

Blue Tigers

Jorge Luis Borges

A FAMOUS POEM by Blake paints the tiger as a fire burning bright and an eternal archetype of Evil; I prefer the Chesterton maxim that casts the tiger as a symbol of terrible elegance. Apart from these, there are no words that can rune the tiger, that shape which for centuries has lived in the imagination of mankind. I have always been drawn to the tiger. I know that as a boy I would linger before one particular cage at the zoo; the others held no interest for me. I would judge encyclopaedias and natural histories by their engravings of the tiger. When the Jungle Books were revealed to me I was upset that the tiger, Shere Khan, was the hero's enemy. As the years passed, this strange fascination never left me; it survived my paradoxical desire to become a hunter as it did all common human vicissitudes. Until not long ago (the date feels distant but it really is not), it co-existed peacefully with my day-to-day labours at the University of Lahore. I am a professor of Eastern and Western logic, and I consecrate my Sundays to a seminar on the philosophy of Spinoza. I should add that I am a Scotsman; it may have been my love of tigers that brought me from Aberdeen to Punjab. The outward course of my life has been the common one, but in my dreams I always saw tigers. Now it is other forms that fill them.

I have recounted all these facts more than once, until now they seem almost to belong to someone else. I let them stand, however, since they are required by my statement.

TOWARDS THE END of 1904, I read that in the region of the Ganges delta a blue variety of the species had been discovered. The news was confirmed by subsequent telegrams, with the contradictions and incongruities that one expects in such cases. My old love stirred once more. Nevertheless, I suspected some error, since the names of colours are notoriously imprecise. I remembered having once read that in Icelandic, Ethiopia was "Blaland", Blue Land or the Land of Black Men. The blue tiger might well be a black panther. Nothing was mentioned of stripes; the picture published by the London press, showing a blue tiger with silver stripes, was patently apocryphal. Similarly, the blue of the illustration looked more like that of heraldry than reality. In a dream, I saw tigers of a blue I had never seen before, and for which I could find no word. I know it was almost black, but that description of course does scant justice to the shade I saw.

Some months later, a colleague of mine told me that in a certain village miles from the Ganges he had heard talk of blue tigers. I was astonished by that piece of news, because tigers are rare in that area. Once again I dreamt of the blue tiger, throwing its long shadow as it made its way over the sandy ground. I took advantage of the end of term to make a journey to that village, whose name (for reasons that will soon be clear) I do not wish to recall.

I arrived towards the end of the rainy season. The village squatted at the foot of a hill (which looked to me wider than it was high) and was surrounded and menaced by the jungle, which was a dark brown colour. Surely one of the pages of Kipling contains that village of my adventure, since all of India, all the world somehow, can be found there. Suffice it to report that a ditch, and swaying cane-stalk bridges, constituted the huts' fragile defence. Towards the south there were swamps and rice

fields and a ravine with a muddy river whose name I never learnt, and beyond that, again, the jungle.

The people who lived in the village were Hindus. I did not like this, though I had foreseen it. I have always got along better with Muslims, though Islam, I know, is the poorest of the religions that spring from Judaism.

We feel ordinarily that India teems with humanity; in the village I felt that India teemed with jungle. It crept virtually into the huts. The days were oppressive, and the nights brought no relief.

I was greeted upon my arrival by the elders, with whom I sustained a tentative conversation constructed of vague courtesies. I have mentioned the poverty of the place, but I know that it is an axiom of every man's belief that the land he lives in and owes his allegiance to possesses some unique distinction, and so I praised in glowing terms the dubious habitations and the no less dubious delicacies served me, and I declared that the fame of that region had reached Lahore. The expressions on the men's faces changed; I immediately sensed that I had committed a faux pas I might come to regret. I sensed that these people possessed a secret they would not share with a stranger. Perhaps they worshipped the blue tiger, perhaps they were devotees of a cult that my rash words had profaned.

I waited until the next morning. When the rice had been consumed and the tea drunk down, I broached my subject. Despite the previous night's experience, I did not understand - was incapable of understanding - what took place then. The entire village looked at me with stupefaction, almost with terror, but when I told them that my purpose was to capture the beast with the curious skin, they seemed almost relieved at my words. One of them said he had seen the animal at the edge of the jungle.

In the middle of the night, they woke me. A boy told me that a goat had escaped from the corral and that as he'd gone to look for it, he'd seen the blue tiger on the far bank of the river. I reflected that the scant light of the new moon would hardly have allowed him to make out the colour, but everyone confirmed the tale; one of them, who had been silent up until that moment, said he had seen it, too. We went out with the rifles and I saw, or thought I saw, a feline shadow slink into the shadows of the jungle. They did not find the goat, but the creature that had taken it might or might not have been my blue tiger. They emphatically pointed out to me other traces - which of course proved nothing.

After a few nights I realised that these false alarms were a sort of routine. Like Daniel Defoe, the men of the village were skilled at inventing circumstantial details. The tiger might be glimpsed at any hour, out towards the rice fields to the south or up towards the jungle to the north, but it did not take me long to realise that there was a suspicious regularity in the way the villagers seemed to take turns spotting it. My arrival upon the scene of the sighting invariably coincided with the precise instant that the tiger had just run off. I was always shown a trail, a paw mark, some broken twig, but a man's fist can counterfeit a tiger's prints. Once or twice I witnessed a dead dog. One moonlit night we staked out a goat as a lure, but we watched fruitlessly until dawn. I thought at first that these daily fables were meant to encourage me to prolong my stay, for it did benefit the village - the people sold me food and did domestic chores for me. To verify this conjecture, I told them I was thinking of moving to another region, downstream, in quest of the tiger. I was surprised to find that they welcomed my decision. I continued to sense, however, that there was a secret, and that everyone was keeping a wary eye on me.

I mentioned earlier that the wooded hill at whose foot the village sprawled was not really very high; it was flat on top, a sort of plateau. On the other side of the mountain, towards the west and north, the jungle began again. Since the slope was not a rugged one, one afternoon I suggested that we climb it. My simple words threw the villagers into consternation. One exclaimed that the mountainside was too steep. The eldest of them said gravely that my goal was impossible to attain, the summit of the hill was sacred, magical obstacles blocked the ascent to man. He who trod the peak with mortal foot was in danger of seeing the godhead, and of going blind or mad.

I did not argue, but that night, when everyone was asleep, I stole soundlessly from my hut and began to climb the easy hillside.

There was no path, and the undergrowth held me back. The moon was just at the horizon. I took note of everything with singular attentiveness, as though I sensed that this was to be an important day, perhaps the most important day of all my days. I still recall the dark, almost black, shadings of the leaves and bushes. It was close to dawn, and the sky was beginning to turn pale, but in all the jungle around, not one bird sang.

Twenty or 30 minutes' climb brought me to the summit. It took me very little effort to imagine that it was cooler there than in the village, which sweltered down below. I had been right that this was not a peak, but rather a plateau, a sort of terrace, not very broad, and that the jungle crept up to it all around, on the flanks of the hill. I felt free, as though my residence in the village had been a prison. I didn't care that the villagers had tried to fool me; I felt they were somehow children.

As for the tiger ... Constant frustration had exhausted my curiosity and my faith, but almost mechanically I looked for tracks.

The ground was cracked and sandy. In one of the cracks - which by the way were not deep, and which branched into others - I caught a glimpse of a colour. Incredible, it was the same colour as the tiger of my dreams. I wish I had never laid eyes on it. I looked closely. The crevice was full of little stones, all alike, circular, just a few centimetres in diameter and very smooth. Their regularity lent them an air almost of artificiality, as though they were coins, or buttons, or counters in some game.

I bent down, put my hand into the crevice, and picked out some of the stones. I felt a faint quivering. I put the handful of little stones in the right pocket of my jacket, where there were a small pair of scissors and a letter from Allahabad. Those two chance objects have their place in my story.

Back in my hut, I took off my jacket. I lay down and dreamt once more of the tiger. In my dream I took a special note of its colour; it was the colour of the tiger I had dreamt of, and also of the little stones from the plateau. The late-morning sun in my face woke me. I got up. The scissors and the letter made it hard to take the discs out of the pocket; they kept getting in the way. I pulled out a handful, but felt that there were still two or three I had missed. A tickling sensation, the slightest sort of quivering, imparted a soft warmth to my palm. When I opened my hand, I saw that it held 30 or 40 discs; I'd have sworn I'd picked up no more than 10. I left them on the table and turned back to get the rest out of the pocket. I didn't need to count them to see that they had multiplied. I pushed them together into a single pile, and tried to count them out one by one.

That simple operation turned out to be impossible. I would look fixedly at any one of them, pick it up with my thumb and index finger, yet when I had done that, when that one disc was separated from the rest, it would have become many. I checked to see that I didn't have a fever (which I did not), and then I performed the same experiment, over and over again. The obscene miracle kept happening. I felt my feet go clammy and my bowels turn to ice; my knees began to shake. I do not know how much time passed.

Without looking at the discs, I scooped them into a pile and threw them out the window. With a strange feeling of relief, I sensed that their number had dwindled. I firmly closed the door and lay down on my bed. I tried to find the exact position I had lain in before, hoping to persuade myself that all this had been a dream. So as not to think about the discs yet somehow fill the time, I repeated, with slow precision, aloud, the eight definitions and seven axioms of Ethics. I am not sure they helped.

In the midst of these exorcistic exercises, a knock came at my door. Instinctively fearing that I had been overheard talking to myself, I went to the door and opened it.

It was the headman of the village, Bhagwan Dass. For a second his presence seemed to restore me to everyday reality. We stepped outside. I harboured some hope that the discs might have disappeared, but there they were, on the ground. I no longer can be sure how many there were.

The elder looked down at them and then looked at me.

"These stones are not from here. They are stones from up there," he said, in a voice that was not his own.

"That's true," I replied. I added, not without some defiance, that I had found them up on the plateau, but I was immediately ashamed of myself for feeling that I owed anyone an explanation. Bhagwan Dass ignored me; he continued to stare in fascination at the stones. I ordered him to pick them up. He did not move.

I am grieved to admit that I took out my revolver and repeated the order, this time in a somewhat more forceful tone of voice.

"A bullet in the breast is preferable to a blue stone in the hand," stammered Bhagwan Dass.

"You are a coward," said I.

I was, I believe, no less terrified than he, but I closed my eyes and picked up a handful of stones with my left hand. I tucked the pistol in my belt and dropped the stones one by one into the open palm of my right hand. Their number had grown considerably.

I had unwittingly become accustomed to these transformations. They now surprised me less than Bhagwan Dass's cries.

"These are the stones that spawn!" he exclaimed. "There are many of them now, but they can change. Their shape is that of the moon when it is full, and their colour is the blue that we are permitted to see only in our dreams. My father's father spoke the truth when he told men of their power."

The entire village crowded around us.

I felt myself to be the magical possessor of those wondrous objects. To the astonishment of all, I picked up the discs, raised them high, dropped them, scattered them, watched them grow and multiply or mysteriously dwindle.

The villagers huddled together, seized with astonishment and horror. Men forced their wives to look upon the wonder. One woman covered her face with her forearm, another squeezed her eyes shut tight. No one had the courage to touch the discs - save one happy boy-child that played with them. Just at that moment I sensed that all this confusion was profaning the miracle. I gathered the discs, all of them I could, and returned to my hut.

It may be that I have tried to forget the rest of that day, which was the first of a misfortunate series that continues even until now. Whether I tried to forget the day or not I do not remember it. Towards evening, I began to think back on the night before, which had not been a particularly happy one, with a sort of nostalgia; at least it, like so many others, had been filled with my obsession with the tiger. I tried to find solace in that image once charged with power, now trivial. The blue tiger seemed no less innocuous than the Roman's black swan, which was discovered subsequently in Australia.

Rereading what I have written, I see that I have committed a fundamental error. Led astray by the habit of that good or bad literature wrongly called psychology, I have attempted to recover - I don't know why - the linear chronology of my find. Instead, I should have stressed the monstrousness of the discs.

If someone were to tell me that there are unicorns on the moon, I could accept or reject the report, or suspend judgement, but it is something I could imagine. If, on the other hand, I were told that six or seven unicorns on the moon could be three, I would declare a priori that such a thing was impossible. The man who has learnt that three plus one are four doesn't have to go through a proof of that assertion with coins, or dice, or chess pieces, or pencils. He knows it, and that's that. He cannot conceive a different sum. There are mathematicians who say that three plus one is a tautology for four, a different way of saying "four" ... But I, Alexander Craigie, of all men on earth, was fated to discover the only objects that contradict that essential law of the human mind.

At first I was in a sort of agony, fearing that I'd gone mad; since then, I have come to believe that it would have been better had I been merely insane, for my personal hallucinations would be less disturbing than the discovery that the universe can tolerate disorder. If three plus one can be two, or 14, then reason is madness.

During that time, I often dreamt about the stones. The fact that the dream did not recur every night left me a sliver of hope, though a hope that soon turned to terror. The dream was always more or less the same; the beginning heralded the feared end. A spiral staircase - an iron railing and a few iron treads - and then a cellar, or system of cellars, leading through the depths to other stairways that might abruptly end, or suddenly lead into ironworks, locksmith's forges, dungeons, or swamps. At the bottom, in their expected crevice in the earth, the stones, which were also Behemoth, or Leviathan - the creatures of the Scriptures that signify that God is irrational. I would awaken trembling, and there the stones would be, in their box, ready to transform themselves.

The villagers' attitude towards me began to change. I had been touched by something of the divinity that inhered in the stones the villagers had named "blue tigers", but I was also known to have profaned the summit. At any moment of the

night, at any moment of the day, the gods might punish me. The villagers dared not attack me or condemn what I had done, but I noticed that everyone was now dangerously servile. I never again laid eyes on the child who had played with the stones. I feared poison, or a knife in the back. One morning before dawn I slipped out of the village. I sensed that its entire population had been keeping an eye on me, and that my escape would be a relief to them. Since that first morning, no one had ever asked to see the stones.

I returned to Lahore, the handful of discs in my pocket. The familiar environment of my books did not bring the relief I sought. That abominable village, and the jungle, and the jungle's thorny slope rising to the plateau, and on the plateau the little crevices, and within the crevices, the stones - all that, I felt, continued to exist on the planet. My dreams confused and multiplied those dissimilar things. The village was the stones, the jungle was the swamp, the swamp was the jungle.

I shunned the company of my friends. I feared that I would yield to the temptation of showing them that dreadful miracle that undermined humanity's science.

I performed several experiments. I made a cross-shaped incision in one of the discs, put that disc with the others, and shuffled them around; within one or two conversions, I had lost it, though the number of discs had increased. I performed an analogous test with a disc from which I filed a semicircular notch. That disc also disappeared. I punched a hole in the centre of one disc with an awl and tried the test again. That disc disappeared forever. The next day the disc with the cross cut in it reappeared from its journey into the void. What mysterious sort of space was this, which in obedience to inscrutable laws or some inhuman will absorbed the stones and then in time threw an occasional one back again?

The same yearning for order that had created mathematics in the first place made me seek some order in that aberration of mathematics, the insensate stones that propagate themselves. I attempted to find a law within their unpredictable variations. I devoted days and nights alike to establishing statistics on the changes. From that stage of my investigations I still have several notebooks, vainly filled with ciphers. My procedure was this: I would count the stones by eye and write down the figure. Then I would divide them into two handfuls that I would scatter separately on the table. I would count the two totals, note them down, and repeat the operation. This search for order, for a secret design within the rotations, led nowhere. The largest number of stones I counted was 419; the smallest, three. There was a moment when I hoped, or feared, that they would disappear altogether. It took little experimenting to show that one of the discs, isolated from the others, could not multiply or disappear.

Naturally, the four mathematical operations - adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing - were impossible. The stones resisted arithmetic as they did the calculation of probability. Forty discs, divided, might become nine; those nine in turn divided might yield 300. I do not know how much they weighed. I did not have recourse to a scale, but I am sure that their weight was constant, and light. Their colour was always that same blue.

These operations helped save me from madness. As I manipulated the stones that destroyed the science of mathematics, more than once I thought of those Greek stones that were the first ciphers and that had been passed down to so many languages as the word "calculus". Mathematics I told myself, had its origin, and now has its end, in stones. If Pythagoras had worked with these ...

After about a month I realised that there was no way out of the chaos. There lay the unruly discs, there lay the constant temptation to touch them, to feel that tickling sensation once more, to scatter them, to watch them increase or decrease, and to note whether they came out odd or even. I came to fear that they would contaminate other things - particularly the fingers that insisted upon handling them.

For several days I imposed upon myself the private obligation to think continually about the stones, because I knew that forgetting them was possible only for a moment, and that rediscovering my torment would be unbearable.

I did not sleep the night of 10 February. After a walk that led me far into the dawn, I passed through the gates of the mosque of Wazil Khan. It was the hour at which light has not yet revealed the colours of things. There was not a soul in the courtyard. Not knowing why, I plunged my hands into the water of the fountain of ablutions. Inside the mosque, it occurred to me that God and Allah are two names for a single, inconceivable Being, and I prayed aloud that I be freed from my burden. Unmoving, I awaited some reply.

I heard no steps, but a voice, quite close, spoke to me:

"I am here."

A beggar was standing beside me. In the soft light I could make out his turban, his sightless eyes, his sallow skin, his grey beard. He was not very tall.

He put out a hand to me, and said, still softly:

"Alms, oh Protector of the Poor ... "

I put my hands in my pocket,

"I have not a single coin," I replied.

"You have many," was the beggar's answer.

The stones were in my right pocket. I took out one and dropped it into his cupped palm. There was not the slightest sound.

"You must give me all of them," he said. "He who gives not all has given nothing."

I understood, and I said:

" I want you to know that my alms may be a curse."

"Perhaps that gift is the only gift I am permitted to receive. I have sinned."

I dropped all the stones into the concave hand. They fell as though into the bottom of the sea without the slightest whisper.

Then the man spoke again:

"I do not yet know what your gift to me is, but mine to you is an awesome one. You may keep your days and nights, and keep wisdom, habits, the world."

I did not hear the blind beggar's steps, or see him disappear into the dawn.

! This story is from Jorge Luis Borges' `Collected Fictions', translated by Andrew Hurley, published on 5 January by Penguin Press, pounds 25