

CHEETAH, MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
(Acinonyx jubatus)

I've released you in full color  
from my camera, from my sketchbook,  
even uncollared you from dark Egyptian tombs.  
Capturing your style (medallions  
of smoldering charcoal on sheet ice)  
takes all the illumination and motion  
camel's hair can muster.

Draining my sienna palette,  
you refuse to keep your canvas context.  
Unhampered by layers of super-polymer,  
you complete your spotted streak  
across the papyrus on my other easel.  
Your dissident design brushes past my strokes,  
tracking shadows in my studio, haunting  
the old passageways, hunting  
the presiding tomcat, a drab native mouser  
who may not submit to your dynasty.  
Shoulders knotted like Osiris's fist,  
your precedent pushes into dimensions not resolved  
in pigments or even the bas-reliefs of Pharaohs.

I warn Tom of your Isis eyes coming, your speed  
matched with light, and hope he hunches himself  
in a small niche you can't enter  
with your leggy serpent length,  
your heathen haunches and expletive head.

Confrontation comes spitting sudden:  
Arranging himself on a vacant pedestal overlooking  
my work, Tom bristles his long lineage,  
his black leopardship. Smoothing the smug cap  
of Ptah, he arcs down sovereignty from ankh eyes.  
Below, your tail tip conveys grudging recognition  
of your high-flown ebony kin.

It is the artist confronted:  
You've both made the point. I put away the paint  
and reach for the sculpting clay.

At midnight my palm slides over your undulating spine.  
At last, cheetah, you're free—but mine!