

The tiger, before it leaps

Martin Spray

TO THE TIGER, you are but meat. To you, if you see it before it springs, the tiger is a beautiful thing, and a terrible one. Do we not live with tigers, whose beauty, when we see it, blinds us to the fact that they are tigers, and may be— indeed are - about to spring? Some who see them say there are more than there used to be. I am inclined to agree.

A few years ago, at the end of October, here in the Forest of Dean, I was in a party that had gathered to celebrate some new works on the Sculpture Trail. Before visiting the sculptures, we had the usual little speeches, and a varied and tasty buffet lunch - *al fresco* but for a canopy of plastic, in case.

It wasn't needed. It might all have been less pleasant - especially for the toddlers, and for the family of one of the artists just flown in from Singapore to spend a few weeks in their alternate English home - if it had been a day of gusts and stair-rods, instead of calm, and cool bright sunshine which made the autumn colours of beech and oak, hawthorn, bramble, and early-turning bracken, so delightful. It made for a cheerful party, and for such comments as: "They couldn't have chosen a better day!", "It's a real Indian Summer!", "It's been too hot for me - but I didn't like that frost last week!", and "We could do with a drop of rain, though....".

I and two or three others had difficulty walking a long way, but the foresters provided a van for our transport to the site. The rest had to walk the half mile.

Looking around the new artwork, I heard only two people mention the tigers that patiently waited. Probably, very few visitors - or locals - notice them: they have been in the Forest a long time, and have become part of the background. That is nothing unusual.

A few days before, it had rained. At home, the grass was wet, the late alpine strawberries washed and ready to eat. But a tiger sat under the trees at the edge of the garden, in a long hollow pretentiously called The Fernery.

The rain had been welcome – though inconvenient. The summer had been dry. Several of the ferns had looked more like piles of sun-dried, strand-line seaweed most of the time since July; and it was no surprise that one or two of them did not wake in the next spring. At the top of the fernery, one limb of the tangle-headed beech began its autumn colour-show early in August: a gorgeous citrine against the tired greens, almost hiding a tiger snoozing among its last crop of leaves.

Back on the Trail, a forester with us remembered that three decades ago several of the prominent large beech in the area did not wake. A tiger had watched them through the glorious summer before - and had sprung.

Yes, he agreed, we were lucky to be in the forest on such a beautiful day, with colouring on the trees that would make this a quietly memorable year. He did not mention tigers - but I saw that he was watching one, watching him, nearby in the shade.

One of the new sculptures includes artful groupings of bamboos – plants familiar to the oriental artist. Planting had been stalled as long as possible: the dryness of the soil would not have been to the plants' liking. When they were eventually planted, they were watered in by a fire-fighting team and tanker. Once established, the forester would be more concerned about them getting out of hand.

As with the insouciantly scampering, I'm-cute-and-I-know-it grey squirrels, a.k.a. tree rats, which in my corner of the woods have dead-topped half the maturing birch and scarred a creditable proportion of trees the foresters actually want, the milder winters might make life easier for such plants as bamboos. Perhaps I should try a few hitherto half-hardy plants I've been daydreaming about growing. Perhaps not.

The theme the artists had worked within interested me: 'the diversity of the Forest of Dean'. They could, even without half-hardies, have had at least as much *bio*-diversity to stimulate them in my garden as in the plantations! After all, we gardeners grow scores of thousands of kinds of plants, many hardly resembling their wild progenitors, while the native British flora can't muster two thousand.

Through the earthworks-and-bamboo sculpture site runs a tiny stream - really just a drainage ditch, since foresters have been draining this part of the Dean for centuries. Actually, when we were there it didn't run, and the children who had been told to put on their wellingtons could probably have come in shoes; but after a downpour a rill enhances the charm of the place. But that day the tiger on its bed was nicely dry.

Predictably, a clear sky let the temperature crash at the end of the afternoon, and there was general regret, back at the car-park, that the cafe was closed. Later, back home, I was sorry not to have left the central heating on.

The next day was wet and chill. Overnight, wind transferred much of the red and foxy-brown, orange and yellow from the trees to the ground, where all becomes earthy-grey. But the day a party gathered to celebrate some new works on the Sculpture Trail was altogether delightful and refreshing: the sort of day when, with late-season butterflies fluttering about the garden, 'getting back to nature' is a joy - and *so obviously* beneficial. The sort of day that puts the world's problems out of mind. The sort of day that lets tigers dream of inheriting the world.

And all-in-all, and notwithstanding the dearth of official sightings, it was the end of quite a good year for tiger-spotting in the Forest. Alas that most of us did not go to look for them.

Do go! You need not visit the Dean. That is only an example. Tigers are all-but ubiquitous. Now, there are new ones to be looked for. I wonder, for instance, about this forest's justly famous bluebells. While our scampering guests from Carolina are cute in their old way, the tigers-in-sheep's-clothing that have maintained the delicious, romantic sheets of spring amethyst have taken a liking to wearing boars' coats. Their project - to plough the forest - is going well.

But overall we might well praise the tigers! These wonderful, care-less, creatures continue to protect so many of our valued, heritage, landscapes.

We owe them gratitude for bracing, sublime moor, butterfly and orchid rich downland, and spring-fresh coppice woods; and for no less charming sweeps of lawn and borders, sleepy yesterday's hamlets and forever-England fields and hedgerows and deep-sunk lanes. But remember: they do so only when they sleep.... Watch carefully.

They can wake, and stretch their limbs, and become the likes of Moor-Fire Tiger, or Teigr Aberfan, or the Band of Flood-Tigers that have been walking abroad recently. Then, *if* we recognise them, we do not like them, and blame *them*.

Perhaps you do not recognise them. Or perhaps you say they are paper tigers. They are not. Perhaps you do not believe these creatures exist. Many don't. Look! Are you certain? Look! They are beautiful creatures, as they laze and doze in our favourite places. And they are beautiful, still, when – Is it not likely? – they leap; yet, they are also terrible.



Tigers drinking water. Attributed to Kano Tanyu Edo period (1613-1867)