Fair Exchange

By Georgina M. Cox

Did you ever love me, or was it all a charade?
You called me baby, but it was just a trade.
I mistook the wanting in your eyes
for something that might make you stay.

I wonder if you practised being kind,
if every tender word was predesigned.
If when you held me trembling in your bed,
you counted all the things I'd give instead.

I wish you'd told me I was nothing.
I wish you'd said it to my face.
Instead, you made me feel like everything
until you'd taken everything you came to take.

And oh, how willingly I gave it.
How little you were made to steal.
I laid my heart before you, beating,
and thanked you for the things you made it feel.

Because I loved you with an ugly hunger,
the sort that makes a beggar of the proud.
I'd have swallowed every cruel thing you'd uttered
if you'd only said you loved me just as loud.

I learnt to recognise your footsteps,
to hear displeasure in a sigh.
I could tell when you had ceased to want me
by the way you wouldn't meet my eyes.

And still, I'd turn myself to sweetness,
make my voice a softer thing.

As though the reason you could never love me
was some small failing I could mend.

I wonder if you ever felt ashamed
when you saw how I brightened at your name.
How a single word could resurrect
the very girl your silence had condemned.

There were nights I lay beside you
and felt lonelier than when alone.
You slept so soundly in the bed
where I was begging to be known.

And wasn't that the cruellest part?
Not knowing whether you were cruel.
For sometimes you would hold me like you meant it,
and I would lose the nerve to question you.

I have spent so long defending you to people
who could see what I could not.
I called your indifference exhaustion,
and made excuses for the love I never got.

Perhaps you never meant to hurt me.
Perhaps you never meant a thing.
Perhaps I was so grateful to be chosen
I never asked what choosing me would mean.

And God, I hate how much I miss you.
Not even you, perhaps, but who
I thought I was when you were loving me,
before I learnt what loving cost you.

I think the worst was not your leaving,
nor the promises that fell away.
It was knowing you could watch me love you
on the nights you felt nothing, and still stay.

I could have borne an honest ending.
I could have mourned what wasn't there.
But you gave me just enough to grieve for,
and never quite enough to call it fair.

And here is what I cannot bear to tell you,
what pride has begged me to deny:
I knew that something in you didn't love me.
I thought that loving you enough might change your mind.

So I became a little kinder,
a little quieter, less inclined to need.
I thought if I could make myself worth keeping,
you might, eventually, keep me.

But you did not.

And now I envy all the women
who will meet you without knowing what I know.
Who will hear you call them baby
and believe it means you won't go.

I wonder if you'll ever think about me
when you've found somebody you can love.
If you'll remember how I gave you everything
and how, somehow, it wasn't quite enough.

Or if I'll be a passing recollection,
a name you mention once and then forget.
While I spend years unlearning all the ways
I loved a man who never loved me yet.

Did you ever love me, darling?
Even briefly? Even badly? Even then?
Was there one moment when you held me
that you wished you could hold me again?

Because I could survive you never loving me.
I could survive the shame, the wasted years.

But how am I supposed to mourn a love
when I don't know if it was ever here?

And how am I to hate you for deceiving me
when the cruelest part remains the same—
I would have given you everything for nothing,
if you'd only asked for it in my name.