

M O R O N I ' S T A I L O R



P H I L L I S L E V I N

Il Tagliapanni (c. 1570)

GIOVANNI BATTISTA MORONI

On a black cloth, a line of chalk
Marks the course my scissors must follow.

You follow its path, dabbing
At your palette, tending to my likeness

Faithfully, until stepping back into the light
Taking you farther each day

From the weight of your father's toolbox:
Chisels and mallet set in separate chambers,

Plans translated by sweat into columns, arches,
Turrets, tombs. Your unerring hand

Proves you are his son, though you combine
Powder and oil instead of sand and lime –

And you abide by a tempo that dwells
Not in the ring of steel on marble, but a bell

Calling the quarter-hour, thickening the air
The people of Albino move within

Before dispersing, going home to evening prayer,
Yielding to pigeons that occupy the square,

Waves of them changing patterns at every
Turn, as if design, not direction,

Were all that matters. You prefer to face
Each face alone: a gentleman in pink brocade

Standing with a sword by a ruined wall,
A lady in solemn jet

Whose finger keeps her place in a book of verse
Written by another noble sinner (in the gray

Lining of her sleeve, the layer
Of lace at his wrist, my skill

As well as yours resides). You would rather
Alter an angle to sharpen character,

Render a gaze defying decay, disarming
Any of us who enter where they

Live on, carrying their immaculate dignity
Into our uncertain future. Bergamo is falling

To strangers, the Republic divided,
Even the churches are not free of blood.

You lean your canvas on an easel,
I stretch my fabric on a table. You dress them

In the Spanish fashion, cutting darkness
From darkness. So do I.

Here is material fit for a man
Who stays away from the clash of knives,

Avoids an oath that could end in war
Or the stain of exile. Today, Giovanni,

I prepare the cloth: you have given
My semblance a soul, done justice to my form,

Shown the bare room where I reign –
But see to the ruffle at my throat

So they know how far I have come. (Better
To remain in Albino, beyond the noise of fame.)

Aloof as a courtesan, Venice once
Displayed herself to me in an alley

Where I met a merchant selling the finest silk:
Visible from the door of his little shop,

An immense flag billowed on a façade
Across the canal, a stone's throw

From where I stood. I paused at the same spot
Later, savoring my acquisition, a weave

Embroidered with silver thread.
But the banner beckoned – liquid

In the wind, then familiar. It was the crest
Of your favorite patron, whose doublet

Needed new buttons for Carnival
(I saved a piece of velvet for them).

When I couldn't reach the palace on foot
Or find a gondolier to row me there,

That rippling emblem, mutable
As flame, mutable as water,

Seemed like a garment meant for a time
Hereafter. Obscurity may be no more

Than a phantom obstruction, my friend,
An error of sight, just as a shadow

May cast the shape of a chasm,
Portending depth though nothing is below.

Today my scissors follow the chalk,
Tomorrow I will help you make your name.