

Christ! The Tiger... *

The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours.

—T.S. Eliot

When I was a boy I had a fairly anarchic sense of ethics. Although I had no qualms with the tortoise winning the race—slow and steady—I thought it was a pretty good deal that the hare could sprint ahead, take a nice long nap in the sun, and still come in a close second.

A favorite story of mine from young childhood was the Easy Reader version of *The Old Man and the Tiger*, a folktale adapted by Alvin Tresselt. In fact, I still have the copy my mom wrote my name in sitting on my shelves. In the book, a tiger has been caught in a trap after he followed the scent of a steak with which the trap had been baited. Saddened by his predicament, he calls out for someone to help him. Nobody does, not the monkeys and elephants who are afraid of him, until an old man comes along, leaning on his staff, and agrees to let the tiger out as long as the tiger promises not to eat him when he does. True to his tiger nature though, as soon as he is set free he pounces on the old man and says that, because he is so hungry, he will indeed eat him.

Although the tiger's betrayal of trust with the old man alarmed me, I knew somewhere in my child's brain that this is what tigers do. Tigers eat goats and deer and sometimes even people, and such a fact does not impinge upon their honor. Yet the story follows upon this line of argument, questioning the tiger's sense of gratitude (as later we'll see).

The frightened man then cuts a deal with the tiger. "Let me walk down the path," the old man says. "Let me ask the first three I meet, 'Is it right for the tiger to eat me?' If they say yes, I will be happy to let you eat me. But if one of them says no, you must let me go."

At this point, the folktale wonderfully complicates things. Certainly as a kid I had no practice in comparative literature, but as an adult rereading the book, I recognize the literary merit of the story, willing to enter the thorny bush of relative ethics in ways many children's stories are unwilling to do.

The tiger and old man first come upon a tree, then an ox, and finally a road. To each the old man asks if it is right that the tiger eats him. The tree tells him that it spends its life creating shade for men to rest under, but when it grows large enough, men cut will it down to take its wood. The ox says that from morning to night that it works for the benefit of men, but they never give it a moment of rest. The road tells him that though it provides a path for men to walk upon, they trample it all their days without a word of thanks. Yes, the three agree, it's right the tiger should eat him.

India is the last best refuge for tigers in the world. Of the approximately 3500 wild tigers remaining on the planet, about 70% of them live—fierce, free, and orange—in India. The rest pad the relative wilds of eastern Russia, Indonesia, Indochina, China, and North Korea.

Many of India's tigers live in the far north and coast of the country, amid the moist, precipitous cliffs of the Himalayan foothills and the twisty mangrove glens that grow along the waters of the Bay of Bengal. In 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi outlawed the hunting of tigers, and in the years since, the establishment of tiger reserves and conservation measures in these areas and others have led to an increase of tigers in India. So whereas the dread cat was once feared to go extinct on the subcontinent, tiger populations have grown to 3000, with some increases expected in the years to come.

This success is heartening to tiger lovers, but the accomplishment has led to trouble. As tiger numbers have bounced, human contacts have swollen as well. A dramatic increase in the human population of India hasn't helped. Where in the past tigers were not likely to meet with people in the mangrove forests, for example, economic and population pressures have put anglers, wood cutters, and honey collectors in the literal tiger's jaw.

Tigers have always eaten people, no doubt to the time they first showed up in the tiger's lands. For more than a millennium, people in the kingdom of the striped cats have produced painting and poetry on the business of tigers, these folks ascribing to them a god-like courage, intelligence, and violence, an assignation that surely comes of both reverence and fear. In the early 20th century, a book of rather turgid prose reveled in its depiction of the man-eating tigers of India, as written by the (white) man charged with killing them. And a google search of "tiger attacks" will bring up a good, long list of contemporary newspaper accounts of the problem, largely from India. Indeed, of all the apex predators on the planet, tigers are the most likely to eat someone.

Why then the gains made on the subcontinent in tiger expansion? How have Indians come to terms with their family members and friends being consumed? Perhaps it is in line with the Hindu belief that humans are only one creature in the great web of life, with none more important than the other, as expressed by a woman of southwest India whose husband was eaten by a tiger. Perhaps too, the growing concern for animal welfare in India, particularly in the cities but elsewhere as well, creates tolerance for the tiger's ways. Then there is the knowledge that, of the thousands of tigers at large in the country, a very small few act aggressively toward humans.

And yet that understanding and grace has its limits. The village poor who are most often the victims of tiger attacks have at times struck back, poisoning or beating to death the tiger they suspect of doing the deed. Despite the illegality of killing these animals, and at times without definitive proof that the tiger killed is the tiger that has killed, fear, anger, and a sense of justice has led to villagers taking matters into their own hands, particularly when the federal government has failed to act. Some tigers, particularly young males or older animals whose

infirmities prevent them from catching their usual, more agile prey, may eat a dozen or more people.

Given the predicament, some in the Indian government, in particular those who support the growing tiger population, believe it's in everyone's best interests to decidedly eliminate those tigers proven to have attacked people, thus reassuring the put-upon villagers and dissuade them from an all-out tiger war. To save the tiger, they reason, we must kill the tiger.

The ending pages in my book, *The Old Man and the Tiger*, tell of how a fox comes along and helps the old man. Remember that the tree, the ox, and the road have all told the man it is right that the tiger should eat him.

This fox, she is quick on her feet. After hearing the old man's story thus far, she says to the tiger, "I do not understand the old man. Will you tell the story?" The tiger says there is nothing to say, other than that before the old man had arrived, he had walked into the trap. "Is that the trap?" the fox asks. The tiger says yes, that is the trap, which the old man had come by and helped him escape from.

"And now you want to thank him?" says the fox. Yes, the tiger says, he wants to thank him by eating him, as he is very hungry.

The fox says she is still confused. "The old man was in the trap," she says. "You let him out. Now he will not say thank you." The tiger, not as nimble minded as the fox, says "No, no! I was in the trap! See—like this!" and in he walks.

In this game of switcheroo the clever fox is playing, she keeps emphasizing the fact that the old man has failed to thank the tiger for his help, implying, of course, that's exactly what the *tiger* has not done.

As soon as the tiger walks into the trap, the fox slams shut the door. The tiger, now wising to the game, cries out, "Come, come, old man! Let me out!" The old man does not, only smiles, and in a moment the fox and he walk together down the path. The final page shows us the tiger in his trap, a big tear rolling from his eye.

Now, with this ending, I'm meant to believe three things: How wonderfully droll is this trickster fox; how swell it is the tiger got his comeuppance, given that he didn't thank the old man or keep his word not to try to eat him; and how felicitous it is that the old man (a human like me) got away.

As a boy, I wouldn't have said so to my mom as she read the book to me, but I harbored a secret resentment toward this turncoat fox. After all, she must have suffered under the mistreatment of men as much as the tree, the ox, and the road. And though I couldn't have

expressed it, it stung that the man was just as unthankful (when the tiger didn't eat him) and just as unfaithful (breaking his promise to the tiger when the three said it was right he be eaten), but the man could get away with these breaches of faith and the tiger could not. Also, how right is it that men get to go on happily being men—faults and all—while tigers can't be tigers?

I think in part the book was a favorite of mine because I could relish my disappointment in its ending. Simmering in its injustice was part of the draw. Even so, the final page was a kick to my heart. I was forever always broken up for the dear, weeping beast.

As an adult I suppose I should be happy, literarily speaking, with this. After all, that ending, it's one that says the truth, a work of realist fiction wrapped up in a fable. The tiger, us he devours, as we devour him—the grand metaphor of creation. Well ok, that's so. But oh, *oh my*, the sad tigers of the world.

* Title adapted from Eliot's poem, "Gerontion," in which he compares Jesus to a tiger: "In the juvenescence of the year/Came Christ the tiger."