

An Account of April 2020

Ana Margarita R. Nunez

MAMA CAT IS a fighter. One morning, as I am on the way to the neighboring window box that serves as my makeshift compost pit, she comes toward me, meowing loudly. I have food scraps in one hand and a trowel in another. Trying to shoo her away, but having forgotten how to do that with cats, I yell and wave my trowel. She looks at me and keeps meowing, unfazed. Just then, there is a rustling from a discarded cardboard box on the neighbor's porch. A tiny kitten emerges, and it's beautiful: white, with an impossibly delicate, fairy face, dark blue eyes, and a black patch on its brow. My heart melts. Mama Cat sees it happen, sees me falling in love. She narrows her eyes and settles down to lick her coat and wait, in triumph.

I run into the house to wake up my little boys. It's easier to wake up CB, as always. "There's a cat in the yard," I whisper, "and it has a kitten!" "A kitten!" He is up and out of the house like a shot. He's eight now, but that's how he's always been: he can go from sleep to hyperactivity in two seconds, flat. I follow, calling out warnings as I go: "Don't touch the kitten! Don't make the mama mad! Don't let her scratch you!"

When I catch up with him he's peering into the box, entranced. We discover that there are, in fact, two kittens. Two!

In fact, it seems like fate. We three—a mother and two boys—have been here at home by ourselves for what seems like an eternity, in the sudden pause that has

fallen on the world. Actually, it's only been four weeks since we've gone past the front gate. It's called quarantine, but it's also a siege. We've withdrawn into the fortress of our little house, tucked behind a big apartment building. Our landlord, who lives there most of the time, has taken his many children, his wife, and his three cars home to Lanao Sur. Normally their domestic activities are a timekeeper set half an hour ahead of our own. When they turn on their kitchen light at 5 am and the smell of frying fish begins to waft into our yard, it's time for me to get up. When they start their car on school days, my kids should be in their uniforms and brushing their teeth. But like us, they've gone to wait it out, hunker down, in their first and safest of homes. I wonder when they'll be back. Maybe after Ramadan, which starts in two weeks, certainly not before the end of this month. Lines have been drawn around the provinces, like the lines on the map, in a desperate effort to keep out a plague oblivious to borders. It's a succession of borders, really, each one sliding shut. Around the country, around the bigger islands, around the provinces, the cities, all the way to my own street, my own door, each closure bringing with it a more and more focused isolation. But the borders are permeable. There sits Mama Cat and her children.

My hands tremble a bit while I open a can of tuna. I'm a bit weepy. I'm not sure why, because I'm not the sort who takes in strays or hands out packs of food to beggars. I recoil from the tap of a rough, mendicant hand on my shoulder. Since I was a little girl, my mother taught me to be afraid of germs. In my imagination, that touch is teeming with creepy-crawlies, with malice. Beggars touch you to blackmail you into giving them something: it is the price of their going away, and taking their germs with them. My fear of germs from their hands can make it difficult to breathe, can make me want to cry; I handle it the way I learned to handle the urge to burst into tears as a girl. I can make myself grow cold and angry. Then I shrug that hand off, call the nearest security guard, walk away without having given anything.

Mama Cat is not like me. She has an iron nerve, brash and battle-scarred, quite unlovely except for her feline movements. Her coat is mostly white, but she carries the random patches of brown and black, the mark of a stray born of generations of strays who bred by themselves without regard for bloodline or appearance. One ear is practically hairless and covered with dried scabs of blood, torn and healed several times over. Her eyes look perpetually narrowed and rimmed with pink. It is as though she is always looking into the sun or sizing you up. Her kittens' faces are perfectly heart-shaped, but her head is awkward and modelled bluntly, sitting uneasily on her skinny shoulders. She is a beggar and makes no bones about it. I believe I recognize her: a few months ago I woke up at 3 am, the witching hour. In the faint light from the porch I could make out the white shape in my window, calling insistently. She

sounded barely like a cat that night. It must have been hunger that made her cry out so loud when she saw me move, so loudly and so clearly that she was practically talking to me. I know it was hunger. But I could not be induced to go out, even to the porch. Beyond the small pool of light was the dim yard, full of shadows, hiding frogs and rats and roaches or worse. I feared a burglar jumping out of the darkness from behind a blind corner. I feared the cat leaping lightly off the window ledge and landing on her feet, getting up on her hind legs, drawing herself up to human height.

I feared the cat trying to tell me something. From eight years ago, I remember being heavily pregnant and sitting in my mother's dining room. It is my first pregnancy, and I'm supposed to be taking a few hours' break from life at the in-laws and the little frictions of the early days of marriage. The sliding doors are open to the back yard, and it is the golden hour sometime between three and four o' clock. My mother has just discovered that a stray had kittens in the yard and she is horrified. She has a militant hatred of the small community of independent cats that roam our neighborhood and occasionally shit on her lawn. The maid is ordered to get rid of them. *Cats are intelligent*, my mother tells her. *If you put them outside the gate they will come back inside. There are what, three, four kittens? They'll grow up in no time. Four more cats to come back here, to get into the trash, to shit all over the place.* The maid scoops up the kittens, puts them in a plastic bag. It's practically tradition to put unwanted cats in a sack and dump them somewhere far away. The kittens are too small to make their way back, aren't they? But they're not in a sack. They've been roused from their sleep, and they begin to mew feebly. I call out to my mother, *They can't breathe!* She ignores me. The maid asks what she should do with the bag. She would like to get back to her work; she's been sweeping up the fallen leaves under our mango tree and starting a fire under the tree to burn them. My mother shrugs, takes up the bag, and hangs it on a low branch just over the fire. To my horror, the mewling from the bag grows louder; it's a high-pitched chorus of distress. It brings the mother cat running into the yard—she's white-and-black-and-brown, like many of the neighborhood strays. The cat circles the mango tree frantically, calling out, and the kittens continue to meow. Another cat arrives, a larger, male—he must be the kittens' father. Their meows are different from any sound that I've ever heard a cat make before. I am about to cry.

Then I hear the kittens, I feel them, crying "Mama, mama!" Now it is I who cannot breathe; the sadness in my chest threatens to suffocate me. Suddenly, I am a mother. Until this moment it's all been on the outside—the doctors' appointments, the baby books and the baby bump, the prenatal vitamins and the diet, even my husband kissing my belly or putting his hand on it to feel the baby move. This is the

first time I ever really hear a baby cry—the first time I hear and understand it. The mother cat has thrown caution to the wind; even with humans around, she circles the perimeter of the bonfire—it has died down, but continues to smoke—and continues to call; the male watches from the relative distance of the fence, pacing back and forth.

And then the crying stops. The bag swings slightly as the maid pokes it with a stick. The adult cats slink away, defeated. There is a precise moment when they know there is no more point in staying, that it is time to melt away quickly, and quietly. The sun has gone down a little lower, the light is not golden anymore, but thinner, cooler, preparing itself to silver into dusk. What to do with that suddenly quiet bag? *Burn it*, says my mother. And the maid begins to build up the fire again, stirring the embers, feeding them, coaxing it back to life.

When I give birth, nothing is right. It happens three weeks short of my delivery date. When I wake up in the morning from a bad dream—it involved a skull, a toilet, and a train station—I don't feel the baby move. After a day of second-guessing myself, I make a cautious call to my doctor at dusk: *Go to the hospital right away*, I'm told. Her words are clipped, tense and efficient. *I'll see you in thirty minutes*. It's strange to give birth out of silence and stillness. Most birth stories are noisy, frantic, community affairs. Childbirth in cinema and television is all high tragedy or camp: a mad drive to the hospital, awkward, bewildered father, wild, anguished screaming. With both her children, my mother's water broke in the middle of the night; she was rushed to the hospital, textbook-fashion. My bumbling father pinched her arm at the IV site. She pushed my younger sister out, yelling that the epidural hadn't taken effect. I get my own epidural in the cold and quiet of an operating room. I'm curled up on my side and the nurses are holding me down. I'm terrified and I try to be very, very still. *We need to do a vertical incision*, the doctor says, *it's faster than a bikini cut*. *We want him out as quickly as possible*. I nod. A blood pressure monitor is clipped to my fingertip. Another needle goes into my arm and I go under.

I remember nothing of my son's actual birth but the sound of a baby crying. The first time I see him it is through the glass of the nursery window, after three days of wrestling with post-op pain. Now I know why he had stopped moving: he had gotten the umbilical cord wrapped around him while inside the womb, something that the old wives call *likos*. It means to coil, or bind. He is very small and very difficult. He's bound to be that way, they say. His earliest, deepest memory is of struggle.

I remember the day the kittens died as the day before CB was born. They are linked inextricably in my mind, in a cause-and-effect kind of way. As though the

kittens crying in that plastic bag suspended over a dying fire were my own child crying from the womb, warning me of the danger, warning me that I could lose him. My sister remembers that day too, but she remembers it differently, maybe more accurately. She assures me it was a couple of months before, the summer after she graduated with her bachelor's degree and before she entered law school.

CB is old enough to ask questions now. He asks a lot of questions but won't take no for an answer. Some of his questions are philosophical: *Why are there walls?* Aesthetic: *Why are haikus boring?* Some are pragmatic: *Why won't you tell us a story? Why are you crying?* I told him that once upon a time, my mother didn't want me to marry his dad. *But we did it anyway*, I say. *We met secretly. Daddy didn't have the money to take Mommy on a date, so we shared one pack of cookies and a soft drink in the park. But why? Why didn't she want you to marry him? Sometimes she's like that. She can get very angry. Do you know that one time, she was so mad at the stray cats that she killed their kittens?*

I don't count on his telling her that I told him. The need to ask questions trumps everything else. In childhood, oaths of secrecy are at once terrible and terribly forgettable. A skirmish ensues in our little trinity: my sister, my mother, and I. My mother becomes shrill: *I never killed those kittens! I told the maid to put them in the bag, that's all. She's the one who killed them. And I never—I never—forced your sister to study law. It was her choice!*

My sister is an attorney now. She makes it a habit to stick to evidence. She'd rather not listen to reverberations; she prefers clear lines of cause-and-effect. They don't have to be straight lines; so long as there is a thread. Even when tangled, the clue offers a way out of the labyrinth. She tells me something I never knew: *Mom changed the first choice on my college application to "Legal Management" before turning it in. She laughs over the kittens, then tells me something I do know: Hitler didn't pull the trigger on all those Jews, he let the SS do it.*

But that doesn't matter anymore. We're all more or less married, and more or less lonely: our father has been dead two years. My sister is married to a pilot; he's home every two weeks. My husband works abroad. Even when we were little, my mother was a lonely parent in the estranged but cordial way of the 1980s and 90s, when passionate, rule-breaking courtships that began on the dance floor and in liberal campuses segued into staying together for the children. Growing up I felt no affinity at all with my father. He didn't read, he wasn't friends with my friends' fathers, he didn't sit with a newspaper at the breakfast table and then pick up his briefcase and drop us off at school on the way to work at the office. He worked in a bowling alley, not an office. His English was terrible; he fell asleep during Mass. He

felt obligated to interfere with any dates or phone calls that I got from my crush, like the strict dads in the soap operas or the *komiks*. He didn't understand.

My younger son, Raj, is seven and quite unlike his older brother. Like my father and my husband, he's not much of a talker. Now and then he'll say something cryptic and wise: *We're already in the past*. The three of us circle the box where Mama Cat stowed her kittens. The one I first saw and fell in love with, the one with the fairy face, CB and I decide to call Moonleaf. Moonleaf is shy, retreating into corners. The other kitten is intrepid, scrabbling its way out of the box and heading out into the larger world, not minding that it's diving and skidding, head and nose and one tiny paw first. This one, with the caramel patches on its head, is Coco. We can't tell if they're male or female. Raj wants in on the fun: "Let's call the mama 'Tata!'" The name doesn't take. Later on, he changes his mind and says, "Let's call her Josie." But that doesn't stick either. So "Mama Cat" she remains. "They have names!" Raj says, delighted. "We *petted* them!" He means that we made them our pets; I don't let them touch the cats, though it seems cruel—there is news that the virus infected tigers in the Bronx zoo and a pet cat in Belgium.

I decide it's not names but food that will keep them. The cats accept the tuna and stay the night.

Feeding them means cooking an extra cup of rice every day. I guard my small quarter sack of rice jealously. When children play games, they dream up the what-ifs that they glean from the conversations of their elders. One of our favorites was: *What if there's a war? Where would you hide? And what would you bring?* We never dreamed up the what-if of a pandemic. But war was the catastrophe with which we were always intimate (by "we" I mean my playmates of twenty years ago and I; my children's "what ifs" are comfortably postmodern: *What if I were a YouTuber?*) In wartime, when you run to hide in the mountains, make sure that you bring rice, salt, oil, soap, and matches. That covers the essentials: food, light, hygiene.

I am afraid of running out of things. I rely on my sister-in-law to bring me groceries now and then, because I can't drive. I find myself thinking of my father's cooking. Our family's designated cook until illness and age destroyed his sense of taste and smell, he brought a treasure of recipes from Bulacan with him. He kept them in his head and in his hands, and nothing was written down. There were recipes for times of festivals and plenty: *bulalo*, *caldereta*, *paksiw na pata*, Max's style fried chicken, chicken *sopas*. There were everyday dishes: *paksiw na isda*, *sinampalukan*, *misua* and *patola*, *ginisang gulay* of many permutations, sauted with tomatoes and seasoned with *patis*. I dream about the rich food, which I remember very well, and try to reconstruct the recipes meant for lean days. More than ever I appreciate the

economy of this kind of cooking: a single pot to wash, and stretches of time to simmer before the final seasoning that buy me a window of time to pick up clutter or clean the sink. The days fall into a kind of rhythm. The children spend their mornings watching the kittens and chasing them from under the plants and around the window boxes. After breakfast, they dig out their school notebooks—decommissioned prematurely—and rip out the used pages (goodbye Science homework and quizzes in Mother Tongue!). The sala chairs are dragged out into the sun and the boys settle in to write “Cat Observations.” 1. *When Mama Cat is gone, the kittens stay still.* 2. *Feed Mama Cat so she won’t get hurt and she will let you take care of them while she’s gone.* 3. *Don’t give her water, she won’t drink.*

I put frozen meat in the sink to thaw, then turn on the radio and listen to the news while chopping ginger and onion. My father didn’t give out recipes, he gave out maxims that guide my efforts at reconstruction. His measurements were never more exact than *kaunti* or *marami*, *dampot*, *dangkal*, and *guhiti*—ultimately, *tikman mo*, just taste it. Meat should be simmered low and slow, and vegetables washed and tossed into the sauté to cook in their own juices. Leaves wilt and cook in residual heat. I make tinola from two chicken thighs, extending the soup with a broth cube—something my father would never do—and the lemongrass I gather from outside. My neighbor’s malunggay extends a few branches over my wall and I take that too. He has about six trees planted in a row along the boundary, but over the weeks of quarantine I have taken nearly all the leaves that I can reach. I slice the meat off my chicken breasts to fry for Raj, who doesn’t eat things that look weird (nearly all vegetables except radishes fall into this category). The breast bones I save for *arroz caldo* and *sotanghon*. The *alugbati* is flourishing, with thick, fat purple stalks and glossy, dark green leaves that I sneak into omelettes and patties. I probably shouldn’t talk about it though. Every time I take a picture of a plant in my garden or brag about it to someone else, it withers and dies. Lately I’ve taken care to talk only about the most robust plants, the ones that are flowering and sending out shoots and leaves like crazy. It doesn’t matter, the blossoms dry up and fall, the leaves drop and they turn anaemic afterward. Or maybe I’m the one who’s crazy, and they’re not dying because of me. They could be dying from the natural course of things. Because death is natural, unless it’s too soon.

“Why is everyone so afraid of dying?” CB asks me, exasperated. “One of your books says that when people die they are unconscious, so they don’t know anything or feel anything anymore.” I laugh and tell him that it’s scary anyway. The only death that he remembers is my father’s. But he was only around at the funeral, which is only a small, discrete part of a death.

What doesn't grow in our makeshift garden, I buy in bulk. The idea is to see as few people as possible, to interact as infrequently as possible. A kilogram of cardaba bananas is barely enough for anything; a kilo of cabbage, a kilo of onion or *kalamansi* is an awful lot. To fight decay, to fight loss, I pickle and freeze. All of housework, I come to realize, is a battle against loss and decay. There is a thin line between "keeping it together" and falling apart, and that line is a hamper of soiled clothing, a dusty floor, the welcome mat just outside the door that's starting to smell like cats.

I miss Auntie Bebe, who used to come three days a week to clean and do the laundry. Just under sixty, she is tiny and grey-haired but very strong. I wish I had hands as strong as hers—it takes almost all my strength to wash the towels and blankets. I wrestle with the damp, heavy sheets as I attempt to hang them on the line. I manage to string them up, but my own dress is soaking wet. My arms tire so easily, and when I scrub the floor it's never really as clean as when she does it. And everything seems to get dirty again right away. I wish it were four weeks ago—that I could sit at the table and have coffee with Auntie Bebe again after she's done the breakfast dishes. She has nine children, a husband who drinks, and no end of stories about the calamities she's survived and the travails, big and small, of the people she works for the rest of the week. The *kangkong*, alugbati and lemongrass outside I owe to her enterprising spirit. Her own home is in a low-cost housing development, the walls so thin that you can hear your neighbors talking. It frustrates her that the rules are so strict: plants are not allowed, unless they're in a pot. No livestock, not even chickens. Everything must be bought from the store. She is a distant relative of my husband, and in her case I've given up the practice that my mother and grandmother taught me: to separate the cutlery, cups, and plates used by the help from the ones used by the family.

My mother marks the maid's utensils with dots of nail polish. My grandmother used to go one step further: when poor relations came to visit, she collected the dishes that they used and poured boiling water over them. If she was in a bad mood, she'd save time by breaking the plates and throwing away the shards. This also was a way of avoiding contagion from outside. Fifty years ago, people could be walking around with raging cases of tuberculosis. People drank from streams and rivers and got cholera. Even twenty years ago, it was not uncommon for some little children to walk or crawl around at home naked from the waist down, their mothers cleaning after them with an old rag.

Today, we're told even inanimate objects can carry disease with them. The lock on the gate must be disinfected after collecting deliveries and bills, as well as the doorknob that I must turn when I go back inside. We no longer believe in miasmas

and curses surrounding lepers, but our ability to see germs also tells us that there is death on our groceries—such are the days in which we live. I wash all the groceries in soapy water, each egg, each pack of instant noodles and can of tuna in a bucket of soapy water near the front door. I have to make sure the boys don't touch anything before I clean it, so I set them to work keeping the cats away from the bags of meat, the tray of eggs. They make a game out of spraying the cats with water from my bucket.

I don't remember ever having to spray Sasha, the cat I had when I was a little girl. Sasha was so unlike Mama Cat. Elegant, discreet, soft gray, with a regal head and an intelligent expression on her face, Sasha was a perfect lady. My grandfather hated cats; she loved to curl up on his chair at the dining table, only to be tipped out and unceremoniously kicked away before he sat down to eat. But she never lost her composure. She'd dash away without a single shriek or mew of protest. I still remember the sweet comfort of her fur when she rubbed up against my legs, the excitement of watching her belly swell every few months and then finding a nest of kittens somewhere in the house. Her favorite lying-in spot was the loft above the maids' room. The space between the ceiling and the roof where a hole had been cut around the trunk of a live guava tree was a close second. I marvelled at how she picked each kitten up by the scruff of its neck to transfer it from one hiding place to another, moving them as they grew bigger and more daring. If there were four or five in the litter, then she'd go back and forth from her first nest to the other, tirelessly. She died crossing the garage while heavily pregnant while my grandfather was backing his pickup. Motherhood killed her, without a doubt. Otherwise she would never have been so clumsy, her quick paws and her lithe body would have carried her out of harm's way in no time.

Mama Cat is no lady. She squats at the door, waiting brazenly for CB or myself to come out with their bowl of food, mewing loudly and demanding more when she's still hungry. As the days go by her boldness increases. But like the woman of the world that she is, she's not beyond bribery. One morning, CB calls me, excited. "Mama, the cat brought us something!" It is a mouse on the doorstep, freshly decapitated and still bleeding bright red. I just stare at it and feel my gorge rise. None of us can go past the door until I screw up the courage to cover it in soil and nudge it into a dustpan. This is quite possibly the loneliest I've ever felt all month.

But CB loves her, and loves the kittens. He is endlessly fascinated by them. They climb up to the windows and almost get into the house, threatening the protocol I've put in place for "outside" things and "inside" things. Better be safe than sorry, they say, and so I proceed to pour bleach on the legs of the chairs that the boys bring

outside when they play. They rampage through my plants, and I wonder whether it's still safe to eat the greens. More than that, they're tearing down the vines, and all but murdered my pandan. I'm not sure I want them to stay, but I'm afraid of them leaving.

My son asks too many questions. I don't know how I'll answer them. He's growing too big, and this house is too small for him. We have a big fight over cake, one night. He's precocious, and occasionally brilliant, but also suspicious and greedy for good things, beautiful things, sweet things. He asks me how much cake I've eaten, because there is only one very small piece left. I lose my temper—how dare he—I call his father, and finally, I let myself cry. I cannot bear to be accused of overindulgence—of all things! We both go to bed crying. I go to bed first, pulling the blanket over my head. I wake up at dawn, at 4 a.m. to find him snuggled in beside me. Raj is sleeping on my other side.

When day breaks, I open the door and for a breathless second I think the cats have left. But no, they're in the window box among my plants, Mama Cat sleeping soundly, one kitten on either side.