

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1991

School Marm's Cat

Janet Homer

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

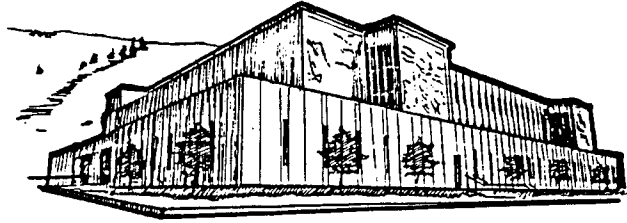
Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Homer, Janet, "School Marm's Cat" (1991). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 3487.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3487>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.



Maureen and Mike
MANSFIELD LIBRARY

Copying allowed as provided under provisions
of the Fair Use Section of the U.S.

COPYRIGHT LAW, 1976.

Any copying for commercial purposes
or financial gain may be undertaken only
with the author's written consent.

University of
Montana

The School Marm's Cat

by

Janet Homer

B.A., University of Michigan-Flint, 1976

M.A., University of Cincinnati, 1980

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

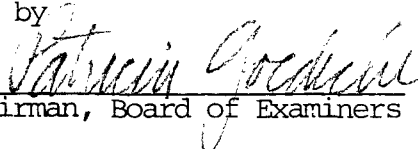
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1991

Approved by


Chairman, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

Date Jan. 7, 1992

UMI Number: EP35676

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP35676

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

Acknowledgements

The following poems or earlier versions of them have been published: *folktale* in Slant, *sculpture proposition* in Five Cincinnati Poets, *my first word* in the Casper Star Tribune, *last ride of the fair* in Rhino, "I see it before I see it" in Amelia, *shooting the cat* in Sing Heavenly Muse!, "the mountains in my rear view mirror" in Waterways, and *looking for the cirle* in Cutbank.

Table of Contents

I: Dreams and Tales		1
	legend	1
	folktale	2
	The School Marm's Cat	3
	sculpture proposition	4
	correspondence with my sister	5
	dreams	6
	<i>The mountains in my rearview mirror</i>	7
	looking for the circle	8
	Souvenir	9
	stories	10
	Maps	11
	my first word	12
	a fiction	13
	domestic fugue	14
	Dreams and Tales	16
	house dream	18
	folktale: the sand story	19
	Asleep	20
II: A Life		21
	<i>Poking in my childhood's ashes I find</i>	21
	Port Huron, Michigan, 1959	22
	last ride of the fair	23
	<i>I see it before I see it</i>	24
	Trouble with the phone	25
	no, no one in particular	26
	Recipes	27
	horoscope	29
	Learning to be dead	30
	he remembers	32
	<i>I run to pick up the newspaper</i>	33
	What I Know About Praetas	34
	horror story	35
	dead cat poem	37
	More Trouble with the Phone	38
	shoe poem	39
	Pilgrimage	40
	Keeping Up with the News	41
	Honor Thy Father	42
	therapy	43
	shooting the cat	44
	not rhetorical questions	45

I: Dreams and Tales

legend

like when he rode out of the forest
across the clearing to the stone
grasped the magic sword
and drew it out
the stone said *ah*
you've come at last

folktale

the enigma of the broken watch:
every time she came into a new town
she'd bring it to the jewelers one by one
each would open the back
and point out the broken parts
one by one and tell her
not me maybe someone else
some other shop
one jeweler kept it for two months
offering hope and increasingly rising
estimates but in the end
it came back broken
the men who repair watches
who are sent watches by shops
came to know her by her watch
they would send it back with regrets
in time all the jewelers & repairmen
were beset by nightmares of a wandering woman
holding out a broken watch
on a dusty road in the moonlight
strolling from town to town shop to shop
she'd hold out the round gold shell
on the palm of her bare hand
hold it out toward them and
in their dreams they'd
shake their heads no
shake their heads
no

The School Marm's Cat

It was the cat's usual trick
of knocking over full glasses of water
that finally got her attention.
Without half a thought she had
blotted oceans of spilled water
before it finally sank in:
who was filling those glasses?
And where were all these fossils coming from?
When had she bought an antique wheel chair
and where? How did orange blossoms
fall on her pillow every afternoon?
The reservations for the flight to Bermuda
have been confirmed for two,
but who had made them?

Amnesia had set in.
She must not have noticed.
The cat pretended to sleep in her lap,
thinking about his piano lessons
and the delivery of the parlor grand.

sculpture proposition

while it is still dark transform the man
into a 500 pound block of gray rock
possibly limestone
approximately 6 foot
by 3 foot
by 2 foot

it may be necessary to reinforce the bed
to support the weight of the stone
placed lengthwise
on its side
or its back
the blanket topsheet & pillow will have fallen
to the floor by then

in the morning draw back the curtains
and let the sun warm the rock
a dappling effect may occur

close attention may reveal
ripples of movement in the rock

correspondence with my sister

it is because of these truths
you write that I hang out
in back-country saloons
in back canyons of the Laramies
and in dime stores in places like
Alliance, Nebraska

sometimes I think the West is full
of people who have run away
though I meet many here who live bravely
my letters to you
are posted to the front
you post yours
to the frontier

in a dream I rode in a car
through these grasslands
with our father
along a road pointing north
bound by a nonsensical fence
cutting across the sweeping hills
their horizons hid like the
edges of the sea
we stopped in the middle
at a wayside museum
celebrating the American West
he said nothing
then disappeared

some days I drive alone on the prairie
to study fossil fish exposed
in rocks in long-dry river beds
I stop to sift for pottery shards and
arrowhead chips at Spanish Diggings
afternoons in an archeology lab
along the Oregon Trail
I study human bones

dreams

I dreamed you were arguing with my mother
she was having one of her tantrums
you were driving the car
I was in the back

then I dreamed about your mother
she was talking to the chickens in Czech
you were just riding into the corral at the end of
the day
she complained *you're never here to help
where do you go all day?*
you lead the tired horses into the barn
and comb them

another time I dreamed of running
away to your acre
I sneak up and watch you through the fence
the adoring dogs and ducks and cats
and horses and husband swirl around you
in my dream I even add Bengal tigers
and manganese blue peacocks
all revolving around you and all
all hoping for attention

you told me you grew up in an old stagestop
on the Deadwood trail
you'd dream about the horses in the remuda
calling you all night
you'd wake up and cry
begging your mother to let you go to them

when you say things like that, like
I never got over Lone Tree Canyon
I think I know what you mean
and I miss it too

The mountains in my rearview mirror
brought you out of the back of my mind.

I saw them misted and gray
the sun about to set behind them.

Beside the road small crowds of poplars
turn green-gold in the declining light.
A mirage of waterbirds
flashes on the flooded creek.
A red fox beside the railroad tracks
waits, watching me drive by,
and horses who stand dreaming
in the failing light
melt into the darkness.

You were in every
oncoming truck full
of young ranch hands rolling toward
road houses of beer honky tonk
pool ball click jukeboxes

When I see you in town
you never let on about these mysteries,
yet you must be full of horizons
when you ride home at nightfall
mountains behind you,
sun behind that.

looking for the circle

last night I dreamed
of the Indian storytellers

in a potter's window in Taos
I'd studied the tan clay figures
speaking to smaller dustier audiences
who are dancing, joyful, orange-banded
or crouching in fear and awe
brown and black

I dreamed I crept to the fire
listening for voices
after shuffling for miles in the moonlight
through dry brown leaves--
the storyteller's circle--
hushed figures in the firelight

Souvenir

I like to dream of you in the rain--
a thick gray mist--city rain.
Your voice like a bass bell
tolling quietly in the distance,
bringing the night's ship to harbor.

The postcard you send, though,
is about rain in the desert,
how rarely it falls
in its clear cascades
through clear air.

The sun on this postcard is completely up.
The background is deep red rock,
cracked canyon walls recently painted by rain.
In the foreground is a table,
a split boulder littered
with a hundred broken pots,
the clay edges softened by the wind
and years of rain.

Incised lines of a running thunder pattern
are jumbled like a torn-up map.
Where pieces of the inside show,
burlled like an old hide,
they curl up, remembering their lost function:
little bowls holding
the last of the rain.

But--see it snaking through the pieces?
Something silver flashes among the pots,
a band of bright metal, liquid as an adder,
spined with dead turquoise,
brought here hidden in a clay pot,
forgotten in this canyon,
then freed by breaking,
now washed by rain.

The man who sent this postcard is thinking,
*Yah, those Navajo girls
are some wild dancers.*
But I'm thinking about rain
in the city, rain
in the desert--
rain.

stories

I have looked for you before and found
a child a man a child a man
I see a child's legs and a man's hands
a man's mouth and a child's unfocused gaze
you are so tender I could eat you

in the dry houses with the dark rooms
did your mother tell you stories?
I have heard that your father was a king--
what were those stories he told you?
you shared the thin air of the mountains
and the fresh air of the sea
with strange birds who cried
strange cries over your sleeping
your father told you stories
about the wars boys march off to
but did the birds tell you
how they came to be?

I believe your stories
I believe you're a man
I believe in the thin air of the mountains
in the sea and the birds
birds whose cries would send a boy
who believes in legends
out to fight
I believe you believe
now you know what a man knows
as a child knows it

Maps

Names in a language I do not know
dance silent on my tongue.
My eyes eat the cities and the rivers
of a people I do not know.

A highway hangs on the mountain ridge.
Roads run beside the sea.
Names of coastal points and bays
sing of sailing ships,
of islands like lost loves.
The small music of avenues and villages
is not drowned out
by the grand march
of provinces, capitols, or states.
The blue crosses of mountains
name themselves in my mouth like saints.

Springs well up, become lakes,
spread, then drain away as I watch.
Borders billow and disappear,
redrawing themselves with blood.
The wide, white interior
races away from me like a wild horse.

And here in red in the lower righthand corner
are the ruins I dream of on still nights:
I walk out of the jungle
into moonlight filled with fallen stones.

my first word

luna
said the other little girl
as we drifted through dry yellow leaves
luna she said
in the voice of an enchanted princess
that's Spanish

that night I got up to check
her moon was not my moon
somewhere *luna* was rising
but not over these cold wet lawns
not over these Methodist churches
these pledgeofallegiances & the new blond
brick&aluminum high school where boys & girls
decorate for some eternal prom

luna rises
over a place so strange to me I cannot imagine it
I dream of people in white in the darkness
speaking a language like music
I dream of pale houses & streets & summer forever
soft nights of *luna* pouring into the air
luna in some strange liquor in the green dark

a fiction

the only story I ever wanted to write
was about madmen
madmen and madwomen
they would fall in love with each other
would dream of each other
lean out to one another
from bodies frozen in madness
they would commune without sound
courting words would pour out
from wild eye to wild eye
mad heart to mad heart
ah my mad one my darling
let us be impossible let us exist
in a universe of daring let us
follow the springlit moon into our blood
let us lie down in the night among animals
feel the good frost crisp beneath us
my darling my mad one o

in the story the ward nurse
would write in the log
another night passes

domestic fugue
(sangha)

John cooks dinner
I do the dishes
Arthur claims he
cannot cook but
will go to the store
for anything anybody who can
could possibly want

after dinner
we thank each other
Arthur thanks John
for cooking dinner
John thanks Arthur
for going to the store
I thank John
for cooking dinner
he thanks me
for eating it
he thanks us both
for providing him with company
we thank him for same
later
he thanks me
for doing the dishes
I say next time I
will cook dinner
he thanks me
for this kind offer
he says next time he
will do the dishes
I thank him
for reciprocating the offer
Arthur says he
will go the store
we thank him for his offer

I nod to Arthur
John bends slightly at the waist
Arthur doffs his hat
in a sweeping court bow
I drop a curtsy
John produces a fresh salmon and
proffers it on bended knee
Arthur accepts it
kissing him on both cheeks and
bestowing him with
the Croix de Guerre
I lead the applause

(no break)

John signals the twenty-one gun salute
Arthur touches off
the fireworks
I read a telegram
from the governor
John throws yellow roses
Arthur catches them in his teeth and
defers the award of the ears and tail
to us
we grant him
Roman citizenship
John raises Arthur
the Nobel Peace Prize
Arthur sees him that and
ups it the English succession
I call them both and lay down my hand:
liberal obliviousness
existential arrogance high
John is holding
four Hokusai waves and
a one-eyed dharma master

with Byronic Zen wistfulness
unparalleled in this century
Arthur reveals his hand:
a passing familiarity with the classics
humility tempered with a certain wryness
the Romanov jewels
and a couple of dues cards
marked Paid
a transcendental flush

we all wish
Arthur would learn
to cook
he suggests
tomorrow
we go out to dinner
and split the bill

we thank him
he thanks us
the Titanic sinks
the Roman Empire falls
cows will not give milk
Buddha belches

for Arthur Trupp
& John Yukimura

Dreams and Tales

Scheherazad is dreaming about me.
She sleeps all day in a palace room.
The maids cover the windows and
whisper warnings over her sleep.
She rises as the sun sets and
prepares to meet her murderous prince.

Every night, all night,
she tells him my story.
Just when I complete the most recent
seven labors, each one beyond wonder, and all
a blood price set by some caliph--
just then,
I inadvertantly cross some dwarf
who curses me, and I must
travel seven seas and seven deserts,
each with its own riddling demon,
to find some sententious old
golden bird,
guarded by seven harpies,
each with a bone to pick.

I bring a jeweled egg back only to find
the dwarf has been captured by
disenchanted houri
and must be rescued.
It goes on like this.
Scheherazad complicates my life,
mercilessly, stifling yawns
as she works through her sevens.
What is it to her if I live in suspense
night to night, not knowing
how the story ends?
What is it to me
if she saves her pretty neck?

Is it any wonder
she dreams about me?
That I try to poison her
but the birds outside,
flattered by their roles in her stories,
sing not to drink the wine,
and she declines. That I beg her
to end my suffering, offer a dagger
and my heart, but she declines that, too.
Then I grow big as a cloud,
filling her sky like a thunderhead.
*Scheherazad, I say to her, I am one genie
who will not go back into the bottle.*

(no break)

All your Aladdins and all your Sinbads
can't recant me. The forty thieves
have chased me to Aden and back,
and here I am again.

Your story may end
in a thousand and one nights, but this
is my story you endlessly transform.
You may lead me in this dance today,
but someday, drop what veils you will,
they will all be gone,
and you will be naked.

house dream

*I stopped at Hedgeville
and slept in the back seat
...excited about my new life.
-Gregory Corso*

I cannot wait to get to sleep and dream
last night I dreamed my house was moving
a square white house of one story
moving cross-country in slow progress
through fields of barley and sugar beets
I was inside standing watch like a captain
or sometimes playing a pipe organ
pirates ambushed in the low marshes
but they were sucked under the
log rollers of the inevitable house

at a crossroads in a town I used to know
I got out to talk to an old friend
he was travelling too
had someone waiting in a sidecar
behind his glasses he'd gotten old
and here we were again crossing paths
when will we ever see each other again?
and where will my house take me?
will there be flowers? a clothesline?

folktale: the sand story

the old woman said
this sand is growing
this mason jar was only half full
when I brought it home from our honeymoon
they have to sweep the streets daily up there
fine white sand forms everywhere overnight
it piles up in drifts in the center of town

now I'm old and look
the jar is almost full
in two years I may be dead
the jar will be full
the sand is growing in secret
at night it creeps up

Asleep

I am sitting at my kitchen table,
waiting for the moon to appear.
I am looking out my window
over my neighbors' roofs, over
the exhaust fans and the
telephone wires. I have lit
the candles, I have made
a shrine on the table,
I have brought the tall vase
of delphinium spears, shades of
blue and lavender like love,
like memory. I have brought
the photographs of my mother and father
at twenty, smiling, I have
brought the photograph
of myself twenty-five years ago
when the air promised spring. I think
I have played the right music:
Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata,
Guiomar Novaes to charm the moon.
I have poured the sacramental wine
and drunk it, looking out the window.
All my life I have been waiting
for this moon, and when it appears,
round as a tired old man's face,
it tells me nothing, it passes
through the sky, silent,
keeping its secrets, going its way.
I snuff out the candles. I go to bed
and to sleep, disappointed
by the moon.
But in the final hours of night
the moon circles around behind the house,
finding my window, it shines
down on me, immersing me
in light, blessing my sleep.

II: A Life

Poking in my childhood's ashes I find
my father taking me to see the cranes,
driving out onto the flat sod plain.
The shallow water standing on the black fields,
gold and silver flashing on the water.
Hundreds of dream birds,
a white cloud with long legs
resting for an afternoon in the sun.

*They're flying home,
see?*

Port Huron, Michigan, 1959

in the city where we buy shoes
the light is always summer
sweet air mixes with machine smells
gulls fly over the briskly moving traffic
ore ships sail down the street
I point but my mother
says shoes & hurries

the sea is mixed up with the city
I dance along the sidewalk
over fossils over beachsand
the bricks of the Glendower Building
are sponge mosses
reeds grow in the window at Sears
waves lap the curbing
the green light changes to red
& we cross the street

last ride of the fair

the only ride left
my father's laughter made me climb
into the little star-painted rocket
he laughed as I clutched the safety bar
this ride only scares kids he said
arm around me

50 feet in the air
on the carnival ride
whirling around upside down
rightside up back & forth
neon lights on the shadowy crowd
ground littered with broken balloons
a whoosh
then a pause & the stars

at home alone in the dark
I sat on the edge of my bed
looking out through trees
at the top of the ferris wheel
hearing the staggering carousel music
the cries & shouts of the late night crowd
the round-up ride's regular pneumatic gasp
remembering his arm around my shoulders
then the sharp intake of his breath
as we went up again
and again

I see it before I see it
an unearthly light in the trees
through shadowy leaves flickering
reflecting in gutters full of rainwater
in the darkness blue & bright it is the first
church of the holy blue neon sign
ice-blue neon dead & glowing
proclaiming in the dark
first baptist *blink*
first baptist *blink*

Trouble with the phone

i

I'm trying to get through to you
& the line is busy.

1953 & the line is busy.
1967 & the line is busy.
1978 & the line is busy.
1989--

Who are you talking to?
I've called & called.
I bought a phone with automatic redial.
Inside, a tiny pony
beats out the numbers with his hoof.
Lights flash and then--
the line is busy.

The line is *always* busy.

mother?
mother?
are you there?

ii

so I rattled on like Gracie Allen
prattled and rattled and rambled
with the phone pressed so hard to my ear
it hurt and I could hear someone talking
at this end and at the other end
someone was talking and
we were talking about our whole lives
and the thousand miles of phone line in between
burned

iii

when the rain is coming down hard like this
my heart whispers *revenge*
I want to call old lovers
and let the phone ring and ring
and drag them out of sleep and peace and dreams
but mostly out of bed
and finding the line dead I imagine they
stand looking out the night window
and the rain coming down
settles into them
and their bare feet are cold
and their dreams become troubled

no, no one in particular
why do you ask?

I'm more married to you somehow
than I ever was to my husbands

for almost half my life
you've wandered the back country
of my dreams
how can I be in love
with a man who isn't there?

you're like a story somebody told me once
a song on the radio--yes
some ballad about the road
all the storms along the way
loneliness in the desert
bittersweet homecomings
when you come home at all

I still smell the smoke
still taste the bourbon--Lillard & Bond
still talk to you when no one's there
I've been keeping the faith
and here you are again
after all these years
intangible as ever

Recipes

Sicilian Joe taught me how to dress
a salad in the bowl: oil
(there's only one kind),
red wine vinegar, parmesan, a kiss
of garlic, grind the pepper yourself.
Like a symphony conductor,
he'd wield the fork and spoon, tossing.
Just so.

Neapolitan Joe kneaded
bread like he made love:
steady, patient, and sure.
*Keep it simple, he said--
flour, water, salt,
yeast to make it rise,
rain or shine.
Nothing more,
never less.*

Milanese Joe talked about
coal miners' wives
frying up bits of bacon
when that was all they had.
*How much grease you drain
depends on how greasy
an Italian you are--*
his joke as he added the onions
and garlic, poaching them
in chablis with oregano and sweet,
sweet basil. Finally he'd
pour the shimmering sauce over pasta
coated with eggs and parmesan. We'd lean
into the cloud of drunken steam.

But years later it was Hungarian Joe
who inherited all these secrets.
He came to me, his old friend,
saying *Special, it has to be
special, she's really--*
I showed him how to dress
the salad, knead
the bread, make the magic
carbonara in two pots,
then wed them in one.

How to set the table with the plates
close together, how to mix the light
of candles with wine glasses,
how to arrange the pure

(no break)

white lilies in the tall glass vase
just so.

And when I asked him,
years later, how the recipe
had worked, he said,
First time,
every time.

Ah, Giusep--
what have I done?

horoscope

I've been tracking your movements
in the horoscope column.
Today people with your sign
will receive news from overseas,
discuss matters of grave concern
with Taureans and Geminis,
must be wary of speculation.
People with my sign will be hungry.

Every morning I ponder the news
of what you will have to endure:
misunderstandings at work,
flattering words that draw you
into dangerous alliance,
Pisceans who confuse you
by swimming in opposite directions,
the loss of a cherished object
you had not known you've outgrown.
People with my sign
are advised to be patient
and sympathetic with the suffering of others.

If you have felt the shadow
of something high above you
circling,
do not fear.
Your life is guarded--
you do not face these trials alone.
When you are advised of a woman
who will bring dramatic change,
I will make my move.

Learning to be dead

On the way here tonight
I saw a cat newly killed
on the centerline.
My headlight caught the surprise in its green eyes.
It wasn't used to being dead.
I helped it off the road.
Every day as I pass
I shall note the level of decay
of my small black cat in the weeds.

I am an expert on the subject of death.
I collect death.
I remember my death as fondly
as other people remember hide & seek.
I do hope I can be of some assistance.

In my case, suddenly alone, I had to
study death secretly,
looking sideways slyly
to see how the dead moved
and didn't move their faces.
Getting the right manner is so important,
don't you think?
For a while I couldn't
get the eyes right
until I got these glass ones.
I had to learn
to ignore life.

Weather affects the dead,
no matter what people say.
As the weather turns colder
I study the signs like a gypsy fortune teller,
read it in the leathery mid-leap death of run-over toads.
There's really nothing like a good dead bird,
its ruffled feathers streaming with ants.
Something to remember
in the gloom of December.

Butterflies are perhaps your best models--
so resigned.
Yesterday I found one flat against the sun-warmed sand,
wings beating a slow rhythm of *soon, soon*.

But death in nature
is a genteel interest.
It's the walking waking death
you came here to learn about,
with its attendant deaths:

(no break)

dead air, dead weight, dead time,
living in a dead zone like an atomic test site,
only no bomb explodes.
You want to learn how to manage
death without destruction,
neat & tidy,
a family death
as loving & kind
as falling through the ice on the river
carried away into cold darkness by the current
with no one to hear the cries--
that kind of death.

That will come soon enough.
Start small
with birds,
cats.
Watch the dead.
You'll know when you're ready.

he remembers

as we sat on the porch sipping coffee
it was the gas station on Clifton being held up
that started it this time
small arms fire in the village
he said whirling his coffee in the cup

waking me up at midnight
he tells me about climbing down
a rope ladder from a helicopter
alone into jungle darkness
to recover bodies

another time in the kitchen
he tells me what good cooks
the mama-sans were
how he ate beside the water
right there on the docks
the sweetest crab I ever had

what I miss most
is settling things--here
too much just trails off
and you never know when
a thing's finished

I run to pick up the newspaper
to study my horoscope
for news

today it says
take heart
the universe has meaning
you will find what you never had
and lose what you never wanted
riches romance
travel tribute
adventure alabaster alchemy aubergines
magic in your hands and mouth
all all will be yours

before my wondering eyes the words blaze up
then fade
fade to nothing
a blank space in Sidney Omar's column
and my fingers are smudged
by the newsprint

What I Know About Praetas

Praetas live in the *praeta loka* which, with the realms of animals and hell, constitutes the lower world of *samsara*. *Samsara* is like an exercise wheel in a squirrel cage: you don't even know it but you go around and around and never get anywhere, least of all out.

To be a *praeta* is a particularly nasty form of existence-- better than being in hell, of course, only you don't know that at the time.

Each *praeta* lives in an empty universe.

Praeta translates from the Tibetan as *hungry ghost*.

Praetas cannot tell you when the wild apple trees are blooming on the riverbank, though they always seem to know when the ground below will be littered with windfalls.

Praetas have long snakey necks and little turtle beaks and low brows. Their only other significant features are big, big bellies that are always rumbling for food, like an old horror movie: *feed me, feed me*.

Praetas eat with the appetites of baby vultures, rapidly, in small bites and long undulating swallows.

Praetas use one hand to stuff food into their mouths and the other to reach for the next handful.

A *praeta* would be the perfect dinner guest to invite if the power went off in the night and you had a big chest freezer.

Praetas do not have pets, mothers, washing machines, library cards, birthdays, or forwarding addresses. They might have blisters, credit cards, memories, and bad breath.

When *praetas* weep, they lick their own tears. When *praetas* bleed, they suck their own blood. And when *praetas* shit --well, *praetas'* taste in movies runs to Fellini.

Praetas have no sense of right, wrong, style, direction, time, smell, purpose. They are colorblind, tonedeaf, braindead, soulsilent, heartsick, hopelost.

Praetas cannot love, although they might hate.

Praetas never understand how people get interested in the things they do.

Some people are foolish enough to think they can safely view *praetas* like they do the sun in eclipse, reflected in a mirror, but this is a very dangerous practice.

horror story

somehow you have joined the strange club
of voices in my head
the captives who imprison me
ambush me while I concentrate on living
slipping in while I'm driving
or while I'm walking through crowds
talking to me all night when I can't sleep
I am never alone

there you did it again
I was writing this poem
and you started talking in my head
drawing me into explanations
you're always trying to fool me

I've studied you carefully
I've hoarded every word I ever heard from your lips every
moment you were in my sight your every smell every color
in every light you ever moved through every movement
every vibration every stillness every twitch
I've counted your shirts and your moods and the number of
times you blink in a minute and all the things you've
forgotten ever telling me and all the different sounds
your door makes when you slam it
I've listened to your music read your books noticed what you
notice noticed people noticing you noticed how you walk
how you look around when you're crossing the street
noticed how you laugh when you don't mean it and what you
laugh at when you do
I've dreamed about the country your people came from about you
dreaming and about what you dream

I deduced from all of this
what the world would look like
through your eyes
I dreamed you are
what I dream you are

for a long time now it has been your turn alone
to draw me into discussion after discussion
endless discussion of my life
and you keep teasing it out
changing direction a little each time
I think about the way I think
and the theoretical ways we might
know one another intimately
philosophically with respect
why is nothing ever as real
as what happens in my head?

(stanza break)

occasionally the other members of the club
talk to me about you
they've been trying to reason with me about you
they say you're monopolizing me
I think about you too much
they're jealous

I have lived alone
with this crowd a long time
living this secret life alone
I try to look harmless

dead cat poem

this cat is talking to me
on the first day I noticed it
dead beside the road
a black & white blur against the weeds
then I saw its fur sinking
from a fan of exposed ribs
today all the bones
have risen to the surface
the fragile shell of a skull in pieces
the fur melting away into the dust
soon it will be a black callus on the road's edge
then buried in snow
then finally
in the spring
dead
trickled away & gone

More Trouble with the Phone

Monday morning I pick up the phone
and madness is already yattering on the line,
wants to know about the weather, whether
the weather has meaning, meaning
does anything have meaning?
Or should we just
go bowling,
form a league, have play-offs?

Finally I escape and unplug the phone,
but Thursday I forget when I call out
to restore the breach, and this time
it is need calling. Not quite whining,
the hothouse voice extrudes
adventitious roots, coiling out
through the receiver
into my ear and into my brain,
penetrating and draining me.

Somehow I escape and unplug the phone,
but a week later, to prove that I am
strong, I plug it back in, and this time
it's my past calling,
collect. In vain,
I try to deny I'm home,
I say I have something
on the stove or that I was
just going out, but
the long song has begun.

I had thought of getting an answering machine,
but the idea of having to play back my calls
turned me to stone. And now, instead, here I am,
prisoner of the phone,
jaw clenched, circulation in my ear stopped,
hand gripping the phone
bloodless, eyes empty, the line of my life
unplugged. *Abyssus abyssum invocat.*

shoe poem

he said I reminded him of a whore he'd known
it was the way I licked champagne off my fingers
he was a policeman and arrested her sometimes
he laughed he apologized he laughed
I could see her flashing through his mind
her hair the room the rare champagne
in the light on her fingers her eyes
the window in the background the night
her cracked shoes

licking the light of the champagne
off my fingers I wondered where does
the light come from? from the bubbles?
I couldn't waste any I licked my fingers
my shoes sat empty in the light falling
across the hall from the bare bulb
lines of fine dirt where the leather bends
soft bruises where the leather gave

Pilgrimage

In the great museum at Cody, Wyoming,
I wander the hall of Buffalo Bill memorabilia:
his deerskin shirts, his canceled checks,
his grand proprietary haminess.

I pass from the nave into the dim shrine
of Annie Oakley and ponder her relics--
her actual gloves, her guns
too precious to reveal,
shot-out aces and handbills
proclaiming her miracles.

Others move on from this corner, but I remain,
looking through my reflection in the glass
at her photographs. In her best
pictures she's pinned back
the brim of her cowboy hat
with a diamond star, but
I find myself looking for something I don't find,
something I must have been expecting,
some ache, some bitter recognition. I learn
she made her own costumes,
she was married to Frank Butler
for almost fifty years and,
toward the end, had all her medals
melted down and sold to help orphans.

Unsettled,
I return to the main hall where
stuffed buffalo stampede
eternally and on posters,
Buffalo Bill himself
jumps through hoops.

Keeping Up with the News

I wondered at the time how to
compute the probability of three
famous fascists all having phlebitis
attacks the very same day. It was
Richard Nixon, General Franco, and my
father. I could imagine their flesh
pale like a corpse's, vulnerable
and naked, long white
legs gone soft like raw sausage, dark
veins throbbing against the casing, blood
backed up to the cement of their
pelvises, the purple clots like grape
jam bulges on their calves, like
terrorists bidding their time. My lips
smacked with justice.

I never questioned language then,
only why fascists tend to gout. Take
my father, for example: a
bantam dictator and limited
in scope, encompassing a truly
petty sphere of
fear. No room for politics,
nationalism, just another
nasty little *fascist*,
that epithet we lay upon tyrannical
types we don't like--you know,
men without conscience.

Honor Thy Father

The dogs come running
as I walk through the neighborhood.
Shattering the morning's quiet, they
bark me out to open country,
bruiting our freedom to empty-eyed houses and
animals in pens.

Once away from those confines, we
silently cross fields and
start up through the cut
of a derelict sand quarry,
now parked full of old trucks
and great rusting drums.

Between the sharp grass and dry sand
shattered glass shines.
Flattened beer cans shift and creak
in a gasoline-scented breeze.
Then the dogs scare up a rabbit,
and, as they break across the quarry floor,
I think I hear my dad
laughing and calling them.

I leave the dogs behind there
with the groan of metal
and the scent of gasoline.
The rabbit gets away as I
climb alone over the high end of the cut.

*scuttling clouds cross the moon
cloaking his direction
young trees whip him
thorns tear him
harsh grasses twine unseen
pulling him down*

therapy

what I want you to do this week
is kill people
just sit back and think about it
as many as you want
as many times as you want
any way you want
baseball bats battery acid pickaxes
one at a time or
line them up in a row on their knees
and march along as they sob and beg
shooting them in the back of their heads
loved ones public figures
total strangers people in traffic
that teenage boy who shouldered you aside
at the bus stop and got the last seat on the bus
the snotty kids in the apartment upstairs
people who lie to you
people who contradict you
who starve animals
hurt little children
as many as you want
anyone you want kill them
kill them all
people who are already dead
gather your family and friends together
and bury them alive
just kill
to your heart's content

shooting the cat

on the day after his wedding
he shot his wife's cat
come on cat let's go for a ride

driving out in the country
where it's easier to breathe
the cat hiding down under the seat

when they got far enough out
he set the cat down on the ground
it huddled closer to the earth

he shot the cat without expression
like an experiment
with a pistol

and drove slowly home
to tell his wife
who was fixing dinner

I shot the cat

do you love me?

not rhetorical questions

well, what would you call
a man who broke your bones,
blackened your eyes,
threw you down the stairs,
knocked a hole in the wall
throwing a hubbard squash at you,
killed your cat on your wedding day, smashed
all your Christmas presents,
told you to close your eyes as he
cut out the heart of your turtle and--
close to tears with laughter--
laid it beating
in your outstretched palm--
that kind of man
what would you
call him
?
lover?
husband?
men who come to you
in dreams as murderers,
the kind of men, you know,
who hurt you because
you're only something female,
hurt you in ways
only some-
thing female
can be hurt--
them
?
what would you call them?
baby?
daddy?