

## **Zoe of Excelsior**

*In memory of Zoe Moraga Natkin Ripley*

My Zoe is one quality cat.  
She soaks up sunshine  
like a solar goddess  
with crooked teeth  
and amber eyes, stretches  
flat on the dining table.  
She wants someone  
to peel her a grape.

My Zoe is one quality cat.  
She imagines bathing  
her electric monkey fur  
in cream of broccoli soup,  
settles for a cotton-ball bath  
of Bulgarian rose water.  
Why should she spit clean  
when she doesn't have to?

My Zoe is one quality cat.  
She doesn't share  
her premium morsels  
with the flea-nipped ferals.  
Organic chicken breasts, de-boned,  
shredded, and plated  
just so; melt-in-her-mouth  
hamachi sashimi, \$34 a pound,  
flown in from Japan.  
They can eat her cat food.

My Zoe is one quality cat.  
She'll burst onto the dinner table,  
slash the burrito-meat-pinata open  
and dig for steak, suck  
Mozzarella off pizza slices,  
and drag tuna from bento boxes,  
without turning an ear  
when she's called. She'll meow  
at her earliest convenience.

My Zoe is one quality cat.  
Zoe prowled through her previous life  
as a Parisian streetwalker  
in skin-tight suits and ballerina flats,  
summons the fish soup with croutons  
when she sinks into her sweater-lined bed.

## **Zoe Speaks**

My name is Zoe Moraga Natkin Ripley. I am well except I can't eat tacos. I lick wrinkled firecrackers off Daddy's tortilla and leave muddy streaks on the bathroom floor by rubbing my butt across the tiles. The whole day my tongue stings, and Daddy says, "No more moo-moo meat for you." Mommy washes me with a wet towel. Then I stand on my hind legs and claw a hole in her burrito. Daddy yells, "Spank that fuzzy butt!" But he isn't raving anymore now. He lets me nap under his blanket. Later evil olives rain in the kitchen. Salty dirty ones. I want to kill them. I kick and pounce on them and chase them under the refrigerator and stove. Sometimes Mommy screams, "Aayaaah!!" and pelts me with prickly bread or burning macaroni and I have to go in the back room and lick my fur. I might need to wear a hard hat. The kitchen is a scary place for little cats.

## **The Crisp Heart of Romaine**

The meatless duck sweating on my plate  
tastes worse than soy abalone.  
I tell my husband I want organic  
haute cuisine, not the spongy cubes  
that mock meat. He says, OK, he'll try,  
since I, his wife, have only succeeded  
in setting his baking mitts on fire. Smoke  
rises from the wedges of onion  
in the steamer & refuses to clear.  
After losing the baby, I want to reclaim  
my body. From now on, I'll prepare spaghetti  
with oyster sauce & ketchup  
like Mom used to make in Chinatown.  
Last night, the crisp hearts of romaine  
from the Farmer's Market were eaten  
by our cat, Zoe, because she didn't want  
the mysterious tofu that swam  
in the sink. She loves eating  
produce that is locally grown. Now,  
green as a goddess, Zoe flamenco-dances  
on the plastic tablecloth. Life seems  
at once retro & au courant.  
From the radio, Roy Orbison's brooding  
spills over the tile & out into the backyard.  
He's a sensitive man who got too much  
in touch with himself & time  
couldn't wean him from the loneliness.  
I want to crawl under the bed & return  
to my childhood. Zoe washes  
the furry kitten dolls with her tongue  
& taps them with her paw. They won't wake up.  
Even she wants special love time as she bathes  
in the peach light of San Francisco.  
Taking a break from saving the planet  
with wheat gluten, my husband sits down  
to stroke my hair as I cradle Zoe.  
I'll have to eat all the gluten roast  
to satisfy my heart.

## I AM'S

Zoe can't get the knack of being a fierce guard cat. She lets the neighbors steal our Buddha and fish sculptures outside and doesn't tell us, but if George gets up too early on Saturday mornings, she meows him back to bed. If I sleep too late, she sharpens her claws on the comforter. She must have been a concubine in a previous life. George jokes, *Hey Zoe, do you want hamachi sashimi?* We drive three neighborhoods away to buy her flats of premium cat food. She will only eat IAMS Ocean Fish Formula in the 3-oz cans (*Zoe flavor Zoe brand*), kicking the big cans under the stove. Lately she takes it lightly microwaved with a touch of pure olive oil and Healthy Choice's Sun-Dried Tomato Sauce, her version of my lasagna. On Saturday nights I order two Chorizo quesadillas and a Carne Asada taco with no onions, cilantro, or chile from the Taqueria Maria. George picks them up while I set three porcelain plates on the small formica table. Zoe sits on her wicker chair and eats her broiled steak very politely, no paws on the table. She doesn't even bat the food to the floor. On family dinner nights she sings to George. She thinks he has gone hunting and clubbed those wild quesadillas, the prey still bursting with flavor, and dragged them home for us, something she could learn to do.

## Dear Zoe

The first time I met you, it was in 1996. You took your claw and slashed my wrist. You watched, smirking at me when I sat down on the stairs and cried.

I've never had a pet in my life, and my boyfriend's house cat just scratched me for no reason. I didn't know what to make of you. I'm Chinese, and you're a black cat. We think black is bad luck. My mother said I should have you killed. You were probably expensive to feed.

George and I joked that you were my familiar. After the iodine treatment left you slightly radioactive and I lost the baby, you developed a psychic connection and became even more familiar. You knew when to protect me from George, giving him the evil eye when he asked for too much attention. Once you stuck your paw between his butt crack and he jumped off the couch in shock. He thought I taught you to do that. Zoe, you're an amazing telepathic cat. Maybe you were channeling me.

You're a little old lady now, Zoe, and I'm in denial. At the veterinarian's, the doctors called you a geriatric cat. I couldn't bear the thought, my little person in a cat suit. I know you hardly walk and you nap a lot. If you need to jump up on the dining table, I could help you. You'd appreciate the help. I know you aren't lazy.

The last month I was really worried about you. I thought you were on your last legs. I'd carry you out from your cat bed to the sofa, turn on the heater, and you'd stay there all day. Then, at night, I'd carry you back into the bedroom, and you'd sleep under the covers with me.

Zoe, please don't die on me. If I had to put you down, you can come back as my lesbian lover. Who knows, maybe you were. I don't know what your fantasies were, but you always had that "peel me a grape Marlene Dietrich" quality about you.

## George, My Husband, Didn't Expect to Live in San Francisco

The full moon beams as if it had eaten  
blue cheese & burped into the sky.  
The pasta trucks rumble down  
the Great Highway. Our cat, petite  
in her black sealskin coat, claws at the ghost  
of a mouse in our dark wood kitchen.  
I can almost taste the *pappardelle con  
il ragu di fegatini* as my husband, the refugee  
from Mattawamkeag Maine, sways  
in his plaid boxer shorts, stirring  
his chicken-liver sauce. The evening smells  
the way the cheese felt when it melted.  
It's in the mood for love. George laughs  
since he didn't expect to live in San Francisco,  
ten years after seeing the bridge collapse.  
The moon won't eat cheese. Tom Waits,  
who keeps an eye on life, chokes up  
a melody—*outside, another yellow  
moon has punched a hole in the nighttime.*  
The black ink of my life keeps writing  
on the right squid of my brain.  
The cat screams in Cantonese,  
telepathically, again Big Pris, unsettled  
by her migraine, stands on her head.  
She'll have quintuplets by Cesarean section  
when she's 41, & they'll frolic in red  
rain slickers & tiny duck shoes. These hip babies  
will love asparagus spiced Eritrean &  
George'll have to feed them milkshakes  
to make them hungry. *Mutt-ye ho? M-goi, tai ha.  
What's good? Let me have a look.*  
Baby Cat slurps the sauce,  
twirling the angel hair in her paws.  
The moon blows a raspberry at the comets  
as they somersault through the night.  
George & Pris turn off the light  
& pull the blankets for bed. The fog horns  
groan & the cat wants to build  
a bonfire & sauté her littleneck clams.