

SELF-PORTRAITS

Matthea Harvey

[After paintings by Max Beckmann]

Double Portrait, Carnival, 1925

I worked on us
for weeks. Painted my face, then yours. I loved yours,
made it smile as our doubles struck funny poses.
Me the hapless clown, you both general and horse —
the fore-legs your legs, the hind legs, horse,
high heels mimicking hooves. I gave you a huge hat,
a soft grey jacket, a white cravat, closed your fingers
around the reins. And for myself? I painted a cigarette,
a purple suit and shiftless feet. I thought I was painting you
a poem of color, of orange cuffs and spotted horses.
But the horse had a wild eye, the tent flap gaped,
and we stood there in disguise.

Self-Portrait in Tuxedo, 1927

I can mock the debonair pose of hand on hip,
casual grip of cigarette stub, but I only masked the body.
It was the one time I asked myself, truly,
what face I saw in the mirror, then answered
with a storm of brushstrokes on my forehead,
a shadow lapping my left eye with its dark tongue,
misery marking my mouth. One is not the same after such clarity.
You liked my stance. Said if I were a stranger leaning on a wall
at a party you would ask me to dance, would rashly press against
me. I did not point out the small glowing ash. After all,
in a dream sequence your taffeta would not burn.

Self-Portrait with Glass Ball, 1936

And so I held it softly to my chest,
firmly, but with no fear of it breaking
for this is how it is with things we take for granted.
I did not look down, thinking I knew what was reflected there;
myself — only more so, as in a lover's eyes.
What do I see there now?
The richest colors. Glimmers of you
which I painted quickly, cradled heedlessly,
and spent hours instead creasing my forehead
into a set of elegant birdwings, angling the door
onto blackness so that the future could darken my eyes.
And that mouth. Strange that gripping a brush with determination
can produce such resignation. If only I had looked
into that third eye — for though it had no ties to visions
it knew my heart, was my heart.

Self-Portrait Yellow-Pink, 1943

I said goodnight with yellow on my cheek,
and in the morning you woke laughing
to tell me of a dream where I hired ten numskulls
to work on the garden who then painted all the elms
in gold filigree. You wanted me to put the glittering trees
in the picture but I had to disagree. It was your dream,
not mine, though it crept into the painting. I painted myself
as the man you might have met in sleep — his arms hugged
to his chest protectively, as if you or your dream
had rested there, invisible, a near-dimple by the mouth,
a shadow of a sleeping cap which wasn't on his head.
You pouted and asked for trees.
Sometimes you are very hard to please.

Self-Portrait with Blue-Black Gloves, 1948

Is it true that the night you said to me, sweetly,
mischievously, your hands are like large flat fish
that fill my rivers, I climbed out of bed and began to paint
those gloves? I did not mean to imply thievery or shame.
I do not think I meant it cruelly. What I remember
is feeling suddenly small, leaving bed to sit squarely
in front of first the mirror, then the canvas, and then,
taking a thick brush, painting myself larger.
In the dark my hands, forearms and forehead
gleamed white, and it seemed right to cover at least
fingertip to wrist. But I see what you see.
You remember waking to sunrise alone and finding me
asleep in front of my own stripe of orange,
a grim look in the eyes on the canvas that frightened you.
How to explain why I crawled away like a cricket
to sing my song in a corner, knowing you
would not find it beautiful.

Self-Portrait in Blue Jacket, 1950

What is not in the picture: a field of poppies,
morning glories clinging to their vine in a rainstorm,
images that would not yield their meaning when I picked up
the brush. I once told myself not to rush such things,
then found their lush colors gone. One consolation:
lost money that goes through the wash is still money
when it reappears. So I paid for the colors' brightness
with crumpled bits of memory, and though I was the subject
again, there were unpaintable moods in the blues
of my coat, electric green seas curled in the chair's arm.
It was bigger than me. The perspective was not mine.
I hid my mouth with a cigarette and long fingers,
wiped the brushes dry and called for you to look at him
still holding my breath.