

MYSTERIOUS COMPANIONS

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Familiars: Poems by Fred Chappell
(Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2014)

In chapter 2 of Genesis, God brought to Adam every bird and every beast that He had made “to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof” (2:19). God did not invite Adam to name the elements, the plants, or the heavenly bodies. And even though Adam’s human loneliness ended only when Eve came forth, this naming of the creatures of the Garden—in that time before time was, before sin and death and a new kind of hunger made man into a user and a killer and an eater of animals—suggests that a special bond exists between human beings and those beasts who share with us some degree of consciousness, especially those who have the capacity to know, in Wordsworth’s phrase for what the poet brings, “relationship and love.” In particular, in our all too inadequate word *pets*, we can still detect traces of that brief primordial moment when “dominion” (Genesis 1:26), companionship, and colloquy could almost be at one.

And among our oldest companions—domestic yet independent and with the spirit of the wild—are cats. *Familiars*, by the distinguished North Carolinian poet Fred Chappell, is a gathering—not, of course, a herding—of many different cats, each with its own appropriate name, traits, and story. In

his preface, Chappell recounts the genesis of the book. Originally planned as a companion volume to his collection of character studies at a reunion, *Family Gathering* (2000), *Familiars* became not just a one-to-one pairing of relative and cat (although several such pairings are in the new book) but a much greater gallery of feline portraits in which “other cats pursued their own destinies” both with and without human company. These cats are all “familiars” not only in the sense of being associated with solitude and mystery—and witches—but also as being family members, just as much as Cousin Liliias or Uncle John with whom, in name and nature, appropriate cats are matched.

The term *personification* probably does not go far or deep enough to be fully true of what we find in these poems as portraits in which catlike humans and humanlike cats exist both as reflections of each other as well as in and of themselves. Often humorous, poignant, and sometimes evocative of mysteries lying just beyond words, Chappell’s poems are much more than simply odes and elegies about a few beloved pets.

The first poem, *Difference* (all in italics), is filled with memories of Sheba, a cat now dead yet still alive in memory: “*How powerful a presence is her absence.*” She could play “*With tigress energy*” but more often she was simply there and would observe “*...with steady gaze the calm routine / Of household duties droning round again / From her vigilant*

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bookshelf eminence.” Where Sheba’s spirit has gone and whether all who love their pets will ever see them again will be the subject of the book’s final poem, “*The Animals of Heaven.*”

Four pairs of poems match relatives from *Family Gathering* with their cats. The subject of “Cousin Marjorie” is a woman so very much herself that self-centeredness and selflessness in her become almost the same. On the one hand, “She is the noontime that absorbs the day-moon” and is “Large in every sense, rich, overblown, / Rose that droops from surfeit of itself / ... / All Marjorie’s grand Everything is here.” Yet, on the other hand, she is “So much herself she is wild Selflessness.” In the matching poem, “The Elect,” Marjorie’s pets, including Rogue the cat, also see her as all-encompassing: “She is the universe that mantles / Their universes. She is the center / That cuddles all their boundaries.” The pets see themselves as The Elect who in heaven will “... stand / On the right-hand side of Marjorie // Forever and ever and ever and ever.”

In many of Chappell’s poems, a cat is not directly compared to its human owner (if a cat, by its nature, can ever be “owned”), but its appearance and its behavior clearly demonstrate that in cats we can see something of ourselves. In “Emilia Reveal’d,” Chappell tells the story of a clean, well-mannered cat who “... keeps herself immaculate / With careful grooming head to tail” and who “... charms the ill-bred family / Into being polished folks.” Yet there is another side to our nature. And so, on moonlit nights, “Emilia may let down her guard // And caper about, coming unglued, / Alarming the judgmental owl / When joined by a kink-tail biker dude / Who matches her pleasures yowl for yowl. // Then she appears the following day / With every whisker combed just right, / Unrumped, cool, as if to say, / “Who were those dreadful cats last night?”

Chappell also shows his storytelling skills in “The Artful Dodger Out of the Bag,” a humorous tale of a cat that escapes being drowned. An Old Man and an Old Woman live in poverty with their “brats”—and five cats. Against his wife’s wishes, the husband decides to drown the cats in order to save the expense of feeding them. After a spirited chase in the house, the Old Man catches one cat—the Artful Dodger—and puts him in a burlap sack. On the way to the drowning place, the Dodger makes his desperate bid for life: “I unsheathed a claw, one single claw, / And severed the sack-threads one by one, / Thinking to free my right front paw / By the time we reached the deep mill-run.” Then the Dodger strikes: “We got to the water just before dark. / The Old Man stood on the bank of grass / And said to the world, ‘This is Wholesome Work,’ / When I extended around and tattered his ass.” In the pursuit that follows, it is the Old Man, not the Dodger, who falls into the mill-race. Clambering out of the water, the Old Man goes home to his cat-loving wife and the Dodger’s tale ends: “He banged through the door and stood in a daze; / He opened his mouth but no word sounded. / She looks him all over and the Old Woman says, / ‘Appears like you was the one that got drowned.’”

Two other humorous poems have Fred Chappell himself and his wife, Susan, as characters. One of these is “Jubilate Felis,” a delightful imitation of that famous passage in *Jubilate Agno* wherein Christopher Smart (1722–1771) praises his cat Jeoffry for worshipping God in his own way by his own nature and actions: “For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry. / For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.” In Chappell’s poem, the situation is reversed, and the cat Chloe praises, not without irony, her mistress, Susan Chappell—though the praise is mainly for Susan’s attentiveness

to Chloe herself: *“Let cherub Angels sound Rejoicement upon keen trumpets. // For I will consider my mistress Susan. /.../ For at morning I will dance and sing about the kitchen table and she will look and in time reward my performance. // For she is forced to eat Repulsive food—Poor Susan! No Tender Vittles comes to thy bowl.”*

Another group of poems associates cats with literature, history, religion, art, scholarship, and a library. In “After Hours,” Nora the library cat makes her guardian rounds all night in a repository of human knowledge, creativity—and folly. On the lookout for “...mouse, beetle, and silverfish, / The mutter of computer viruses,” she protects not only books by “Novelists who titillate or affright, / Athletes boasting of everything they do,” but also works by “Poets for fit audience though few.” After making her rounds, Nora rewards herself appropriately for such a cat: “...she relaxes to peruse a book / And socialize with famous brilliant minds / That every cat feels privileged to know: / Sherlock, Maigret, Lord Wimsey, and Poirot.”

Making another kind of round, in “Security,” is the aptly named Paisano. Guardian of the farm, Paisano misses nothing during his daylong patrol—cow milking, training his male kittens “for tomcathood,” looking for mice in the hay, overhearing theological arguments about God as debated by two mules who employ a “...logic that could confound the schools,” and ending up, in the poem’s closing stanza, by combining a humanlike aesthetic appreciation and precise scientific observation with duty and action: “He notes the flights of swallows, songs of wrens; / He counts the robins, bobwhite, and the quail, / Admires the rainbow of the rooster’s tail, / Alert for any sound disturbing the hens. / The fox and weasel do not despoil and rob; / The farm is safe. Paisano’s on the job.” Perhaps a nod to the southern agrarian

writers and Chappell’s own early farm life can be detected in this poem.

But earthly life, however safe at times, always ends in death. Thus, in “Passerby,” which recalls the scene of Thomas Hardy’s poem “Channel Firing,” a black cat, Margo, walks across a human grave, her shadow cast upon the tombstone and the name. The dead person awakens as if summoned to Judgment Day: “Does Someone call him forth to stand / More naked than the day that he was born, / Upon the right or the left hand / In triumph or scorn?” But as Margo passes by, the sleeper “descends once more those depths / Wherein the darkness tides its silence over / The clay of every fallen warrior / And fallen lover.” Margo walks on, unconscious of her eerie power to wake the dead: “Black Margo, ever unaware, / Explores a farther length of moon-bleached lawn, / Brushing with umbra another name / On another stone.”

Such meditating on what may pass between the living and the dead enables us to see that this is a world in which we think of things both visible and invisible, events here or hereafter, and wonder about a place wherein much is guarded and hidden from view, or revealed as being other than we thought it to be, or else is the alluring stuff of wishful thinking, dreaming, or waking dream. It is also sometimes a matter of perspective.

In “Beside Herself,” appropriately written in two long columns of short rhyming lines, Chloe I observes Chloe II—her reflection in a tall mirror—and thinks that Chloe II is another cat. Chloe I is irritated at Chloe II for doing nothing but imitating Chloe I’s movements:

She noses the face to inquire the name;
the other Chloe responds the same.

In the end, Chloe I departs with a sense of her superiority to the unimaginative Chloe II:

This game is stupid she decides,
then turns her back, disdainfully glides
toward the exit away from the peerer
who's safe inside the door-length mirror.
She hoists her tail in a parting taunt:
some cats have got it *and some cats don't.*

How the outside world looks to a cat inside a house is the subject of “Window Seat.” Chloe sees human beings driving their cars or walking their dogs and, through the poet’s language, characterizes in her own way what she sees: “Small people growl along in loud cocoons/Or stroll with savages tied to their hands.” As the poem closes, the difference between outside and inside becomes the difference between Art (how the observing cat creatively shapes the world she perceives as like a series of paintings) and Reality (the simple pleasures and necessities inside the house). Which is to be preferred? “Outside is merely pictures. Reality/Is here: food bowl, throw rug, and litter box, / Chair legs, the steady tocking of the clocks, / The funky laundry hamper, the TV. // Yet Chloe’s hypnotized by the exterior./Time after time, perhaps against her will, / She crouches twitching on the window sill. /—Reality’s a comfort, but Art is superior.”

Familiars closes with a sonnet—“*The Animals of Heaven*”—that matches the volume’s opening sonnet, “*Difference*,” and is also highlighted by italics. In “*Difference*,” the

death of a beloved cat left empty rooms in house and heart. In “*The Animals of Heaven*,” Chappell speculates beyond death—both that of our pets and of ourselves—and wonders how our animal companions will know us in heaven: “*How shall they find us in that world beyond, / Where all is alien to the one we’ve known? / Will we retain the forms to which they bond / In present time, or different shapes put on?*” The poet hopes that in “*that Hereafter Place*” we will no longer be cruel or neglectful. And also in that place, he trusts, our departed familiars loyally and patiently anticipate our arrival, longing to be reunited with what was good in us: “*There they await us, hoping to recognize / The friends they honored for our nicer halves. / We never saw, not seeing through their eyes, / They loved us better than we loved ourselves.*”

This “*seeing through their eyes*” suggests, as do all the poems in *Familiars*, that it may be possible to look both backward and forward to that Garden which in the beginning was, and in the end once again will be, our proper home. In such a place, where the lion and the lamb will lie down together in the Bible’s peaceable kingdom, and where every animal—even Tennyson’s moth and worm and all the other creatures, feral and tame, who are part of this fallen world’s “Nature, red in tooth and claw”—will be to us familiars, pets, and yet in some ways still mysterious companions. And there, once again, they will speak with us in Adam’s tongue and come to us when called by Adam’s names. †