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2020

The Panther, the Girl, and the Wardrobe: Borderlessness, Animal Life, and Domestic Terror in Brecht Evens' Panther.

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Kwa, Shiamin. 2020. "The Panther, the Girl, and the Wardrobe: Borderlessness, Animal Life, and Domestic Terror in Brecht Evens' Panther." *Strong Bonds: Relationships Between Children and Animals in Comics*. Ed. Maaheen Ahmed. Acme Series on Comics Studies. Liège, University of Liège Press: 165-179.

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**Strong Bonds:
Child-animal Relationships in Comics**



This publication an outcome of the COMICS project which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 758502)



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Couverture : *Jinchalo* ©Matthew Forsythe. Used by permission. Image courtesy Drawn & Quarterly. The editor and the publisher would like to thank Matthew Forsythe for allowing them to use an image from his graphic novel *Jinchalo* for the cover. Discussed in detail in Laura Pearson's chapter in this volume, the image shows the child protagonist, Voguchi, fascinated by and merging with the plant and animal life around her. The image poetically captures this volume's concerns with disentangling—and re-entangling—the connections between children and animals in comics.

Dépôt légal D/2020/12.839/28

ISBN 978-2-87562-259-4

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Place du 20 août, 7

B-4000 Liège (Belgique)

<http://www.presses.uliege.be>

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Imprimé en Belgique

Collection *ACME*

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edited by
Maaheen Ahmed

Presses Universitaires de Liège
2020

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The Panther, the Girl, and the Wardrobe: Borderlessness and Domestic Terror in *Panther*

Shiamin Kwa

We all know a story that goes like this. A little boy is punished for being naughty. A little girl is angry at her parents. She runs away because of a harsh scolding. He is sent to his room without his supper. A brother and sister go to live with an old uncle because of some trouble at home. There was a sick parent. There was an attack by tigers. There was the scarlet fever. The children discover a secret room. They open a hidden door. Suddenly, out of thin air, a creature appears. Only the child can see this creature. The creature is usually an animal, and has some of the animal's mannerisms, but it also wears clothes or has other human properties, the most common one being the ability to speak. The child indulges her "animal" self, or he gains the power he lacks at home. Perhaps she gives in to excessive cravings, or he indulges in unalloyed bliss that adults simply cannot access. Then, at story's end, he returns to the world of the father, she puts back on the mantle of civilization, and the children return to being ordinary children safe in their bedrooms once again. The animal friend has played his part, and now he has to leave. The only animals the child knows are once again the nonverbal family pet or beloved toy.

Panther was written and drawn by the Belgian-born artist Brecht Evens. It was published in Dutch and French in 2014 and then with a few additions for the translations in English and German in 2016. To the casual viewer who picks up the book, it appears as if it follows in the tradition of the child's picture book. Though somewhat thicker and heavier, it projects the material qualities of the illustrated children's book, down to its oblong shape, bright colors, and its promise of suspended reality. First suggesting that it is a children's book, and then upending those expectations, *Panther* achieves an unnerving and unforgettable effect that is equal parts horror and shame. The titular Panther not only has the ability to appear and disappear as if by magic, but he is visually different each time we see him, taking advantage of the "sequential irregularity" (Chaney 130) facilitated as a matter of course by the comics form. From the way that rooms lose their firmness and balance in response to the emotions of the depicted characters, to pronounced

shifts in perspective resulting in an overwhelming sense of instability, Evens' art work echoes a world view inspired by artists like George Grosz (Brown), who elides teeming and teetering masses with anxiety and fear. Sparseness, variation, and pattern create the visual texture of this physically beautiful book's aesthetic, but also communicate its meaning. In its purposeful manipulation of the comic book as a distinctly writerly text, *Panther* theorizes itself, highlighting epistemic challenges of the reading process that in turn reinforce the themes of ambiguity and double entendre on which its plot turns.

This essay looks at the way that the structure of *Panther* guides its readers through its philosophical provocations by exploiting the narrative structures of the comic. The book deconstructs distinctions between man and animal, and between local and outsider, distinctions that not only rely heavily on, but actively produce, difference. To that end, this graphic narrative challenges those distinctions by training its focus on boundaries. Critics and scholars have pointed to the quality of the comics form that makes it the essential writerly text described by Barthes, the kind of text that enlists the reader into the production of its meaning (Barthes). Perhaps the most theorized convention of the comics form is the gutter, as the site where narrative "closure" is produced (McCloud), or, in Groensteen's analysis, as "the site of a semantic articulation, a logical conversion, that of a series of utterables (the panels) in a statement that is unique and coherent (the story)" (114). The gutters, the spaces that divide panels from each other, create discreet units that are read individually, but the discreet units do not necessarily represent a completed action. Units of time or action may emerge from thinking of units in contiguity: narrative is indicated through the exercise of difference and repetition. Groensteen's interpretation of this narrative strategy, what he calls its "arthrology", considers the way that a graphic narrative focalizes the narrative through its redundancies (Groensteen 98–100). The sense of a narrative thus coheres not simply from the transition from one panel to the next, but around a perception of clustered repetitions. For example, an identical subject against changing backgrounds indicates the passage of time or travel in space. Similarly, it could indicate the obverse: changing postures or appearances of a subject against static backgrounds. The idea of a unit of completed action should thus be defined not only by the relationships between adjacent individual panels, but by a range of different parameters—a splash page, a cluster of panels, a series of actions within a single panel, a sequence of panels across several pages—that are functionally variable in their combinations. *Panther* does not indicate its gutters by drawing black lines that frame panels, opting instead to indicate them through absences; this sense of absence will be used to the same effect in the construction of its narrative, where the unspoken and unseen are crucial elements for the determination of what has happened. The construction of meaning across related but variant units is essential to *Panther's* problems of identification: in terms of both subject and meaning. Likewise, the way that specific

units or actions are “thought together” relay the complex processes of witnessing and interpretation that attach to perceptions formed in their reading.

Panther exercises the simultaneous presentation afforded by the sequential narrative form. Typically non-contiguous elements are easily broadcasted in the comics form: outsides and insides, objects within and without borders, good and evil, are no longer unequivocally static categories. The graphic narrative allows for a kind of continuity achieved by the serial, where proximity is an essential aspect of the production of meaning. The repetitions, or redundancy, work in service of producing narrative continuity, but as Groensteen warns: “*continuity* is assured by the *contiguity* of images, but this side-by-side is not necessarily an end-to-end of narrative instances structured according to a univocal and mechanical logic of repetition and difference. We must guard ourselves here against dogmatic conclusions. Comics admit all sorts of narrative strategies” (Groensteen 117). Postema also notes the way that comics urge the viewer to complete narratives through a notion of lack, critiquing Arnheim for drawing distinctions between a pictorial image as a whole in contrast to the literary image that allows for “stepwise change”. She suggests that impressions of wholeness are inaccurate: “The ‘wholeness’ that Arnheim ascribes to the pictorial image is in fact problematic at two levels. When he says the image resents itself in ‘simultaneity,’ this implies it can be taken in all at once, which is not the case. Pictorial images are scanned and require reading, just as literary images do. Furthermore, the image often implies other, unrepresented, moments. Thus again, the image is not whole, at least not in the sense of being complete” (Postema 14).

The mechanisms of reading the spaces between and of comprehending sequence based on a certain capaciousness of the imagination turn out to be urgently necessary when seen through a reading of *Panther*. Games of cat and mouse, predator and prey, initially seem to hinge upon the utter lack of alertness or surveillance that could perhaps prevent its disturbing ending. As the book unfolds, however, it becomes eminently clear that no amount of alertness or surveillance would have a preventative effect within a system defined as it is by a notional understanding of molar entities. The players initially suggest a triangulation: a girl, a father, and a panther who has the ability to change from moment to moment while maintaining a consistency of identity. In his body, the panther enacts not only the narrative contiguity outlined by Groensteen, cohering into a unit in spite of the variations in his appearance. This idea of multiple “molecular” identities cohering into a molar one also brings to mind the moment of assemblage that takes place in the “becoming-animal”. Outlined in the tenth stave of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, the process of becoming is a state that dissolves borders of identity, where the dominant molar identity of “man” becomes, in their terms, molecular in a zone of proximity, and therefore indiscernible (Deleuze and Guattari). This becoming is meant to activate a recalibration of hierarchies between human and animal identities, creating a space for the ethical considerations

of animal lives, or to show how critics who adopt this formulation cling to “an imperialistic view of the world and of nature that is accompanied by a series of transcendent values [that Deleuze and Guattari] seek to deconstruct” (Beaulieu 85).

Positive analyses of the model of becoming look to the ways that becoming-animal allows minority identities to elude the grasp of authorities that manipulate or exploit them. To that end, the emphasis is on the liberatory promise of this formulation, which allows for “escape routes—the becoming ahuman of Man. If we humans are the problem with the world then attempts to treat nonhuman animals well or differently within this world is trying to force an eternal victim into an unresolvable problem. Better to unravel the problem itself” (Gardner and MacCormack 5). There are also other benefits to unraveling the problem itself. Evens highlights the dangers that attach to ignoring the possibilities of becoming. *Panther* acknowledges the continuous processes of becoming, and the hazards of refusing to observe that reality. This is especially true when actual boundaries are nowhere near where they are imagined to exist. While the interest in *Panther* is thus less motivated by care for the animal, it also exposes the tendency to oversimplify the animal or vulnerable other as definable and therefore controllable. It presents a profound reminder of the blind spots that are created by systems of identity that depend on reified molar identities. The reader of *Panther* relies heavily on visual and linguistic clues to sort out not only the developments in plot but to aid in identifying its players. We are thus forced into confronting our epistemic limits, a productive position that encourages us to look closer rather than to look away. If the panther, seemingly *one* panther, can assume so many contiguous and yet continuous identities, and if we so easily accept each vastly different visual iteration as equal to the same panther, what categories of judgement have we relied on to assign Panther his identity? Where are the limits of contiguity, that allow us to tell him apart with certainty from, for example, Christine’s father?

This essay is concerned primarily with the question of form itself—the form that the book *Panther* takes, and the forms that the character Panther takes. In the way that it inextricably links form and content, *Panther* explores the ways that we constantly rely on surface detail for meaning and patterns, to try to tell one thing from another. What happens, Evens asks, when our very sense of safety and security is tied to our belief in our ability to maintain control of borders of all kinds? *Panther* takes the problem of our resistance to ambiguity as its central premise. The visual ambiguity aligns with its narrative ambiguity, ingeniously showing how the sovereign father is invested in maintaining blindness to this state of affairs. *Panther* poses an investigation of two kinds of domestic terror. Using the threat of the domestic terror of incestuous sexual abuse, he suggests its consonance in the rhetoric used to describe the threat of the domestic terrorist lurking within the borders of the home state. The home becomes a metonym for the home state, dominated by vigilance against terrorist attacks that come from beyond borders yet unwilling to acknowledge the equally present terror of the predator within the

borders: where seemingly ordinary citizens deploy seemingly ordinary objects as weapons of mass destruction.

The answer to the question of “How did the stranger get into the house?” is that he was not a stranger in the first place. Evens’ work questions the value of responses that emphasize border control to the detriment of over-reliance on inflexible terms. Borders, like the subjects they are meant to control, are in constant states of becoming, changing and repositioning constantly. It is clear that the apparatus of border control maintained by the sovereign father does not adequately acknowledge the flaws inherent in such protections, and *Panther* points to the equal dangers of the false sense of security bolstered by restrictions and the gathering of biometric data, that pretends that fences of any kind are capable of keeping evil out. The book asks us to acknowledge the unnerving fact that structures as firm as walls and as finely detailed as biometrics cannot fully account for the stranger within. The problem, he suggests, is not one of porous borders or weakly constructed ones; the problem, instead, is that the danger already lies within them and that those structures not only fail to keep the evil out but indeed create harbors that protect the evils within. The problem, in fact, is not that the sovereign father is negligent or ignorant, but that in fact he depends on these false and failing structures to maintain his power.

If we insist on molar opposites, we allow those variations to remain unaccounted, and our mechanisms for sorting, including, and excluding, fail the protections that we intend. What *Panther* suggests is a greater sensitivity to not only the structures that allow for these predations, but a greater sensitivity to how those structures are created and insinuated in their maintenance. The use of spots and patterning in *Panther* is both aesthetic and ethical gesture: what is the panther’s body if not a model of the molecular form, the body that coheres from a formal arrangement of dots? *Panther*, cat-like, playfully overturns systems of deducing meaning from images, reducing the separations to show how the outsider is already inside, how the animal is the human. His take on proximities elides the proximity of sequential reading; the proximity of Christine, Panther, and father; and, ultimately, the proximity of the reader and the text.

THE PANTHER

Illustrated in gem-like aquarelles, *Panther* centers around a little girl named Christine, who lives alone with her father. It is unclear what has caused her mother’s departure from the home. Her absence has cast a pall over the household, leaving the daughter and father behind in a home that is muted on multiple levels. When her beloved cat dies, Christine mourns alone in her room until one day she finds a replacement companion in the form of a Panther, who emerges from the bottom drawer of the dresser in her room. The drawer is a portal to his home, Pantherland, an exotic place full of lively, fantastical, and colorful stories. The book begins with

the bottom compartment of another container, the freezer where Christine's father is keeping her dead cat while waiting to bury it in the right spot. It is from the loss of this first cat that the new cat is summoned. Into the world of Christine's everyday life, depicted in sedate washes of reds and blues, comes the Panther, who introduces yellow into the pages of her world. One of the first things to notice about the Panther is that, although his name may call to mind other cartoon panthers, this one is a master of deception who is able to hide his more frightening face most of the time, a face that is sourced, like most objects of the imagination, from real objects in Christine's house. Most importantly, the Panther is patterned; he is covered in spots, a characteristic that complements the visual design of the book, and which will have profound significance in our understanding of the text at the end of the book. The panther's ability to look completely different every time is matched only by his ability to change his storytelling according to Christine's prompting, and initially, his intrusion into her life is a welcome addition (Fig. 1). It literally brings color and liveliness to the depressed blues and reds that accompany the world of her life with father. Here let me pause very briefly only to draw your attention to the fact that her father's exclusively blue and red intrusion at an early point in the book is also composed of a series of spots.



Fig. 1. © Brecht Evens. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

The transgressiveness of the friendship moves from playful to increasingly suspicious, threatening, and dangerous, all the while showing the uneasily framed borders between those states. Evens has described the Panther's behavior as explicitly that of the pedophile, emphasizing the way that the Panther grooms Christine while separating her from those to whom she is closest: "he tries to be her ideal friend, following all of her cues to avoid shock or concern. Later, he seeks information from her, thus making himself gentle and tameable in the manner of the pedophile who gains the confidence of his future victim, isolating her from her potential protectors" (Le Saux and Evens). In this particular case, Panther gradually separates Christine from her trusted friends, including her small stuffed dog named Bonzo. The fantastic stories that he tells her about Pantherland, a world he conjures up to suit her specific tastes, change according to what he thinks she wants to hear. He cajoles her into playing children's games with him that take on an increasingly uncomfortable, then sinister, tone.

Ominous warning signs alert us to the danger that the panther poses to Christine's safety. Her stuffed dog Bonzo tries to sneak away from the panther's watchful eye to warn her of the danger. Bonzo tries to write a message of warning to Christine on the wall, but is caught by Panther and disappears for a time. Panther explains that Bonzo went missing while paying a visit to Pantherland, and has returned from his travels slightly changed by his experience abroad. Unlike the various forms of Panther, Bonzo is from the start more or less visually consistent throughout the book, like Christine and her father: visually changing between panels only in the ways that are natural to comics, with position or expression, expressing "the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images" (Groensteen 22). When Bonzo comes back, however, he is physically changed: he now has a leering face that bares sharp teeth and, more impressively, now has the surprising ability to speak. His speech is not colloquial; it is contextually jarring, and unambiguously sinister to the reader, but incomprehensible to Christine. Although uncertain that he is the "same Bonzo", Christine accepts Panther's explanation of his transformation. She readily accepts the animals and animated toys that arrive from the portal to Pantherland, who arrive from her dresser drawer for her birthday party. It is at this party that Christine is drugged and then sexually assaulted by the party-goers.

Panther exploits the fact of being an animal, a fact that is particularly notable in the history of comics, which harbors a rich tradition of funny animals that have been integrated now into an equally rich history of tragic animals. The animal in the comic is already a way of foregrounding allegorical thinking. Unlike their real-world counterparts, animals in comics possess the qualities that Derrida designates as proper, and by proper he means unique, to man, such as dress, speech and reason, the *logos*, history, laughing, mourning, the gift (Derrida and Wills 373). Animals in comics possess these qualities, and do so in such ways as to undermine purely allegorical ways of reading (Cremins). Comics historians like Joseph Witek

suggest that the traditional animal allegory typical of, for example, Aesop's fables, is undone by the figure of the funny animal in comics, where the comic overturns those conventions (Witek 110). The allegorical suggestiveness of creating types through the mechanism of animal traits is accommodated in the *Animal Farm*-style metaphorical readings of the classic graphic novel *Maus*, about which Orvell remarks: "the reader comes to forget that these are cats, mice, pigs, and soon begins to view them instead as human types" (Orvell 119). That is to say, the animal form, or rather the human-animal hybrids of *Maus* in which the characters are human in body and dress and have animal faces, is an avatar that facilitates the storytelling shorthand in cat and mouse distinctions.

Similarly, animals are used to different effect in comics such as Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese*. Michael Chaney suggests that Yang's comic complicates the simple distinctions that take place on the allegorical level, where animal stands in for human, by making the animal-human distinction actually part of the story. In Yang's exploration of the immigrant hybrid identity-making of self-erasure and projection in the protagonist Jin Wang, the animal in the book turns out to be not an allegorical avatar or storytelling convention but an incarnation of the legendary monkey king from Chinese tradition, an already transtextually anthropomorphized animal. Chaney sees in comics like Yang's a specter, suggested when "social norms of anatomical and emotional proximity" are replaced by more microscopic shifts in human animal relationships (Chaney 130). More importantly, the animal in the comic challenges either-or binaries that are highlighted by attempts to distinguish the human from the animal. In the comic narrative, this distinction is blurred, and allowing the animal to act human is precisely the mechanism upon which Evens' narrative turns. *Panther* is a narrative of suggestiveness. The panther arrives at different times. Every time he comes, his appearance is different. Every time, we accept that he is "Panther", in the same way that we allow ourselves to easily slip into thinking of the vast variety of other lives as members as grouped within the same category of "animal" as if the only important distinction is that they are not like us, the human.

Of course, the predator's cunning is precisely that of suggestiveness. Double entendre protects him from blame: our reading the lewd into what he says allows him to shift the shame to us. He can deny that meaning, and ask what kinds of dirty minds we have to have come up with such conclusions. Panther works his way into Christine's life, and the facts of his being playful and cat-like call into the foreground the fact that this very consistency undoes the possibility of binary distinctions because it is not possible to say that the panther transforms into the monstrous. Rather, we are asked to consider the fact that monstrosity is very much within the continuum of reasonable behavior of this predator who takes many forms, who contains the capacity for violent attack just as much as he contains the capacity for gentle tenderness. By the time Christine has been swept into the party brought from Pantherland into her room for her birthday party, it seems

that interventions are far too late. Yet, what is this after-ness that makes something too late? What does it follow from if we recognize that the danger has always been present, and not a new manifestation? Panther's latent efforts at protecting Christine, during the party scene gone awry, lack credibility. When Bonzo more than suggestively asks her to stroke Giraffe, who "changes shape as you stroke it", (Evens, *Panther*) are we still to think in terms of ambiguities, of warning signs that only make sense in hindsight? At the party, the visitors from Pantherland separate Christine from Panther, and, drug her. Then they proceed, we assume, to rape her. This vacancy in the sequence, following a frenetic and crowded series of images, is the most suggestive of all. As the animals crowd around her, the drawing style abruptly changes once again. As if seen from her point of view, the successive pages play out in a series of flat black and white images that are composed of black spots on a white page, the kind one would expect from a diagnostic exam rather than from the fluid and colorful images that we have become accustomed to in the pages so far (Evens, *Panther*).

Instead, the transition from the fluid, the transparent, the varied into the stark world of black and white conjures up the kinds of associations we make when using these words metaphorically. The questions of what really happened, allegations of testimony, are materialized in the sequence. The series of full page spreads go from the leering face of Bonzo, to the vague outlines of circles where spots are clustered together, to a sequential diagram that slowly transforms that circle and its nucleus into view again as the face of the Panther. The images in this sequence ask the reader: do you need to see it to know what happened? How closely must the atoms be arranged for them to become recognizable assemblages?

THE GIRL

During the days leading up to the attack, Christine has been having nightmares. Her father sits quietly next to her on the edge of her bed; we make these assumptions based on the way that the figures are drawn and their relative positions. She tells him about the dreams that she has been having. Christine tells him that he was in her dream, that he was angry at her, "like an animal," she says. He tenderly puts his hand on her knee. At the end of the sequence he suggests that she sleep with her windows open. "Ugh. I feel weird", she says (Evens, *Panther*). In the book the father has seemed to us affectionate, if at times distant. He has seemed kind and tender, if sometimes strangely absent. When we sense the precariousness of Christine's situation, and we see the way that the panther's grasp has become tighter and more inevitable, we wonder why the father is not present, why he hasn't stepped in to protect her. But a new question begins to take form. Is the problem not a problem of his absence, but that he actually has been present? After the diabolical birthday party, a scene plays out between Christine and Panther that looks remarkably similar (Fig. 2). This time it is Panther who sits on her bed. Instead of a rumpled nightgown, she is naked under the sheets. This time it is Panther who soothingly

tells her not to be frightened. He, too, pets her tenderly. He, too, demonstrates concern. She tells him “Aah, I don’t feel right.” He tells her that he is Panther, *her* Panther (Evens, *Panther*). What do these two tender scenes have to do with each other? It is at this point that we return to a consideration of the patterns that we see in the spots.

Jacques Derrida used an encounter with his cat, or rather his awareness of his cat’s encounter with his naked body, as the premise for “The Animal that Therefore I Am”. In his bathroom, beheld by his cat, he contemplates the way that humans are capable of being naked, whereas the cat that beholds cannot. This knowledge is what humans use to claim themselves sovereign over “the animal”, referring to animals as a singular unit in spite of the surplus of forms of life that are grouped under that single word. In the naming of the animal as something from which humans have emerged, there is the blindness of what Lawlor attributes to human auto-affection (Lawlor 169). In the self-designation of “human” as an entity separate from animal, we accept that though we come from animal, are still animal, we claim that human is what animal is *not*. Not only does the surplus of meaning that attaches to the word “animal” reveal our unwillingness to accept multiplicities in others, it also reveals the unspoken fact that we are still the animal. What Evens’ book exposes are our attempts and failures to sublimate the panther inside us.



Fig. 2. © Brecht Evens. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

"I'm panther. Your panther." What do these words sound like to us now? The truth that Evens' book points to is that precautions that do away with panthers, or that do away with the animal, falsely equate security with singularity, as if preventing the passage of the animal is all that it takes to prevent the child from harm. What is clear from this book is that while it may be possible to do away with what we *call* the animal, we cannot do away with the animal that we are unwilling to recognize in ourselves. *Panther* asks the reader to think through what the spots on the panther's body can suggest. It asks the reader to literally connect the dots. There are patterns that decorate the pages, and there are patterns of repeated motifs in the book, from the spots on the panther to the spots on the Twister mat, to the black and white spots at the scene of Christine's assault. There are patterns in the visual cues, and patterns in the language. There are suggestions left unspoken but still there at the surface, waiting to be read.

Panther gazes at Christine as she sits bewildered on her bed. Her father is in his bedroom, getting ready to take her out to dinner to celebrate her birthday. They have been looking forward to this night out. He looks in the mirror as he adjusts his tie, and whistles happily to himself. The panther has taken many shapes throughout the course of the book, but in the last panel of twelve, his face is cast over with shadows that obscure his eyes and mouth. It is hauntingly familiar, actually exactly the same, when we see it next, reflected in the mirror in the father's bedroom. The father is doubled, and the cast of those shadows unravel the mysteries of the circles of black and white that resolved earlier into Panther's face. These patches of black oozing in and out of focus, resolving into the spotty organization of a panther's features are uncannily those of the father's patterns of baldness as his hair recedes from his forehead (Fig. 3). There are other, retrospective, connections. Not just notable, but impossible to avoid, is the introduction for the first time of yellow into the father's room. Evens trained us to see color, and its absence, as meaningful over the course of the book. Up until this point, Christine and her father's world was exclusively shown in washes of reds, blues, and blacks. Only the intrusions from Pantherland were accompanied by shades of yellow. The black figures against multi-colored geometric shapes have been reserved only for scenes that bear the presence of the panther, literally marked by the prowling cat. Yet now we see the colors, now we see the shadowy figure, and we search for the panther in the room. And we don't see him. Or don't we? Isn't he there, looking out at us, directly from the borders of the mirror? Why is it that we are unwilling to believe that we see it now, before our eyes? I made a point earlier that the Panther resembled an everyday object, a figurine, in the father's house. Is it possible that we identified the wrong one?



Fig. 3. © Brecht Evens. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

There are other patterns. The father has been depicted throughout this narrative wearing short-sleeved t-shirts, bedroom slippers, shorts or underwear. In the earlier pages of this book, this seems only like signs of his depression. His dishabille is not notable until it is contrasted with the preening father in the mirror admiring himself in suit and tie. It calls to mind Panther himself, who brightens everything with his cheerful yellow tones. It calls to mind the strangeness of those funny cartoon animals whose nakedness is made stranger when they wear only shirts, and are naked from waist down. Now suddenly we see warning signs where before we only saw ordinary conventions. Now we see the monster in the mirror and wonder how long we have known that he was there. By the end of the book, it becomes abundantly clear that the problem is not that there is an anthropomorphic—animal with human form—panther, whose possession of language has allowed him his access to Christine; instead, we cannot deny the much more troubling possibility that it is Christine's father who is therianthropic—human cast into animal form (Baker 108)—and that he has always had access to Christine.

"I'm panther. Your panther." What separates the panther, *Panther* in the original Dutch, from the father, the *pater*, only requires the slightest adjustment of a single letter.

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Panther reminds us that we often believe that the stranger has arrived without the necessary papers, that he is an intruder who has snuck across the border, an uninvited guest who comes with the intent of harm. This is a belief that strengthens confidence that if only borders can be secured, and the appropriate documents and papers assigned and produced, the realm of sovereign power can be maintained. The vocabulary of inside and outside extends to here and there, to us and them; and the security of the borders becomes the security of that which we keep within. But it is more often the case that the predator is undocumented because he did not need documentation to enter in the first place: he was already on the inside. The comics elision of the animal and the father in the figure of the Panther makes this point without needing to delve into the questions of allegory or metaphor. By its very nature of allowing for the multiple iterations of form that fall within the convention of the comics narrative, *Panther* does not allow for easy gestures towards difference. The panther has appeared in remarkably varied forms, but we have accepted him as if he is a singular, individual entity. Yet the safeguards we take are made in the name of the singular as well, even though we know that we mean the plural. Evens' Panther becomes emblematic of the so-called inclusive exclusion, the bare life, that is the central self-producing activity of the sovereign father. It is this bare life that precisely forms that "zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture" (Agamben 109). The bare life that is created by and for the sovereign. As *Panther* suggests, it is the sovereign father, the creator of the *homo sacer* in the form of the Panther, who has been the greatest threat all along. The comic makes it plain that they are one and the same, so that it is only inevitable for *his* presence to be wholly inescapable.

There is a mistake to attributing singularity to groups of others. There are no protective precautions that can be taken against singulars meant to define everything that we are not. The animal. The foreigner. How can we prepare for and identify threats that we cannot distinguish from the ordinary? The problems of dealing with Panthers of all sorts are thus related to a false faith in our biopolitical apparatuses, created based on how things appear. Our methods are those depending on anticipation and control, in service of risk management. Forms of security are expressed as border policing, technologies of surveillance, the gathering of biometric information, the tracking system of visas and immigration laws, the patterns of movement. They are expressed as travel bans. They are expressed as alerts for the unusual, without articulating what constitutes the unusual. Borders in Evens' book are configured so that they flicker back and forth between the bare life and the

sovereign-sanctioned life; sometimes the panther, sometimes the father. Always the panther, always the father. This provocation asks us to think about the other ways that we fail with our biopolitical assertions of borders maintained in purely spatial and territorial terms. Because just as much as biopolitical apparatuses have become increasingly mobile and invisible, so are their objects mobile and invisible. Flickering on the atomic level, on the level of little spots that cohere into meaning only after it is too late, they reside within. They have always already been there. And we are responsible for them.

The belief that dangerous elements can be reduced out, isolated, and contained, is too often the belief at the heart of our mechanisms of security. Keeping our children away from animals may protect us from *those* animals, those that we define ourselves against. But what do we do about the fact that we, too, are animals? We see in the spatial territory of the wardrobe the embodiment of this paradox. The wardrobe is the border, the portal between Christine's world and Pantherland. But the wardrobe is both exterior and interior, both container and contained. Closing the border may keep out what we think are the outsiders from our borders, but this does not solve the fact that we are all outsiders to each other. It is undeniable that the violence against Christine began once the Panther was invited into her room, but the fact remains that he emerged from her bureau drawer. The bureau drawer that was already inside the room. That is to say, he was always already there.

The last page of the book is a surprise; a black and white page continues into the end papers with the image of the panther skulking off the page back into the wardrobe. In fact, the book presents its final illusion: the wardrobe contains a secret passage, a foldout page that transforms into the technicolor magical dreamscape world of Panthésia, or Pantherland, unfolding seductively into an illustration of Panther's exotic land. In this final action, Evens literally forces the reader's hand, making her carry out the border crossing that cannot be passive, active because we all play a part in assuming the impassability of a border. The problem of access, of closed doors, of who holds the keys, are simply distractions. The danger is already here, inside all of our homes. We are blind to its power, and so long as we remain blind, so long as we remain complacent to it, it threatens to consume us. Each and every one.

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