Thorn

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The cougar stood just there, form curved to accommodate scrawny ilex and the chickadee feeder. Neighbors were bulldozing their lots, driving their yellow machines back and forth to erase anything suggestive of green.

They wrestled with jimson weed. They nudged blades to our fence, daring the chain-link to snap and the jays to come within birdshot. They could not imagine a lion except as a yawn on the wall or a Disney cartoon character.

But he was there like a photo washed in sepia and firelight, dogeared by tall tales. He had come down from the bitter rocks and sour mountain to stand patiently with one paw raised. But I knew if I reached out

to pull the thorn, he would vanish into the granite of a gatepost, one of the guardians of libraries, for all his pain would dissolve into the idea of sanctuary and my meaningless good wishes, my panther, my good black dog.