Beauty With Cat

Konstantin gave me these pearls,
hung these earbobs, gave them their glow.
He could make light come from the right or left
or above or below or not at all.
See my wrist, how thick it is? I begged him:
*Blot that out—paint it again, thinner, whiter.*

But he would not and so it stays.
As does the room behind the drape.
Darkened room

I cannot step into again.
*Show me all,* Konstantin said,
and I did,

my hair undone, moving in its waves
across the skin of my back.
He gave this gold cap,

took the plain one I brought from home,
promised pearls which never came,
painted them falsely here around my neck,

gave light to fall on them, gave them shine.
He once gave three roses
which I kept in a vase
until the petals let loose
in a flurry of red. He could have placed
roses under my hand,

constant for a hundred years.
But here instead is Vladimir, his cat.
You know how cats are:
aloof, never giving the whole of the heart, 
keeping something back for dignity 
and independence. I kept nothing back.

I had always in me the country, 
the milk cows I came from, the trees 
with their small mortal leaves, 

the path from house to barn. 
Was I happy? Happy does not exist alone, 
as red may have blue in it, 

and yellow may shine up 
like light from beneath. 
I never put a brush against canvas 

and stood back, as he did, to see 
what it left there. 
He could have given a basket of plums 

on this windowsill 
or one perfect autumn apple 
like the ones I used to pull from branches 

on my mother’s trees. They are gone 
like the footsoldier in uniform 
who spoke to me one day in the market. 

Here is the counterfeit shape of a cat; 
that, and a longing, a yearning always 
on the tip of my tongue.