

# **The Cats' Lives**

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## Translator's Notes

Ju, Tian-Xing was born in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, in 1958. Having graduated from National Taiwan University's Department of History, she assumed the editorship of the literary periodical *Sansanjikan*, and made a name for herself as a prolific novelist and essayist. Her work was awarded with Taiwan's Time Literature and United Daily Novel prize. Prior to writing *The Cats' Lives*, most of Ju's work deals with the lives of veteran families in their gated communities scattered around the island. These were the soldiers from Mainland China who, having fought the Japanese during WWII and the communist party during the subsequent *Guogong* (the civil war 1945-49), followed their government into exile on Taiwan. First published in 2005 and combining features of the personal essay with novelistic elements, *The Cats' Lives* is one of her distinguished later works. Its popularity speaks to the growing concerns over the protection of animals and the environment on the island over the past decade.

*The Cats' Lives* focuses on Ju's relationship to the many stray and abandoned cats she has taken in over the years. Although she keeps them as pets, she does not consider herself to be their owner and master, and never intends to keep them forever. Under her care, the cats are free to come and go. This is a common practice for many animal lovers in Taiwan – and one that many Western readers may find difficult to make sense of, accustomed as they are to the notion that pet owners should take full responsibility of their animals once they are attached to the household. Her attitude in caring for her cats reflects the ethical beliefs Ju inherited from her cultural roots. In Taiwanese and Chinese culture, the relationship between nature and humans is conceptualized as *Tienranheyi* [天人合一]: nature and humans are to be united as one, in contrast to the Western idea that nature stands in opposition to humans. Therefore, humans as well as other species are ideally pictured as coexisting harmoniously in the environment. Animals, whether wild or domestic, should not be owned by humans, and they are entitled to their own space. This is why Ju keeps debating, with herself and with her neighbors, whether to choose safety or freedom for her cats. If humans enjoy autonomy, so should cats, so she ends up allowing them to run free – even if this means that they go feral, and disappear for days or even months. Her reasoning could be considered anthropomorphic – projecting human qualities onto nonhuman animals – if it did not go both ways: she is acutely aware that cats, too, project cat-like qualities onto humans, and her own descriptions of human behaviour frequently play with

what would have to be called ailouromorphism. Both cats and humans, in her view, are governed by a fate which reflects an unknown and almighty natural order beyond human control.

Ju's focus is on the cats. The human characters, by contrast, are drawn only in their barest outlines. The reader must guess in what relationship they stand to the narrator – Tianwu can be assumed to be her sister, Donald her husband, Mengmeng her only daughter, and Mr. Pan a neighbor who runs the local supermarket.

### **The Hunters**

What a happy age! It was the time when we still had options regarding whether to neuter our household cats or not. Among the less than fifty households abiding on the slope at the southern side of Xinhai Tunnel, we were the only family who owned cats. Cats avoid incest, so our cat population grew slowly. Because they did not have to be neutered, those of our cats who had given birth two months previously were able to conduct nightly training sessions for their kittens.

On a mysterious yet clear night, from a corner came the sound of whining, begging and moaning. I did not have to get up to know that their mother had taken them to a height (probably the window sill or some tree branch) and was training them to jump off.

We hardened our hearts and decided not to get involved in the exercise. Years of experience had taught us that begging the prideful mother cat to take mercy on the kittens (we once helped a very timid kitten to get off the wall) would only drive her away.

Therefore, we could not interfere, and had to continue to harden our hearts, stand by, and observe. We noticed that the mother cat sometimes came back with some live creature smeared with blood for her kittens to practice their hunting skills – a scene just like what one often sees on Discovery Channel, when some large mother cat catches a young gazelle that went astray for the young ones to practice chasing, pouncing, and neck-biting. For a day or two, the gazelle provides an object lesson.

This scenario still plays out over and over again, even among those cats which live and eat rather comfortably in the city. They continue to follow this practice because of the genes they inherited from their ancestors. I suppose they do not want to see their talents go to waste.

Later, the mother cats had to be neutered. It was around this time that I started to take in orphaned kittens. Even though they had never received any lessons from their mother and were always well-fed, some of them became excellent hunters. Never the males, however, because they are not born to hunt in nature. No wonder Mengmeng, the fortune teller of Tiantong Purple Star Astrology, suggested that I should reincarnate as the male of some feline species, ideally a leopard, because male cats do not have to do anything but play all day.

In the history of my many cats, the best and the second best hunters of excellency were Peanut and Nari. Peanut was the only cat my household members and I ever treated as if she were the Empress Wu of China or Catherine the Great.

I took in Peanut after Daylily and Fungus. She must have been one of the kittens given birth to by an old one-eyed cat. Peanut was a white-based tortoiseshell cat, so her neck was longer than that of purebred tortoiseshell cats. She had high cheek-bones and a narrow chin. She was so skinny that the structure of her large bones shone through. As the regulation required, she was spayed before she reached sexual maturity. At that time, there were already seven or eight mother cats and kittens in my house. Among them, only Daylily enjoyed the status of a queen. Fungus, which came from the same litter, would have qualified, as well, had she not contracted a fever that left her addle-brained. She was quite a beauty, but she believed herself to be a dog, and liked to hang around with other dogs. She regarded Niuniu, a tiny bitch, as her real mother. She would greet her in the morning and evening, just as human children do with their parents, and patiently lick Niuniu's face. Daylily, on the other hand, was mostly outside the house, fighting and looking for mates. She therefore commanded over a vast territory, which covered several hilly slopes in some new and old communities. She was usually out for about ten days before she returned home to rest and heal her wounds. On those occasions, Peanut, her mother, would guard the territory for her.

Peanut patrolled our alley all day long. Even though she had been spayed, she was still feisty enough to drive away the tomcats. Because of her beauty, they came to solicit her for sex. Yet she always succeeded in beating them up and sending them away whining. Peanut not only looked down upon male stray cats, but also upon other household cats. She often perched

somewhere high at home, mewing and snarling angrily. Her unusually loud noise was so intimidating that even dogs would tremble with fright upon hearing it.

The kittens in my household were very innocent-looking and care-free. They did nothing but play and chase each other. The old and feeble house cats did not have much to do except sleep the whole day. Occasionally, their hallucinating older sister, Fungus, would unexpectedly engage in courtship rituals by pecking and nipping Peanut in the neck.

How did Peanut escape these these upsetting disturbances? The only way for her was to go on the hunt.

One time, Peanut returned home with a lizard she had caught. She bragged to us about the predator she had caught and also warned us to stay away from it. The lizard was actually the beloved property of Mengmeng. Therefore, we had to rescue it. In our desperation, we scattered some biscuits around her so that, distracted, she would let go of the lizard. Although an expert hunter, Peanut loved to eat biscuits. This method became a routine, and it never failed. She would release the lizard, who was playing dead, and relish the bait. And we would take this opportunity to rescue the lizard and allow it to escape.

While this worked out well in the beginning, it did not turn out the way we expected. Since Peanut loved biscuits, she now went out to catch lizards in exchange for them. It got to the point where she would do this several times a day. With a sigh, we guessed at what she must have been thinking: What happened to my mistress? Why has she become so fond of eating lizards?

One time she was finally bested by her catch—a big, mean-looking lizard, measuring nearly one foot from head to tail. She was fighting with it inside the house. The lizard was scurrying around, looking as fierce as a Velociraptor. Sometimes it stopped, stock-still, and put on a threat display, its mouth wide open. At this moment, none of us dared to try to catch it with our hands or even sweep it out with the broom. A different strategy was called for. We divided ourselves into two groups. One group cornered the giant lizard, while the other went to fetch Mengmeng, our resident lizard expert, from his class in elementary school. We had to declare it a household emergency so that the guard at the school's gate would let us in, and we gave a detailed account of the emergency to Mengmeng's homeroom teacher so as to obtain a leave for him.

Mengmeng turned out to be the right person for the job. He quickly caught the terrifying creature with his bare hands, and released it back to the mountain behind the house. He acted like a true first responder and saved the day.

After this occurrence, the entire household agreed that we would stop trading with Peanut for several days. Smart as she was, maybe she would get the implication, and stop bringing us lizards.

Peanut was indeed smart, but not smart enough to understand that we hadn't wanted the lizards for food. Clearly, since we were no longer interested in lizards, we would want something else to eat. So she started to bring back sparrows, frogs, red-skirted grasshoppers, as well as anchovies, marinated in salt and rice wine, stolen from a neighbor's kitchen. We were quite upset, and tried to make her understand that such misconduct was unacceptable. Yet she seemed to always win the argument, turning the question back at us: "Why was I allowed to hunt for these things before, but now am suddenly forbidden to do so?" If we reproachfully commanded her to stop hunting, she would simply turn her back at us, jump onto the fence, and leave.

One day, she made an odd sound, which seemed like a boast but also a warning to ward off other cats and dogs. The noise was loud enough to shake the entire third floor of the house. Upon hearing it, we immediately went upstairs to check. We found an unpleasantly foul smell lingering in the room Peanut had just left. There was fresh blood under the dining table. Judging from the messy shreds of plumage, a pigeon must have been killed there. Could it be one of the precious racing pigeons, worth millions of dollars, which our next-door neighbor kept?

The family agreed that we had to deal with this matter discreetly. We would resist the urge of talking sense into her, scolding her, or comforting her. We would simply ignore what she had done, and continue to feed her at the assigned times. We decided to take this attitude because we had come to understand that no matter whether she was well-fed or not, she would continue to hunt, because hunting was her nature. At this point, we only wished that humans and animals could go back to maintaining a normal relationship – that Peanut would stop assuming that we liked to eat lizards or pigeons, and understand she was only a cat, rather than a human being, a member of the family Felidae.

Our wish to conclude the business, however, did not change Peanut's insistent desire to see it continue. We often saw her perched on the back rest of the couch, between the dining table and the living room, or in the hallway, where family members frequently passed by, with an

accusatory air. She seemed to be complaining that we had breached our contract, and put an end to the droll and delicious commerce. There really was no good response to such a well-founded and sensible accusation. If we tried to justify ourselves by saying that we had run out of biscuits, she would cover her ears in protest, pretending not to hear us.

Eventually, though, she relented. One day, with a wounded spirit, she jumped off the window and disappeared. We failed to notice at first because we had too many cats, and did not miss her voice among all the meowing. Two days passed before we realized Peanut was not there. Then we started searching and calling out for her. A week later, a guard at a nearby high-rise building who knew that we were looking for a cat informed us that some people had seen a dead cat among the trash bins next to the underground parking lot. They had not been able to tell whether it died of poison or in a car accident, although there was no apparent wound. We asked about its color and size (the body had already been disposed of), and we were pretty sure it was Peanut.

Because we did not witness her death, we did not feel as sad as we did about the death of other cats or dogs that we had kept in the past. We only felt a tinge of grief, such as one feels about those heroes recorded in history, or about a character in a literary work. A character in one of those stories that open with the promise of glory and brilliance, and issue in tragic demise.

This is how the Peanut Dynasty ended. She was our only female Pharaoh. She was the only female cat to ever rule our entire household, including the cats and dogs. Although I tried not to think too much about it, I could not help but wonder: had Peanut been so hungry that she went looking for scraps in the garbage? Why had she been unwilling to walk a few more steps, to come home, and be fed? Why had she not come to beg for food from me? She must have thought of me as a very fickle, inconstant mistress who failed to abide by principles.

Female cats and male cats do not feel the same way toward humans. Even so, I find them equally attractive, and do not prefer one sex to the other. No matter at what age, once a male cat has assured itself that you are not a threat to him, and can even provide meals and accommodation, he will completely trust you with his heart and body. Such devotion is never less than what a man in his prime would show to the woman he loves. Female cats, on the other hand, are more reserved, maybe due to the fact that they carry the responsibility to raise children. They constantly observe you to judge whether you are sincere and deserve their trust. I never earned enough affection from a female cat that she would huddle in my lap and expose her vulnerable

belly for a good rub, such as male cat would. Yet, what creature would stare at you silently from a distance with big and round pupils, snuggle against your ankle affectionately, and not mind being ignored when you are concentrating on your own affairs? In human terms, such body language would have to be interpreted as “I know you are mine, and I am yours.”

Indeed, a female cat will mark you with secretions from the scent glands under the whiskers on her nose and mouth. In this manner, she claims her territory and forbids others to trespass. Such is her way of expressing affection and sincerity – something that it is fair to say we would not tolerate from another human being.

However, for a cat to become a real hunter she must have raised kittens, even if they are not her own. Whether she has given birth herself or been spayed is irrelevant.

After Peanut, it was Nari who ruled the other cats.

Nari had been abandoned as kitten just prior to the arrival of Typhoon Nari. She was so little then that we could not clearly determine her sex, because her sexual organs were not yet visible. Even so, we were sure that she was female. A civet cat with tiger-like yellow stripes and a white belly will be male in 90 percent of all cases.<sup>1</sup> A civet cat with a tricolor tortoiseshell coat will be female 99.99 percent of the time. (The only known exception, according to legend, was snatched by a Japanese taxidermist.) 90 percent of yellow tiger-striped cats are male. With black cats, the odds are even. Still, we have only once had a female black cat. As for cats with a gray back and white belly, or with black and white spots, they also have a 50 percent probability of being either male or female. This is something I learned through the many years I spent with cats.

Nari’s nickname was Nana. Since she was little, Nana had never been close to big cats. She also paid no attention to dogs. During the day, she did not stay at home, but usually wandered around on the plant-covered strip between the back of our house and the supermarket. We called her back for dinner, but as soon as she finished, she would disappear again. Once we even thought we had lost her.

Later we found out from a conversation with Mr. Pan, the owner of the supermarket, that Nana hung around with a fat, yellow, feral rabbit named “Sanbeitu,” or “Three-Cup-Hare,” which he had taken under his care. (The name indicates that he was destined to end up in a dish, a fate from which his new owner had saved him him.) Mr. Pan and his two children, both under

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<sup>1</sup> The term “玳瑁貓,” civet cat, does not refer to the biological species denoted by the English word, but a specific kind of a domestic cat with a particular color pattern.

three years of age, shared the same philosophy with regards to animal issues. The children did not study at the Chinese-English bilingual kindergarten next door. Instead, they, like their father, would catch bugs and play in the dirt on the limited space of the green belt. According to Mr. Pan, he always felt a pair of hunter's eyes staring at him as he was squatting, planting and cultivating flowers there. Eventually, he found out that there was a kitten hiding in the underbrush. From his description, we were pretty sure that kitten must have been Nana. Yet the prey she had been fixing her gaze on was not Mr. Pan—it was Three-Cup-Hare, three times larger than her. The rabbit did nothing but dig holes all day, and ignored the presence of other beings, including Nana, who would sometimes jump over his back. He did not seem to be afraid of her, even though she occasionally tried to bite him in the neck. At dusk, Mr. Pan put Three-Cup-Hare into a cage. The original purpose of the cage was something of a mystery, since it had an upper level, like an attic. Nana later also snuck inside, without anyone's invitation. The hare would groom its fur on the ground floor, while Nana did the same in the attic above. It was an Edenic time for them, with pure joy and happiness for both.

Soon afterwards, a source of worry arose when Mr. Pan adopted two chicks which his friend had won at sausage gambling in the night market. As was his habit, he did not put them in a pen.

It did not take long for our fears to materialize. One day, we heard a moanful chirping sound outside, just under our ears, so a bunch of us went to search for its source. We found Nana and a chick sitting side by side on the second floor balcony. The chick seemed neither hurt nor frightened. Nana beamed at us. (Her expression was the same as when she yawned, indicating relaxation after extreme excitement.) Nana, who was no larger than the chick, had probably taken it into her mouth, chirping and flapping its wings as it must have been, run across the meadow, leapt across the ditch of the mountain road and over the short fence, dodged other cats coming after her out of curiosity or envy, trudged along the wall, and jumped up into our second floor. How could we reproach her? All we could do was applaud and admire her bravery. She did not even notice when we quickly grabbed the chick and returned it to Mr. Pan.

Similar events would transpire at least one or twice a day, with the only difference being the location. Sometimes it happened indoors if the windows were open; sometimes on the third floor. The chicks became so used to Nana snatching them up that they eventually stopped

chirping. Quite often, we'd find Nana and one of the chicks napping side by side, she curled up and the chick huddled up next to her.

I remember how one time, when Mr. Pan came over to claim the chick, a mutual friend of ours was also present. His look of disbelief made us realize that we might have allowed this game to go a bit too far. Therefore, we discussed whether Mr. Pan might protect his chicks from Nana by putting them in a coop. However, he argued that out of respect for nature and the ecosystem, we should not confine either chick or cat. However that may be, as I see it, we are the real predators in this ecosystem.

There came a day when one of the chicks disappeared for good. We could not be sure whether Nana had killed it (at this time, the chick had already grown larger than Nana) or perhaps just taken it somewhere farther into the back country, because we were constantly taking away her prey. But as much as Mr. Pan and we looked for it, it was nowhere to be found. We did not blame each other or apologize; yet we were all upset and regretful.

With the chicken gone (Mr. Pan confined the surviving one inside his supermarket, allowing it to wander around with his two other boys), Nana brought back one of my favorite birds, a Japanese white-eye. It seemed to have died of sheer fright, the body without apparent injury, its eyes wide open. However, Nana did not understand that it was dead, and kept throwing it up into the air, hoping it would come back to life and flap its wings wide open like the chick she had played with in the past. Nana made a strange sound in her throat, maybe because she was confused and unhappy about the whole situation. I stood quietly and observed, fascinated by her natural instinct. I could not decide whether I should intervene. Once or twice, I found the birds she caught were still alive. Suddenly, I understood why I could not bring myself to watch National Geographic or Discovery Channel. Whenever I see the animals fall victim to the laws of nature, to drought or hunger, or being preyed upon, I feel resentment towards the cruelty of a Creator who never tires of inventing vicious practical jokes. At moments like this, it must be hard for the Creator, as well as for me, to decide if he should intervene. I love the predator, but I also feel sympathy for the prey (be it the Japanese white-eye or any other being) and want to save it from being eaten. In a situation like this, I usually doubt and hesitate. Eventually I, like the Creator, end up doing nothing.

In fact, Mengmeng once commented that the last profession that I should enter was that of a zoologist or nature photographer, because I might get up in the middle of night to pick up a hunting rifle and shoot a deer to feed my cats.

Nana was a happy hunter. In her splendor, she matched the Greek goddess Diana. She was always busy in and out of the house. Thank goodness she would never trade stuff with us like Peanut. She seemed to know that we admired her excellent hunting skills, so she often drew our attention to the grace with which she went about her business. One time when Donald was sprawled on the floor reading, as he so often did, Nana jumped in through the window, quarry in her mouth, and dropped it on the page of the book he was reading. Donald was no less surprised than her victim. It was a little mouse, still alive, not even fully covered with fur yet. Then, Nana lay down gracefully as if she were on an Africa Safari, flipping her tail. Her meaning could not have been more clear: “Here is a gift for you.”

Donald politely thanked her, gingerly closed his book, went outside, and released the little mouse.

After spending time with Nana for a while, I would occasionally grow sentimental. For instance, I once went overseas and left her in somebody else’s care. On board the plane I could not help being moody, feeling sad for Nana because she would never experience the vast sky like a crested serpent eagle, what it was like to ride a plane and to enjoy exotic seafood as I was about to do. She was not able to travel to other countries. She also would never know how big the world was. I could not but feel sad because I could not share with her my travel experiences, memories, insights, and moods. I also could not share with her the feeling when someone close was dying. I felt there was a deep divide between us that could never be bridged.

I thought that she was probably sauntering about the green belt, the slope, the mudslide-stopping fender covered with weeds, all within a half-mile radius around my house. I assumed this because female cats have a smaller territory than male cats. Under the starry lights, in the cool and breezy morning, and at dusk when many birds were returning to their nests, she would spend an hour or two, or perhaps more, squatting among the long bushy grass, staring coldly at a sparrow, a cold-blooded old frog, or at one of the thousands of creatures of all kinds that were trying to evade her capture. She might also have been thinking: My smart mistress will never know the delight that comes from all the many different messages the breeze carries through the blades of the grass, how delicately these blades graze the most sensitive fur on my belly, how the

light and the shadow change every second, and how passionate the call that summons me to the ancestry circulating in my blood. My mistress will also never know that moment—time without spending time, as Italo Calvino has said about story-telling—when my twitching paws hit the soft spot on the throat of some animal, whatever its kind, and the abandon with which I bite it in half. Beetles are torn apart, and only the tail feathers, claws, and head remain when I eat a flying bird. She does not know how after the hunt, I will wash my face, rubbing the last drops of blood into my glands. My mistress will never feel the endless delight that hunting brings, and the excitement known to the explorer.

Whenever I imagined Nana's hunting excursions, I would try to fill in more details. This was the only way I could restore some kind of balance to our relationship that was so distant and yet so close, as decreed by our fateful encounter.

For several nights, I woke up from my sleep without any audible disturbance or premonitions. I always found a pair of predator's eyes staring at me from the headboard or the window sill. At moments like this, she must have thought herself a Manchurian tiger, because she did not respond to me as her mistress when I called her name. When she heard my call, she acted like a predator, leaping, kicking, chewing, biting, and clawing my legs and hands as if I were a big antelope.

Under the stars and among the sound of waves, the past is like a dream.

The sentences that I adored when I was young suddenly came to me through the window. I give them away to the city hunters that I have met, as a kindness to them and their remarkable ancestors.

### **When Humans Encounter Cats**

This chapter should have been written a year ago.

A year ago at this time, I was searching for Muggle like a madwomen. I first buzzed the door bell of every unit inside a 15-story high-rise apartment building behind my house. Through the intercom, I inquired if anyone had seen a yellow tiger-striped tomcat with a flash-like short tail.

It took me a few nights before I got a hold of all the residents in that building. In my desperation, I resorted to the media my friends were working for, and asked them to find Muggle for me: Dachun and Wuco broadcast about the missing cat on their radio shows; Junyi announced it on his website; Lanfun advertised on Minxun News, which she was working for. At that time, even strangers greeted me with the question: “Have you found Muggle yet?”

“Everyone in my daughter’s class is mobilized to look for Muggle,” said one of my friends living in Neihu, in the north of Taipei, while my house was located in the south of the city. At certain points, I became very edgy, thinking that maybe I should employ some of the methods that are usually employed to find missing children. Of course, for those who treat cats or dogs like children, there is really not much of a difference between such cases, to begin with. But I recognized that my situation was more complicated.

In addition to Muggle, I also kept five cats and nine dogs at home. For many years, the total number of my pets remained pretty close to this number. It is the maximum number we can deal with if we also want to enjoy a good quality of life. Rain or shine, our cats and dogs always stay with us indoors. The reason that we keep so many of them is not that we like cats and dogs so much (as may have been the case when we first started adopting stray cats and dogs), but rather that we cannot withhold our sympathy from them. To see them abandoned, anxiously slinking around corners with starvation in their panicked eyes, torments me, causes my heart to race and my adrenaline level to shoot up – much better to see them dressed up like stuffed animals, hugged and snuggled by their owners. How I wish I could take those abandoned animals home right away!

Since cats are usually light, and require little space, they are easily disposed of. One time, a neighbor of mine brought me two kittens in a garbage bag. He initially thought they were mice hiding above the ceiling. When cleaning up, he found that they were actually kittens borne by a feral cat in the neighborhood. Holding the two kittens in one of his hands, he threatened that if we did not take them in, he would break their necks and dump them in the trash. Of course, we could not have that and took them in. We named the yellow kitten Daylily, and the one with the beaver pattern on the back Fungus. We also adopted another kitten we found when we were walking our dogs up a path toward the top of a hill. It was lying in a ditch and appeared to be dead. (On the previous day, we had found a dead kitten, which we buried somewhere near our house. We assumed this kitten to be its sibling.) However, as soon as we brought it home, we

realized that it was not quite dead yet. It had only lost a great deal of body temperature. For the next two days, we wrapped it up in a handkerchief and took turns taking care of it. We decided that whoever was reading a book or a newspaper would hold it in their lap to keep it warm. We could only do our best, and did not have high hopes for its survival. Therefore, we did not seriously consider a name for it. We only called it “Yellow Miaow” by its color. There was also one time that we took in a barely grown-up stray cat whose coat was too dirty to tell its original color, so we called it “Dirty.” After it had been fed and taken a good nap, we discovered that it was a pinkish white, beautiful male cat. We were sure he would grow up to be a big cat because of his bone structure, so we named him “Big White.” There was also one time we found a box containing a black cat which someone had secretly deposited at our front door. There was a note attached to it, saying “Call me Kiki,” along with a bag of cat biscuits. We kept the cat for seven or eight years, but were never able to determine its sex or age, even on the day when it died.

This is also how we adopted Muggle. One day in the summer, we noticed the little girl from next door returning home from school with a cat. Because she did not have the first idea how to properly take care of a cat, she held it by the belly with a single hand. So the cat was crying and complaining as they were approaching from a distance. When we opened the door to see what was going on, the girl in her elementary-school uniform told us that a mother cat had just given birth to four kittens in the security guard’s office. The janitor told her that if nobody wanted them, they would land in the garbage very soon. To save their lives, the little girl and three of her classmates reluctantly agreed to each take one of them home. We asked her if she was allowed to keep a cat. She responded that her father might secretly take it away and abandon it somewhere while she was away studying in cram school. This was why she came to us, begging us to take it in.

Yet we hesitated because we had a feeling that this abandoned kitten—which we eventually named Muggle—was going to be trouble. Muggle was already three months old at the time. We did not think he would get along with the nine dogs we kept in our home. Even worse, they might end up fighting with each other. If he were a younger kitten, our nine dogs, whether male or female, would look after him because they liked to play the role of the motherly caretaker. However, we soon found our worries to be absolutely groundless. After we adopted him, Muggle turned out to be a healthy and exceptionally clever cat. For the first two days after he moved in, he silently crouched on the high back of the couch, calmly gazing at the dogs down

below. He was neither afraid nor agitated. He quickly adjusted to our place and the neighborhood, and familiarized himself with the objects inside and outside the houses. He figured out which doors to push or paw at and which windows to open so that he could get out. Sometimes, he jumped on top of the wall and walked on the longer side of the fence in front of the house. In this way, he was always ready to catch some Japanese white-eyes in the osmanthus bush, while at the same time observing the goings-on inside the house. His eyes had a grave expression. Like his relative, the Manchurian Tiger, he seemed emotionally detached. He also looked like Mr. Lingyun Gao, a journalist of the United News, who often visited TV talk shows. When I stared at him eye to eye across the distance of the dining table, he would make a cat sound that nobody but me could understand. He seemed to be saying, “Why don’t you step outside for me, antelope?” He wanted me to offer myself to him as prey, so that he could hone his skills as a hunter and a killer. When he made such advances, I did not hesitate to drop whatever I might be reading, and willingly went out to meet him in the yard. When I pushed the door open, he would already have jumped off the bush, and stand there waiting for me there.

We had developed a few odd tricks together, and I sometimes thought we might even perform together in the street to make a living.

Muggle was very independent and wild. He did not mingle with other cats. He also did not allow people to hold him in their arms. With these characteristics, he came close to satisfying my almost impossible dream, that of owning a tiger. I always fall in love with this type of cat, head over heels. There are no exceptions.

In a any litter of kittens, so young that they are still incapable of moving around, Tienwun will invariably fall in love with the ones which later turn out to be a nuisance. When they grow up, they will become attached, very good at expressing their affections, and obedient. Tienwun opposes the idea of treating all cats and dog as equals whenever we feed them, take care of them, or play with them affectionately. One of our cats that Mengmeng is particularly fond of has the frame of a leopard: a tiny head, long paws and legs, and a long body. No matter how much it eats, it always stays thin. Its body resembles that of the Tartar warrior in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ *Hundred Years of Solitude*. All of our kittens are narrow-minded, and easily get jealous. They are street bullies outside the house, but they become extremely gentle and docile when they return home. Because of the caring love of their mother, they grow up to be silly-looking big fat cats with a round face and round eyes. Before he passed away, my father paid more attention to those

which were easily neglected because of their silence. Donald does not easily get attached to any cats and dogs. For this reason, whenever there is an accident, or a cat or a dog dies, he can calmly comfort us in our sorrow and sadness. This, I have come to think, actually makes him the most valuable family member.

The cat I love the most is the one that grew up to be a loner, roaming around like a wolf. Most of the time, we have no idea where it went. I tried to keep it inside our home before, but it did not work. Spring is always my most fearful season because I will debate with myself every day whether I should close the window to keep my cat inside or allow it to come and go freely, according to its wishes.

In the spring, we often see the trees full of Japanese white-eyes and grey starlings. When I hear crested serpent eagles crying in the distance on sunny days, I look up and try to find them. How I envy their freedom! Whenever I sit down and gaze out the window shoulder to shoulder with the cats, I secretly watch them in profile. Their eyes are sometimes green, sometimes yellow or sometimes gray, and look marvelously serious. I am intimidated by their appearance, and I contemplate how humans do not deserve the power to restrain them because cats, just as well as humans, are entitled to their own freedom. I debate with myself whether I should keep them indoors or allow them to run free. The result is always that I open the window and let them out.

However, not every cat likes to roam. There are also cats that never leave the house. Others stay outside for ten minutes and immediately return, their bodies warm, hearts beating quickly, and pupils dilated. And still others will not return for fifteen days. They probably follow around female the cats who are in heat.

We have been neutering cats and dogs for years, both those in our household and those out in the streets. We are doing this for two reasons: The first is to reduce the number of kittens and puppies in the street because we would never be able to adopt them all; the other reason is that we want our male cats to come home. They would sometimes leave the house and disappear forever, prowling for a mate.

Sometimes it is difficult to decide whether we should take all of our cats to the vet to be neutered. We often have heated debates, and a lot of factors need to be taken into account before we reach a conclusion. We are sometimes surprised by the turns we take. Generally, we think it is preferable to have the male cats neutered so that they will be content to stay at home, and not feel the need to strut their masculinity for the females of the species. Yet, difficulty arises when

the decision concerns a cat who acts like a king with a harem, like Alexander the Great and Kublai Kan. Daylily belonged to this category. He was not particularly large. His body was stocky, like that of a cow. Yet he was extremely virile. The season when he reached adulthood, he was already the king for many female cats from several old and new communities in our vicinity. He earned this exalted position by vanquishing many other cats in battle, as we could tell from the many scars on his body. For this reason, we admired him very much. Whenever he returned after a week or so, we would get busy preparing his meals, cleaning his wounds and bandaging them. We sometimes could not help but ask him which female cat had been the prize worth all this struggle.

I was curious to learn more about the adventures this feline king had encountered on his journeys. I supposed that the beautiful cat he had fought for must have been a tricolored tortoiseshell female. She must have been as beautiful as Helen of Troy. The cat he fought for was invariably female. He would fight for her round face and round eyes. To be his lover, she would have to have the perfect posture of an East European gymnast. She would also be smart and independent, and hard to win over. (Are being smart and independent, and being hard to win over, two qualities that often complement each other?) If I were a male cat, I would also be crazy for a female cat with these qualities.

Daylily was always busy roaming outdoors, mating and expanding his territory. We worshipped him as a hero, and did not want to interfere with his mating instinct, so he was lucky and escaped being neutered.

Although I had noticed Muggle's strong desire to mate already early in his life, I still had him neutered against my conscience. When Spring came, his repressed sex drive lured him outside to chase and catch cabbage butterflies fluttering above the grass in our backyard and between the apartment buildings. He sometimes caught ten or so of these butterflies and placed them, barely alive, before our feet. He often suffered from pollen allergy and sneezed a lot. When he was sneezing, both of his pupils would shrink to a fine line, as if he had just been dosed with eyedrops.

On some occasions, he stayed away all night. I would awaken with a start upon hearing some harsh, high-pitched sounds that came from the cats nearby or in the distance. I guessed they were fighting over territory. Among all the din, I listened hard for Muggle's voice so as to learn whether he was taking a beating. When I recognized him, I became so agitated that I had to stifle

the impulse to jump out of the window and run to his assistance. However, during the day, he acted as if everything had gone his way. He returned to his daily routine: he pushed open the door, entered, stretched his paws, and lay down in the hallway like a dog. When I looked into his eyes, I could tell right away that he was tired because of what had happened during the previous night.

Muggle also liked to trail after me when I went out. Walking by my side, he behaved more like a dog than a cat. (A normal cat would only be willing to walk parallel to someone if it can balance on a fence, crawl under a car, or in some other sheltered position, and if it feels genuine trust and affection towards that person.) Yet unlike my dogs who, when I told them not to tag along, would understand my order and return home with drooping ears, Muggle did not obey my commands. Therefore I only could leave the house when he was asleep. Several times, my successful exit was thwarted by the loud noise of a parking car. Upon hearing it, Muggle was immediately wide awake, jumped off the fence of somebody's house, and trotted towards me, his tail triumphantly erect like a little flagpole, ready to follow me wherever I was going. He must have picked up this habit of tagging-along from me, because I also followed him sometimes, wanting to find out where he was going. He would know right away it was me following him, because I always wore a pair of steel-capped Dr. Martens leather boots. No matter how carefully I tiptoed, I would still make a recognizable noise, like someone doing a tap dance or a Flamenco.

I spent a long time trying to break Muggle's habit of tailing me. To achieve my goal, I resorted to using food as bait. This is a popular tactic with many pet owners. Whenever I was at home, I cried out for him to return home for his meal. I allowed him to eat anything as long as he was willing to come back. Sometimes, when I saw him eating whole-heartedly, I would squat by his side, saying, "You don't have a mind to go feral on us, do you?"

Thus, young Muggle ate too much, and became very fat. After a big meal, he would lie down on his back and revealed his flower-pattered belly, just like my dogs would on a warm and sunny day. When they saw him, some people would respond with a joke: "An anaconda has swallowed a hare. Guess who I'm talking about?"

I suppose that must have been why Muggle eventually did go feral: He looked at himself one day and wondered how he had gained so much weight. I've been thinking about this over and over, and this is the best reason I could come up with.

In fact, I had interfered with his personal life too much, and it was right for me to let him go. I realized this when my rational self was talking. Emotionally, however, I could not bear the thought of not being able to see him again in the future. My instinct told me that he must have been hiding out on the hillside on which our community was located. I asked the building security guard and the garbage collectors to see if they had seen any injured or dead cats or dogs in the neighborhood. I knew he was somewhere close, but I was angry at myself for not being able to find him. I only could rely on my instinct, which told me to go to the hilltop and cry out loud his name there to the whole valley down below, as if I were a female leopard. The longer I cried, the more convinced I became that he might have been adopted by someone nice. Perhaps he was being confined somewhere inside an apartment on the seventh or eighth floor of some building. This must have been the reason why he could not return.

As a matter of fact, prior to Muggle's disappearance, I had been much upset by the disappearance of Blacky, another one of my cats. That time, I had also made a "Cat Missing!" poster, which, in my naïveté, I was certain would melt the heart of anyone who read it. But on the contrary, we found that the posters we had spent a whole evening plastering on Building A were already torn down before we even got started on Building D. By the time we started to put them up on the playground facilities in the atrium, the ones on Building F were also gone, as were the ones we had stuck to utility poles. We wanted to put one up on our community bulletin board, as well, but its glass windows were locked. Inside them, the local government had posted some useless announcements nobody would bother to read twice. In the end, only two shopkeepers were kind enough to display our posters on their storefront.

It goes to show that most communities and society as a whole are indifferent to missing cats or dogs. It also suggests that a lot of people may disapprove of me for caring so much about cats. They probably think that people like me should pay more attention to school children without lunch money, to abandoned senior citizens, and even to the poor children in Africa, India, or Afghanistan. They may even think people of my kind, who always bring cat biscuits in case we encounter hungry street cats, are too sympathetic, afflicted with petty-bourgeois sentimentality, blind to the fact that cats are in fact not humans. But I would ask back, why is it that so many people purchase cats and dogs at the pet shop instead of adopting them, when there are many stray animals roaming our streets or locked up in animal shelters and pounds.

There is another group of people, including scholars such as Professor Fey, Chung-Yung who will disagree with my actions. They propose what they call a “rational attitude” and advocate “euthanasia” in order to solve the problem of stray animals. Yet I must stand in opposition to them. If I were to withhold my sympathy from the dogs and cats that need my help and protection, how could I help those children who live far away, suffering from hunger and poverty, and do something about it?

When I see the street cats and dogs gorging themselves on the food I brought them, I wonder where their next meal will come from. To be useful to the cats and dogs that need my help, I have cultivated a soft, warm, and passionate heart, like that of Feng, Tsu-Kai’s youngest son when he was three years old. This is how Feng, Tsu-Kai described it: “My three-year-old son Jiang-Jiang refused to wrap his heart with gauze. I often saw it bloody red and naked.” I wish that all of the unfortunate street cats and dogs living on our island will at least once in their short lives meet a person who treats them with friendliness and compassion.

I strongly believe that as long as there are street cats and dogs, we should shun pet shops. For that reason, I generally avoid conversations with other cat or dog owners. They often get together and talk about this or that imported brand of pet food or cheese they feed their their dogs and cats. They will say things like: “My cats only eat fresh fish which I buy at the market on the same morning.” I suppose my lack of interest in such talk will sometimes make me appear rude. I care little for pampered pets because for one thing, they already receive all the human care and attachment they need, and there’s no reason for me to put icing on their cake. For another, in my opinion, while it is up to each individual whether to pamper their pet or not, flamboyant public displays of affection are an embarrassment, and will leave a negative impression on those cannot or will not understand animals. They will say something along the lines of “see, dogs and cats receive better care than the average person. I can’t see why I should be sympathetic towards them.”

For all of these reasons, we often refuse requests from the people we know. They might ask us to take care of or adopt their pets when they travel overseas, move, marry, or are expecting a baby. I do not believe that such people are qualified to keep household animals, in the first place, because once they become attached to them, why can they not continue to take care of them? Our friends sometimes try to make us to change our minds by saying, “but it is so cute and adorable, and of a good pedigree.” We would reply, “then someone else should be more

than willing to take it in. Our house is a shelter only for those animals that have no home. It is for those cats and dogs that are unwanted and have no name.”

Indeed, we only adopt animals who were crippled in car accidents, tangled up in wire-traps, born with four white paws (which signifies bad luck in Chinese culture), who suffer skin diseases hard to cure by the veterinarian, are considered ugly, or have been abandoned by their owners. We only adopt those who were abused and injured.

Six months after Muggle disappeared, the same neighbor girl brought us another grey tiger-striped civet kitten. On the night before a typhoon, she stuffed it inside the mailbox without notifying us. The kitten’s screeching and bawling lured us outside. This is how we came to adopt it. We named it Nari, after the typhoon. Its nickname was Nana. A month later, Nari became an older sister because we adopted another male kitten, smaller than her in size. It had a white belly and a yellow back. We named it APEC. We got it from one of the construction workers who were renovating our neighbor’s house. He found it at the entrance of an air vent. APEC became Tienwun’s darling because he would always tag after him, mewing and whining. This was how he earned his nickname “Kubaobao” (Crybaby).

When she was young, Nari’s eyes looked like those of a tiger. I secretly regarded her as Muggle’s sister because she behaved in the same manner as Muggle. She was just as ferocious. But maybe, being female, she had no intention of leaving the house, even if I opened the windows in Spring. (Of course, I always debate with myself whether or not to open the window to let my cats out in this season.)

I am deeply grateful to our wild loners and hunters for their willingness to share a roof with me.