

CATS, ET CETERA

貓，以及其他*

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1

The kittens came into the world before dusk, their bodies slick, their eyes covered by a grey film. *Waaaaaaa*: Their mewling summoned their mother, who started gently licking them, leaving her unable to ignore the disconcerting sight of blood underneath: Due to the mother's incontinence during the delivery, the corrugated cardboard box was now going damp and soft inch by inch, its muddy yellow color seeming all the muddier. It was like a heavy clump of earth silently enduring the squirming vigor of the living.

Then, without warning, the mother cat snapped at the scruff of the neck of one of the kittens.

Crouching by the box, she witnessed the shocking scene without being particularly surprised. Experience told her that the mother cat might even swallow the kitten without thinking, simply because the smell of a human trespasser, overwhelmingly near, had disturbed the intimacy of the moment. So she turned away and went over to the full-length window. A distant street light was flashing, slashing like a knife through the curtain of night. Farther off, it seemed there'd been a traffic accident. There was a confusion of flashing lights, like a mess

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of thoughts one could never unravel. She gasped as blood seeped out from the groove around her fingernail. She'd been biting her nails for so many years now; she'd even glued on acrylic glitter nails, but a habit was a habit. Whenever she was anxious she'd start biting off little pieces and end up stripping the yellowish skin around her nails. "Still not here?" She glanced at the clock—the minute hand had almost overtaken the hour hand, their shadows nearly superimposed—but she didn't know how long it had been: Their fur still sticky, the kittens looked like baby mice with wrinkled faces.

Just as she was getting ready to make a call, she heard the sudden sound of braking outside. It was a long, drawn out screech, a chilly sound from a long way off. July is not a windy month, but chilly drafts were raging through the room. Vexingly, they flapped the posters of celebrities hanging on the wall. But she remained calm and composed. Stroking her belly, she said: "Such a good little baby! Don't be scared, Mommy's here."

Waaaaaaa.

Pitter patter.

2

Noise filled her ears. Standing at the side of the road, the Indonesian caregiver Maria's eyes opened wide. She couldn't believe it: an old man just lying there on the road, unmoving.

People coming and going, honking, shouting—Maria had never imagined the weekend would begin with a scene like this. She secured the strap of her hipsack, stopped for a moment, as if remembering something, then hurried over to stand under an awning. The heat of the muggy summer night pressed down. Every face seemed wound up and uncertain. Sweat marks had become like burdensome children that couldn't be shaken off. They climbed up onto people's shoulders and started choking them, leaving Maria's face covered in perspiration as well. She kept ducking into a store, hungry for a cool moment of relief, only to get a hostile sidelong glance from the clerk.

She looked herself up and down in the mirror but didn't see

anything abnormal in her appearance. Maybe she was still trying to get used to this city—maybe she would never be able to get used to her new life. It had been several weeks already, but she was still missing that village in the south. At this time of day, she'd be in the park, talking and laughing with other Indonesian girls, maybe playing a game of shuttlecock, maybe sitting with Grandpa as he smoked one cigarette after another while she asked herself why the golden shower tree in the distance was always blooming with small yellow flowers, or why the red-orange clouds somehow seemed like children.

Her children. She remembered her children crying at the airport on the day of her departure and laughing on the phone. Then and there, an anxious mood welled up inside her like a sour belch, making her eyes bright with tears. It wasn't that she was feeling especially vulnerable today, but that the strangeness of the surroundings over the past four weeks had filled her with an ineffable loneliness. It was only in the past two weeks that she'd started venturing outside by herself, and the last few times, the husband and wife she was working for had refused her request to go out. They were baffled: "What for? Aren't you going back to Indonesia in a few days?" In a few days Maria's work visa would expire. She would have to leave and come back if she wanted to keep working in Taiwan. But how could she return empty handed? She wanted to buy some clothes for the children. She should get Baria a new watch. And maybe she could wear one of those Hello Kitty T-shirts that were so popular this year. Maria unconsciously felt for her hipsack. But since when had she become habitually vigilant? The other day images of agitated Indonesian women had appeared on the news in a report on mugging. The couple had been laughing about it ever since: "See? See? And you still want to go out alone?"

Maria didn't give up, though she didn't know how to argue with them. She walked and walked, and her body felt lighter and lighter. She so wanted to have a bite of curry chicken. Fried rice noodles would also be nice. She started resenting the couple for not letting her out until now, when it was almost past dinner time. A lot of the buffet places had already taken in the tables and chairs; the bakeries were pulling down their shutters. Going past McDonald's, she looked

in through the bright full-length window at the prices on the menu, hesitated, and walked on.

She didn't plan on getting something at the convenience store. That microwave fare was all like freshly puffed popcorn: savory, but ultimately unsatisfying.

It was just when she was about to turn towards the entrance to the shopping area in front of the train station that Maria spotted a cat: Its shiny white fur was especially striking at night. It was crouching, its hind legs rubbing against the ground, its front paws grabbing wildly at something on the stair. In the flashing light, Maria saw spots of blood on the ground. They were like bestial eyes blinking; this was a sign of a she-cat in heat. ~~One should have heard wanton cries~~ belonging to the still of the night. Instead one heard demented, quaking screeches, causing Maria to notice how desolate the area was. A few human forms were leaving, their steps scattered; occasionally a scooter would roar past honking its horn, as if emboldening itself by raising a brief clamor in the intersection.

Was it that late? The streetlamps stretched Maria's plump shadow until it was eerily long. The shadow soon disappeared into the greater darkness of a building.

The she-cat, still stepping in its own blood, was meowing incessantly.

3

She picked up the kitten. Purple blotches had appeared on its body as *rigor mortis* set in. The fur had darkened. Only the eyes, not yet entirely shut, still gave light.

She stroked the kitten, as if stroking a warm sweater.

Her shirt was sticking to her armpits and chest—it was just too hot out! Everything was dripping with sweat: the chairs, the tables, the cats—different odors bore down on her. The mother cat was so restless that it struggled to stand up and walk, tottering, reminding her of the time the cat had eaten the placenta to replenish lost nutrients—it'd been so bloody. And now, in the dark, in a reflection on the glass,

she saw the mother cat trembling mightily. The entire room started to shake.

Was she overtired? She rubbed her temples and stood up: another spurt of violent swaying.

Looking out, she saw that the tangle of lights in the street had long since disappeared. All she noticed now was a few faint electronic signs in the intersection: NEED CASH? WANNA MEET A DOCTOR? HARD-ON GUARANTEED IN 30 SECS!

She kept looking until her eyes glazed over, but she never saw him. She wondered whether she'd just missed his call when she went to the bathroom. A whole day! Now she was mad: Why had she wasted a dozen hours in this little room waiting for someone who wasn't coming?

She picked up the phone and was once again transferred to his voicemail. Again she heard Jolin Tsai's "Dancing Diva" (she would have chosen Deserts Chang's "Baby"). She started to worry: Had there been an accident? Was he sick? Or maybe he On second thought that didn't seem right: He would have let her know. Oh why would he suddenly start ignoring her? She paced along the edge of the bed. The kitten she was still clutching in her hands seemed colder and colder, like frozen hope. Her cold tears trickled defiantly past her chin.

She wasn't unaware that mother cats often accidentally crush their kittens to death. But this time was different. She yelled: BECAUSE THIS TIME I'M PREGNANT! DON'T YOU GET IT?

We get it, Little Sister. Calm down.

The whole family crowded pit-a-pat into the room. Their lips were greasy; a few had garlic on their breath.

Her elder sister said: I say, how can an expectant mother let herself get upset over nothing?

Her elder sister's husband said: And who is willing to watch this kind of tragedy unfold?

Her elder brother said: Don't cry, Little Sister, just tell your Bro' who's been pickin' on you. I'll kill him!

Her younger brother said: No way Pearl did it on purpose, right Pearl?

(The mother cat meowed)

Her mother said: How can it be doing you any good to go the whole day without eating?

You listen to your brother-in-law: There's the pain of involvement and then there's the pain of losing love. Trust me: Not getting tied down beats tying the knot.

Her elder sister cut in: What are you doing saying such things to a pregnant woman?

Her elder brother said: Just tell me which stinking prick violated you and I'll fix him up good!

Her younger brother said: Pearl's a good kitty, right? Pearl, Pearl, *meow-meow-meow*.

(The mother cat meowed again)

Pregnant women shouldn't go petting cats. It'll scare the *bébé*.

Her mother said: Why don't I cook up a bowl of your favorite sweet red bean soup?

(Another meow)

It takes wisdom to let go. How are you ever going to be happy if you don't see through life's illusions?

Her elder sister said: Can't you be a bit more cheerful?

But . . .

She screamed: THERE'S A KITTY CAT IN MY TUMMY! IN MY TUMMY—

That's nice, dear, Mother said, as I've just cooked up a couple of pomfrets. Shall I serve them now?

Mom gave everyone a meaningful glance: "Cats love fish, right?"

Waaaaaaa.

Meeeeeow, meeeeow.

4

None of them could remember when the kitchen drain had begun making this strange sound: a bit shrill but also plaintive, and if you listened carefully didn't it sound like there were people whispering inside? Mother figured she should go and buy some Draino. It

wouldn't do for it to keep making this sound.

That's right, it would never do for Little Sister to keep on like this . . . , her brother-in-law said. What'll become of her?

"Chen Wutang, just shut up and look cute: No one here'll think you're mute!" With a line and a look straight out of a television miniseries, her elder sister melodramatically slammed down her chopsticks.

I, I . . .—the man was about to continue when out of nowhere a pair of chopsticks was flung at him.

They all returned to the dinner table and picked up their bowls and chopsticks. It was like everyone had gone and put on makeup. They were wearing flippant expressions. The food was the same, but it seemed to have lost its flavor. Silence was oozing from their mouths as they chewed. It was like a dream gnawing on another dream, her mother's rumbling in the kitchen the only sound: She turned on the exhaust fan over the stove, hoisted the pail and the mop, and frantically began cleaning up.

Ma, take a break. Come and eat before the food gets cold. I'll get Wutang to wash the dishes in a bit, her big sister hollered.

Mother didn't answer. She finished tidying up, sat down at the table, still trying to catch her breath. In the next shot, they were shrouded in the flickering light of a fluorescent bulb that had gone on the fritz. It was like an uncertain spirit. Irritated, Mother got up and turned it off, leaving only the yellow stove fan light. The outlines of their faces were indistinct, almost plunged into darkness. They couldn't tell which dish was which, yet the sound of people shoveling rice into their mouths was particularly clear.

In a muted voice, her little brother said: It's just like we're having a candlelight dinner.

They all erupted into giggling. After all, they were veiled in a darkness in which "they couldn't see one another," and that was comforting, a momentary relief for frayed nerves. "Shush! Children should just listen, not talk!" her mother said, smiling as she passed her son a piece of meat. Her elder brother gave the kid a spoonful of bitter melon with salty egg, only to meet with protest: I don't like the taste of

bitter. Her brother-in-law jumped in: "What? Life's a bitter pill. You'd better learn to swallow it or you might end up like your sister . . ."

"Chen Wutang, you maggot mouth!" Her big sister roared through the gloom.

She had become a breach in the family, an enigma to be discussed in secret. Ever since her heart had been broken, they'd all been playing psychologists or even extremely accommodating actors: When pregnancy came up (such a good little kitty) or when she was expecting his call (he just called to say he was leaving . . .) or waiting for him to arrive (he's on his way over; he'll be here in no time), they played their parts knowing full well that the affair was truly over, that she was now simply waiting, waiting in a fantasy world of her own creation. Her waiting had become like a shadow, soundless and obscure, stretched too long in the glare of a light.

So no wonder her mother would sigh and say: "Who knew your little sister would fall so hard?"

"It's so strange. Isn't 'speed dating' popular with you young people these days? How'd she manage to turn herself into such a basket-case?"

"Such a good girl!" Mother was getting worked up.

Ma, you eat first and let's talk about it later, her elder brother said.

That's right, Mommy, we're having a candlelight dinner, her little brother said.

Ma, don't get yourself all alarmed. It's just a phase. It'll pass. She'll be fine. Her elder sister said.

You can say what you will, but it'd be better to commit her sooner rather than later . . ., her brother-in-law muttered, a wrenching heat flooding his thigh. He took a few hurried sips of soup and shut his mouth.

And this wasn't the first time. Whenever they discussed her illness, they tried not to think of it: the hospital, the psychiatric department, the psyche ward—for that would be part of a pitiless process of gradual acceptance of the idea that "there's no such person in this family." Anyway, where were they going to get the money to send her to the hospital? Who would take care of her? Who could take

care of her?

They fell silent again, facing each other in the darkness (fortunately, they still couldn't see one another clearly).

Just then, a moth burst in from who knows where, buzzed up to the light and started bashing itself against it. The more they watched it the more hot and restless the summer night seemed.

Her mother looked up: "Maybe there's something wrong with the *fengshui* of this building?"

Her mother murmured to herself: "Don't people say that there's a ship flying over the roof?"

The sink started making that sound again, like some kind of secret speech:

Waaaaaaaaa.

Waaaaaaaaa.

5

Maria had heard that urban legend.

She'd heard it at church from a girl called Annie, who'd whispered better not visit that building too often; there's a ghost ship floating around up there.

A what ship? Maria asked.

Annie abruptly raised her voice: It's filled with lost souls whose bodies have been burned by fire, lost souls that want to cast the living into the ". . . hell fire—where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched!" Annie asked: "Have you read that passage?"

Maria shook her head and recoiled; Annie's toothy grin had suddenly seemed overwhelmingly close. Ghost ship. She said the words to herself, remembering a moment of silence in childhood, an anxious moment in which she hadn't known where to look. Statuesque, her face was fair and fresh. Her long black hair was uplifted; for a moment, Maria felt as if time had turned to jelly, as Mother's hair waved in the wind in extreme slow motion. Her eyes opened wide as she witnessed this almost soul-chilling instant.

"Girls. I. Hate. You."

— Maria had seemed to hear Mother say, apathetically, as if plummeting away.

(Was she misremembering?)

(Maybe her words had been distorted by the sound of the wind?)

Many years later, Mother was sick in bed, gradually turning into some kind of pallid plant exuding an odor that blended sweet and sour. She would mutter: “Your dad is a good man. . .” “Don’t you, forget the way home. . .” “Your father. . .” Maria noticed streams of pale yellow liquid trickling from her mother’s crotch—ever since her father had left, her mother had been incontinent. Not only that, she’d also lost a sense of existence. She had become like the wallpaper in a dim room, or like a ray of light sweeping tentatively past that photograph over the bed, gone in an instant.

Maria discovered that she, too, cast a disturbing shadow. She realized that she, too, couldn’t face the lip marks on Baria’s neck. She shivered and tried not to think about it, the shock. It marked a betrayal, a wound, and a picture without a background, a picture of a woman with an ashen complexion who just stared at the camera like an awkward child—Maria rubbed her temples, trying to free herself from these vexing thoughts. It was such a nice weekend. Why keep thinking about the past?

The clothes in the two big bags brushed against her shins through the paper, giving her an ineffable feeling of warmth. Maria rummaged around until she found a waterproof watch in one of the bags. It had a leather strap and a shiny silver body. Setting the time—July 31—she couldn’t help realizing that three years had passed, just like that! Time had become the simplest of words. The hands turned round and round; one day was over, and another day began.

Maria randomly turned it a couple of revolutions and realized that the second hand wasn’t moving. What! It was like a thin, feeble leg. It just wasn’t going to start moving, no matter how hard she tapped it. Maria puffed at the face of the watch; but time still wasn’t moving, as if to show her that nothing particularly hateful or happy had happened in the past three years. She’d just been going through the motions, doing her job, as regular as clockwork.

Maria's dejection quickly turned to anger: What had the old watch-seller said after giving his guarantee? This one costs two hundred, and you'll be able to use it until you're a hundred and two! Maria looked up and saw a flashing blue light in the distance (an airplane?). How easily her good mood had been spoiled, just like that! She really felt like going back to find that old man and give him a piece of her mind. But her legs were so sore: Her two bags of clothes now felt like cumbersome children. All she wanted to do was find a place to sit down and catch her breath.

She deliberated: A hotel would be too expensive, a café too formal, a convenience store too chilly—where else was there in this building that loomed before her? She looked up and down. Light was leaking through the dark curtain on the inside of the glass. The spotlight fell on that indistinct old sculpture inside. Night was deepening. The clouds turned a deeper ash-blue and blotted out the crescent moon and the stars. There was only an oppressive solitude to accompany the hollering of a few young punks.

It was just when she was about to walk into the building that she brushed past a girl—on whom she smelled a faint citrus fragrance mixed with an indescribable sanguine sweetness. It was as if she were back in the white hospital ward: Grandma was asleep; Grandpa, his eyes were red from crying, was holding Grandma's hand, telling her haltingly that their eldest son was still in America, that he might not be able to make it home in time. The kids in Taiwan were too busy at work. "They said they'd come see you in a few days, don't you worry" As he talked, the tears streamed down his aged face, while Maria stood at a loss by the cot.

Just then the second hand of the watch started moving again, *tick tock tick tock*, loud and clear.

Maria was amazed.

Time had started moving again, after the girl had already walked away, far, far away.

She was very calm inside (she told them: I'm normal).

After waiting fourteen hours, three minutes and two seconds, she decided to go out and find him. Before setting out, she bought her usual cup of pearl milk tea—who was it who said that love was like the tapioca pearls in milk tea, the pearls that kept gushing up through the straw, always feeling a bit forced? She burst out laughing. She'd always felt it was a lousy metaphor: Was love still love if it had to be forced?

In this city, right now, how many people were immersed in love?

She crossed the street, not knowing where she was going. She tried to remember but she could not for the life of her accurately relate any facts concerning: the place where he lived. She couldn't help feeling shocked, for only now had she realized that in all those days they'd spent together they'd never really entered the heart of this city! All those afternoons they'd wasted at a café; all those hours spent talking on the phone or texting, having fun or fighting. . . . In all that time they'd waited in a world behind full-length windows, a clean world, like a lyric melody or an intense rock song. But that had nothing to do with them. They cocked their heads and imagined the shopping area across the way. That mall was a metaphor. He said: "You're way out of touch with reality."

What's that supposed to mean?

He didn't answer, preferring to put out the cigarette he was holding between his fingers.

She was confused. If he was right, then how could she feel the panic of the fetal movements?

She rubbed her belly. The warmth of her touch was transmitted slowly through her palm. No doubt about it, it was a crystallization of him and her. It wasn't necessarily 'the crystallization of love,' but she knew it was really, truly living inside her body, kicking now and then, sometimes turning over and making her nauseous, sometimes not moving at all, lapsing into silence and just floating. She understood its moods and its movements. That was all the time they'd spent

together, hand in hand. That was the most primal love she'd ever known.

He said: "Letting your calves show in the summertime means you intend to sin."

(I understand, she nodded.)

Then he said: "A girl dressed up like a princess in a floral print dress should go up Yangming Mountain."

(I get it, she replied)

He also said: "If you don't feel like washing your hair, at least remember to brush your teeth."

(Uh-huh. She was just squeezing out toothpaste.)

What he said became the rule for everything in her life: This was 'right,' that was 'normal.' She should be 'like this,' not 'like that'—time and time again, year in year out, until there came a day, one winter morning, when she woke up and found she had almost forgotten how to walk by herself or wash her face on her own. She rushed to call him for help. He was asleep when the phone rang. He told her in a thick, nasal voice: Isn't it simple? Feet side by side, wipe yourself dry with a towel, and you're all set, right? Do I have to tell you how to do everything?

She did as he said but somehow managed to fall and scrape herself.

From that time on, she became aware of its existence. She told the mother cat: I'm carrying a little kitty in my womb. The cat turned its head to the side and looked askance at her abdomen, as if to ask: "Where'd it come from?" But she was sure that it had become part of her body, until he said: "The most ideal attitude in love is honesty, right?"

"So," he said: "I have to be with someone else."

She couldn't believe her ears. There was a squirming, kicking life in her womb. How could their love be stillborn? She held her belly and wandered the streets aimlessly, assessing how much the area had changed. The façade of the train station was covered by a huge Hello Kitty timetable, there were more and more bubble tea shops proclaiming "I Could Never Forget You," and there were lots of

simplified characters on the street signs at the intersection. She told herself: Don't be afraid, this is all an illusion; the disturbance in my belly is the irreplaceable reality. She must have spent too much time in her room today. What else was there to say than that she'd spent the whole day waiting: Fourteen hours, three minutes and two seconds.

But the farther she went, the more frightened and feeble she felt. She'd almost lost the ability to 'exist on her own.' During their romance, he had become the only standard for everything in her daily life, his "I love you" her only source of guidance. But this promise couldn't salvage her world when—*whoosh*—her life collapsed in a flood. She recalled standing in front of the mirror this morning, bewildered: She'd mistaken the facial cleanser for toothpaste, the conditioner for liquid hand soap. . . and now she even had the impulse to use that cup of pearl milk tea she was holding to wash her hands!

She wondered: If love came with an instruction manual, would hers be printed backwards?

Where in the world did he live? After a year together, how well did they really know each another? And love? What did love mean?

She walked and walked until she couldn't walk anymore. She felt so tired. She bent down and held her knees to her chest. She sat down under the storefront awning and wept. She cried softly, faintly, like an infant animal going hungry in the night. Yet she still hadn't noticed that under a nearby awning there was another crying woman, and farther along another—one after another: Their faces expressionless, their shoulders heaving, all of them were all crying silently in the quiet of the night.

7

They were crying silently, the women in white blouses, crying tears that seemed particularly cold. Then there was a freeze frame on the crying women. Clouds were floating gently behind them. Night had not yet departed.

Maria woke to discover the image of those gaunt women still on the screen. Their white forms were particularly striking, all the more

ethereal. She had not anticipated the attendant would bring such a depressing film for her to watch. In the dream from which she had just awoken, she and the children had walked and walked, such a long way, to find her husband Baria. Finally, they reached a river. The children saw something in the dirty water and yelled: "Dad! Look, it's Dad!" Maria saw a huge peacock spreading its tail feathers. Looking more closely, she saw Baria's features on the bird's narrow face. Its long beak was terrifying, beating back and forth: *Squaaaaawk. Squaaaaawk.*

Then the dream ended. Maria wiped away the sweat and tried to remember all the details. Things had felt, the acrid grass had smelled, and the houses along the river had looked so real. She swallowed and fanned herself with her collar. The room seemed way too hot. Were they too cheap to turn on the air con?

She got up and began feeling around the room. She was amazed to see that the remote control in the slot on the wall showed twenty one degrees. Had her dream taken away her ability to judge temperature? She tested the air coming out of the vent with her hand: Warm followed immediately by cool. With the continual alternation, no wonder she'd been sweating one moment and hugging herself the next.

Oh forget it! It was almost dawn. Maria sat back down on the sofa. The women on the screen were still crying. The blank horizon seemed on the verge of saying something, but ended up remaining blank. Maria gave up and lay down in the shimmering light. She tried to go back to sleep but couldn't get those thoughts out of her head: Several years of village life, and Grandpa and Grandma, and how the couple she was working for had presumed to bring her from that village in the south to this city in central Taiwan (they said it would make it easier for her to book her airplane ticket, deal with application formalities and all). Maria even thought of the time a couple of days before when she'd accidentally discovered a plastic 'man' in the master bedroom.

The 'man' wore a pair of black briefs. Its firm chest was bulging, disproportionately muscular. Its brow was slightly furrowed, its lips

shiny, its skin a bit slippery and puffy—its youthful body trembled slightly, as if responding to her touch. When she left the room, Maria was blushing, her heart racing—in the torrid desolation at the end of summer, Baria's hand had caressed and squeezed her calves, while outside the window the wind whished through the leaves of the royal coconut palms and the rotting umbrella trees exuded a rank gooey odor. Hazily, Maria saw Mother walking out to sea. She got smaller and smaller, until she was submerged in the spray. Standing by the shore, Maria started howling, until Mother floated up to the surface, her black eyes like faint fireflies bobbing up and down in the night. . . .

Why? Why had Mother done it?

(At the time, had Father already moved out?)

(At the time, Mother was so young.)

(At the time. . .)

(Mama)

Maria pulled her arms from between her legs. She seemed to hear some kind of noise coming through the vent. It was a soft sound like an infant's whining: *waaaaaaaaa, waaaaaaaaa*, deep and hollow. Smelling of cigarette smoke, the room was like a space capsule drifting through the darkness.

She shuddered.

8

At the break of dawn on a midsummer's day, she and Maria, aged twenty and twenty-three, both heard a faint sound like a baby animal crying.

Maybe it was the call of a newborn kitten. Maybe it was a restless she-cat in heat. The sound broke into both their worlds. As the mother cat licked them, the kittens looked out at the world through infant eyes. Their fur was gradually becoming dry and stiff. Once the clouds dispersed, they'd be able to leave the cardboard box, which was now about to collapse. They would begin to explore the world. They would start to love.

But how large is the world? Or how small? How wide is the path

of love, or how narrow? Nobody can clearly say. The confusion of love is like sinking into the deepest, darkest ocean until one moment you witness an entrancing, kaleidoscopic, rainbow-glazed vision and the next moment mortal fear wells up inside you. This very night, Maria had witnessed a dying old man's twitching feet, while she, at the age of twenty, had observed a she-cat suffocate its kitten. What could one say? Why did death approach so near to life?

She held a mewling kitten, not sure how to find the way home. She vaguely recalled that right when she walked into this building she'd collided with a dark-skinned, rotund woman with large eyes. Agitated and faltering, the woman had helped her up, repeating: "Sorree, so sorree. . . ." At the time, worried about her belly, which was sore from the collision, she'd gotten a whiff of a faint aroma of pepper blended with sanguine sweet and sour sweat, an odor which reminded her that her own body, similarly, operated like clockwork on a twenty-eight day cycle, a period that would never change no matter what some man said or stop just because of some man's feelings.

She couldn't be any more normal.

With these thoughts in her head, all of a sudden the woman excitedly grabbed Maria's hand and held her head high. In the gloom, almost light but not yet quite, a ship could be faintly seen floating above the building. Its hull was shining with a dazzling radiance. The cat standing erect at the prow was glaring down at them, its abdomen round and full, its ice green eyes revealing a mystery only they could understand—for a moment, they even saw a long-haired woman staring apprehensively into the distance. Her face was so pale. The scene was too much. She'd never imagined that urban legend would come to life before her eyes. The whole hull of the ship was splendid and stately. An almost supernatural light bathed her in bliss. She wasn't afraid anymore. She was no longer scared she might just be seeing things.

Was there something wrong with her?

She held Maria's hand tightly. She heard the *tick tock tick tock* of the mechanism of that watch.

At the same time, she heard, in her belly, a faint, low *waaaaaaa,*

waaaaaaaa.

(But he never appeared.)

(But he never appeared.)

(She patted her tummy, saying: "Be good. Never fear: Mommy's here.")

(Don't be afraid.)

Don't be scared.

Waaaaaaaa.

Waaaaaaaa.

Translated by Darryl STERK 石岱崙