

Ned Balbo

The White Cats

A variation on Valéry's "Les Chats blancs"

The white cats stretch in gold light, fur like snow
that somehow doesn't melt, and none may touch.
Eyes half-closed, they regard us while we watch—
What secrets do they carry? Do they know

how frail they are, uncertain predators
so sensitive that with a twitch they feel
the shivers in a girl's dress? They conceal
their double life as someone's shunned familiars—

Yes, it's true: we recognize each one
and call them "cats," but what is it they were
before, in former lives? Our loved ones gone,

grieved-for, reborn? The gold sun keeps them warm...
We stroke them gently, painfully aware
the choice is theirs: to offer love, or harm.

Pomegranates

A variation on Valéry's "Le Granades"

Pomegranates sliced in half spill out
their blood-red seeds, while those uncut
conceal their trove in darkness: great
discoveries yet to be made.

But if the red-gold skin appears
desirable, look to the rind:
pale pulp that bears our deepest fears,

the architecture of the mind—
What is mere flesh compared to this?
A fleeting glance, the briefest kiss....

Still, someone must admit the sun
that ripens them.... Their rubies bleed—
A gentle knife-thrust spills the seed
revealed, at last, to everyone.

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The Travelling Circus

A variation on Apollinaire's "Saltimbanques"

Out of the empty distance they arrive
in gaudy costumes, singing—past our gardens,
pubs, and country churches where the sins
that we confess are small enough to leave,

forgotten, at the threshold. Still they sing,
pull branches low, and help themselves to fruit.
An acrobat turns cartwheels in a suit
of colors stitched from remnants, glittering.

Lodgers watch them; children run before them,
awed by a strongman's barbells. Kindly apes
amuse the crowd, seek alms, or scatter grapes.
The trained bear, gently, offers you his palm.

The Fortune Teller

A variation on Apollinaire's "La Tzigane"

The Fortune Teller, once paid, could foresee
the secrets of our future and its traps,
but answered diplomatically. Our hopes
would not be crushed—not yet. We said good-bye,

and entered time, which carried us to love
and all the rest: betrayal, rage, and grief.
Love is a dancing bear: a little stiff,
and always clumsy. Take one look above,

a bluebird shivers; on the street below,
mendicants pray the Joyful Mysteries.
Just thinking about us, sometimes, makes me freeze
at where time's slow unfolding leaves us now.

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Black Cat

A variation on Rilke's "Schwartz Katze"

All ghosts are memory, doors that you knock
on, gently, with your gaze before they fade,
but this black velvet coat makes you draw back,
so deep and dark it is...You hesitate

before lush fur, this shadow where all sight
diminishes into a single point
that's everywhere and nowhere. Late at night,
you wake, afraid—what blackness will anoint

you with its blessing so that you may sleep,
safe in your own bed, dreamless, without fear?
The black cat holds within her fur each glance
that ever touched it, every look she'll keep
and critically examine at her leisure—
whether, curled up, she twitches in a dream,
tail clasped between dark paws, or turns to stare,
abruptly, at you, caught within the slim,
sharp pupils of her gaze: an insect once
alive, now trapped in amber, at her pleasure.