

Solitária

By Emily Everett

First published in the *Kenyon Review*

I thought this story would end here in Rio with my sister's death, and then I thought it might end with mine. But maybe now, since you've asked, it will end with yours, long after you've decided whether you believe it or not. I can only tell you the story, but later I could show you the room, if you'd like to see it.

My older sister, you remember, was a photographer. She was wild, willful, and she willed herself right into the life she wanted: bright, oversaturated photo spreads in *National Geographic*. I remember the silkiness of the magazine in my hands as a girl, the foldouts of green jungles, fuchsia flowers like wounds. And the animals, her favorite: poisonous indigo frogs, droopy water buffalos, a panther so black and satiny it was like ink spilled across the page. In the beginning she'd lean down over my shoulder to point them out, explaining what crouch or crawl or harness she'd needed to capture each animal. That panther, she said, was the hardest to shoot.

But then she'd disappear for months, on assignment with her camera. After each trip she seemed less and less comfortable among us, like the Sao Paulo house hemmed her in. She snapped at me one night—me holding up the familiar magazine pages to her—snarled that we were too tame for her. It was in that way, and a hundred other ways, that she and I grew up and grew apart and lost touch. When our parents died I felt a last connection between us severed. That is, until her letter found me in Mexico City.

I'd been traveling, no permanent address in a year, but still the letter arrived, slipped under my door by the landlady. Willful, see? If she wanted to find you, that's it, you were found. My sister wrote that she'd returned from photographing a Pantanal rainforest, feeling a little wobbly and unstable. It was silly, but the doctor suggested she find someone to help until the mystery jungle ailment passed. She was confused, too confused to sort medications, would I come? I settled with the landlady and flew to Rio the next morning.

I remember she kissed me on both cheeks at the door, her black hair in my face smelling like wet leaves and loam. I fit myself into her life, into her barely-furnished apartment. She spent hours in her darkroom, bathed in red light, hunched over the trays—developer, stop bath, fixer. The photos were from her last trip. She hung them to dry everywhere, clothes-pinned them to lampshades, TV antennae, the handles of kitchen cabinets. Each blade of the broken ceiling fan over her bed held a different photo of the same blue-black panther, like still frames from a film. On her ceiling the cat stalked, stretched, washed, and bared its teeth. There's a whole album of the photos, if you want to see it.

Illness creates intimacy, so for many weeks we orbited—sometimes distant, sometimes passing closely, but tethered as sisters always are. The years of strangeness between us were there, yes, but she brushed them away as if they were fruit flies, little nothings. When she felt

well enough we walked outside, in the streets and the park, where she could pull the smell of mud and flowerbeds into her lungs. When she became too weak for doctor appointments, she sent me to the *vivero de flores* for potted plants. I need the outdoors indoors, she told me.

I spent the remaining weeks as she instructed: we turned her darkroom into a hothouse, a tight enclosure of jungle damp and heat. Every morning she asked for more palms, bromeliads, monkey-brush vines, heliconia with lurid red lobster-claw flowers. More than anything she wanted orchids, their violet and banana-yellow petals a brilliant slash against the broad green leaves.

She asked me for the humidifier, and for sunlamps on a timer: eight hours of daylight, eight of darkness. I did these things for my sister—crazy things, I see you thinking it—because there was nothing else she would let me do. She wouldn't eat, bathe, watch telenovelas. Even unwell she was still wild, coiled tight for an outburst at any suggestion to rest or wash. Every room in the apartment seemed to crush her inward, bow her forward—every room but the darkroom.

It was around the time her hair fell out that my sister requested soil. I remember because she didn't brush off the thick hair, so it became like an ebony fur collar on her bathrobe. I bought five bags, and she scattered a thick cushion of loam over the darkroom floor. She hardly slept in the next days, watching the fingers of moss that had begun to grow up the dewy walls. Then one morning, sleep pulled down heavy on her limbs. She wanted less daylight, so we sat in the dark and smelled the rain, listened to the humidifier and the drops of condensation plunking onto lower leaves. On the second-to-last day she asked for more soil, and on the last day she asked me to pour it over her where she lay under the fronds of a rubber tree. I didn't cover her face, so I could see when she was still breathing, and when she wasn't anymore.

I fell asleep there in the dirt. When I woke there was something pacing in the room, but hard to see in the dark. I groped for my sister's hand. Gone, of course. I scrambled for the door, and a long dart of light, true daylight, entered the room. It fell across me on my knees, and across the pacing thing: a long, silky-black panther. It leaped past me into the apartment, but I've since seen that it requires no door to pass in and out of its rainforest darkroom.

And so I am as you find me today—an old woman who keeps a room of rainforest alive, who walks miles every day through the favelas. The people there call me *senhora solitária*, or just *solitária*. I don't correct them. They don't look well enough to see the panther with me, the one who flows around their legs, rippling like dark water, skirting past their bony dogs. They don't see it move through the walls of their houses, the stones of their sheds. *Um fantasma*, they would call it, if they knew. *Pantara fantasma*.

Though it sleeps here in the darkroom, it's not a pet; I don't have to care for it, only for the room. On walks it doesn't pad at my side like a dog. Instead it lopes away, ranging out into the hills, maybe as far as Corcovado. Often I walk for hours before I see it again, that glossy black so bold against the matte grays and browns of the street. I can't tell you where the cat goes, so don't ask me, but it's always like this—drifting away, then returning to my side, orbiting on our old tether. And when it returns I smell the leaves and loam of my sister's hair, or the citrus-soap of orchid blooms, or sometimes a tang of freshly-turned soil.