

Daniela Tordi

The Panther

It all started with a small notice in a local newspaper, which—after some time—took on the proportions of a national news item:

PATHER TERRORIZES LIVORNO

Hunt Commenced Four Days Ago. Many Animals Attacked.

The panther was first seen by a driver in the district of Parrana San Martino. After raising its head from behind a hedge, the panther arched its back and stretched. It had already eaten a dozen chickens and slaughtered two dogs and several goats belonging to farms situated in the surrounding hills. The hunt was initiated soon thereafter, with participants including forest rangers and both urban and state police, as well as private citizens armed to the teeth for this singular safari. Bearing pistols, knives, and rifles loaded with tranquilizing darts, they combed an area of approximately twenty-five square miles. However, day after day, having seen neither hide nor hair of the beast, the hunters returned to their homes and barracks where, fearful of the near and present danger, they left the lights burning in their gardens and courtyards.

The Prefecture of Livorno sent warnings to Pisa, Grosseto, and Sienna. Meanwhile experts arrived to examine the slaughtered dogs. They concluded that the killer must be an unusually large feline, agile and potent and able to jump over high enclosures, that then carried its prey far to consume their corpses in peace. According to the local police chief, it was probably an escaped exotic animal imported from Africa or Asia, and belonging to some collector, who abandoned it. As a matter of fact, two months earlier, at Castiglioncello by the sea, a hunter had reported seeing an enormous cat at the edge of the local highway, gripping the carcass of a pheasant in its teeth.

I was in my studio in front of the large glass window facing out into my back yard. Having tried in vain to sleep, I remembered some changes I needed to make in a report to the congress of hematology, and so I got up. I checked the windows to make sure they were secured against the storm. While doing so, I noticed the tree branches swaying under the influence of the cold winds and rains of that particularly bitter January. Having stood for a while at the foot of the staircase with ears pricked, listening to the sounds of night, I sat at my desk and bent my head over thirty pages riddled with scrawled and scratched-out notes.

I carried in my mind the exact program of the days to follow, and felt exhausted in advance by the precision and punctuality demanded by the routines of academic life. Over the last few months I'd lived that life as though it were a prudently calculated investment, measuring my energies and motives with the same fussy precision with which I had filigreed the text of my report with periods, commas, colons, and semi-colons. Even the asterisks (referring to meticulous experiments to underline their data and procedures) reminded me of conversations I'd been having with friends and acquaintances: explanations logical, justifications unimpeachable, and arguments so flawless they left no room for appeal. For my rigid and regimented way of life no one had ever chastised me, not even my mother, with whom I spoke by telephone twice a week, and who seemed happy to hear me so taken with my work and students. I found myself wondering if something or someone in this world might lift me off this chessboard of a life, if only long enough for me to forget the rules of the game.

While the blue light of my computer washed over the objects that, at two o'clock in the morning, defined my horizons—the marble mortar that I used as a paperweight, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, the small frame holding the only photograph of Mario that I had saved since his departure—my eyes gazed beyond them, as if searching in the dark for a more open space. Tiredness still hadn't found me, and in the apparent stillness I felt animated by a curious excitation, as if the novelty of abandonment that I felt suddenly predisposed to had altered the constant measure of my sens-

es, altering the frequency that my mind normally transmitted. The calmness that I experienced at that moment was nonetheless filled with tension.

Under my heavy nightgown the silk pajamas I wore crackled like a second skin, returning to me, piece by piece, the forgotten sense of my own body. In the unvaried storm of those events at the center of which I had existed for so long, I'd inhabited a neutral zone in which the development of my cerebral functions was unbalanced by physiological sensations: no pain, no pleasure, far from hunger and thermal extremes, secure in the limbo of endless days spent in my studio, or at the laboratory. The thought made me laugh: I saw myself as a white mouse in an experiment, or a bacterium isolated and extracted for cultivation, a virus incubated for long and patient study. And though I felt no one looking at me, still, I remained perfectly inert, absent of even the slightest vibration.

At that moment, just as my vision had grown accustomed to the dark, a vague mass moved past the window, moving slowly—animating, in a perfect play of lights, the cockeyed slits of my wooden shutters, realigning them. Through the wider fissures a lucid shadow projected into the room, like a stretched wet, black cloth. No sound, just the rhythmic pattering of water from the gutter now that the storm had ceased. A moment later, as I tried to understand what I'd just seen, the scene repeated itself, this time from the opposite direction: a large, compact shape gliding from right to left, reaching a height of no less than one meter. The impression was that of a solid corpus passing at a constant gait. I assumed it must be a large dog.

I was about to get up when suddenly a loud crash took my breath away. Fear immobilized me for some time before I approached the window without hesitation. With my forehead to the glass, breathing shallowly so as not to fog it, I saw at once the large flowerpot that had fallen from the staircase descending to the tiled garden. Since the air was still, as it usually is in the middle of the night, I was sure someone had knocked it down. In the space left empty by the incident I felt a presence. I remembered having read in the newspaper only a week before an item about a panther having mysteriously appeared in the vicinity of Livorno. As the details of the article rose in my memory, my vision was drawn a hundred and eighty

degrees to the right and I saw precisely what I had been imagining.

Sitting motionless with its back to me, as if guarding my house, the beast sniffed the air, its whiskers and ears pearly by the moonlight diffused through the sparse clouds. I felt certain that the slightest sound would have broken the spell of that vigilant, haughty pose; I even worried that the beast might hear the beating of my heart. I tried to form a reasonable thought to go with this fantastic apparition, but I was too disoriented by the fear the presence of a live panther transmitted at that hour and at that place.

I spent a long time standing there that way, looking, an interval divided into smaller units in which my consciousness waxed and waned. In that interval I was put in mind of a discussion my husband Mario and I had had more than once by telephone. "I don't like the thought of you all alone in that house," he had said, "so isolated. I wish you'd consider moving back to the city." If I had called him at that moment and explained what I was seeing, he would surely have thought that I had propitiated yet one more strange and incomprehensible incident, like the time I almost vanished before his eyes thanks to an Arab aboard a ship traveling down the Nile. It's hard to say, ultimately, which events in our lives are causally linked and which are fortuitous. All things considered, I have to agree with my husband that there exists in life a flux of logically concatenated circumstances beyond our capacity to comprehend or even to recognize them. But a panther sitting on my front doormat challenged any effort to temper absurdity with rational thought.

Just as the shadow of panic swept over me, I burst out laughing; I couldn't help it. The panther turned. Through the shutters, despite the darkness, I swear it saw me in that frozen moment. I was paralyzed by stupor; nevertheless, a part of me wanted to go out there, to get close, to reestablish my contact with the world starting with that specter. I felt a challenge growing in me, inviting me to unhinge my mind from the shallow plane of things obvious and reasonable, to trust myself to a deeper unity, one that would only be arrived at by way of events exceptional and mysterious. I thought of those hunters who had pursued the panther for

days, and of the fear they and other must have naturally felt. I knew I'd have to resolve myself to do what had to be done: a phone call to the ranger whose command post happened to be located nearby. But the prolonged solitude to which I'd grown so accustomed underscored my sense of myself as a singular individual confronted by a singular event. Then and there, with a clear conscience, I abandoned myself to the forgotten pleasure of adventure.

As the panther stretched itself out between the shadows cast by a pair of enormous amphorae on either side of my doorway, I reached into the room where I had installed my refrigerator and took out the frozen carcass of a turkey that my neighbors had given to me during the holidays. I hadn't cooked it since at the last moment the friends that I had invited to dinner—a couple from Sienna—called to cancel, and it was far too big for one person. Now I smiled at the odd silhouette that crossed the corridor before me, the shadow of a ghost wearing a nightgown and carrying the drumsticks of a frozen turkey. I was bound for my studio, where I would open my window and enter into the longest night of my life.

The panther's eyes burned yellow; they projected from the empty space like laser beams, sweeping away all the banal securities that texture our everyday lives. From the domesticated pride with which zoo lions gaze through the bars of their cages, by sheer accident I'd arrived at the limpid abstraction of a vision free, vigilant, and undermined by an infallible instinct. I'd never before experienced so strong a sense of continuity between myself and my surroundings as I did now, in front of the panther which, having appreciated the diner that I'd offered it, turned away again toward the hedges and hills. Then, without the slightest regard for my presence, the panther wedged itself back into the darkness again, its tense muscles wrapped harmoniously around its slender limbs, indiscernibly exhausted by days and days of hungry drifting.

While standing next her, my own limbs grown rigid with the increasing coldness of the hour, slowly, in a way as simple as it was certain, I understood what it meant to live, to be alive. And as the panther moved away, I gathered by the sluggishness of its movements that it was an old

beast. I kept watching him, leaning against the exterior wall of my house, slouched under the burden of an enormous tiredness borne of the effort I'd expended in ignoring my own fears. Meanwhile like a well-mannered guest the panther strutted down the walkway, passing—without hesitation—in front of the Citroen parked beyond the stakes marking the entrance to my property. As if to assure me I hadn't been seeing a ghost, the panther smeared his reflection across the car's paint and chrome.

I could have stumbled headlong into the current—like that of magnetic waves—generated by the stillness of that night; I could have surrendered the sense of my long and laborious days. But those same mute eyes that had sounded the space of my existence had also loosened my grip on the float to which I had been clinging my whole life, pulling me down into an unknown—but not totally ignored—destination.

When I awoke the next morning I knew immediately that I hadn't been dreaming. I felt refreshed as if I'd slept soundly for days after a long, wearying insomnia. I launched my arms and legs into the air with a renewed sense of their proportions. As I stepped down into my kitchen—like a mariner descending into the galley after hours spent fighting the open seas on deck—I rediscovered the pleasures of soft morning light, and of the soft warm odors that emanated from my cupboards. With renewed vision I measured the distance and closeness of all things.

*Translated from the Italian
by Peter Selgin*