

Dreamtigers

By Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986)

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Dedicated to all those who've ever wondered what a howdah is ...

Dreamtigers

When I was a child, I fervently worshiped the tiger—not the spotted tiger from the floating hyacinths of the Parana and the Amazonian wilds, but the striped tiger, Asiatic and royal, that can only be seen up close by men at war sitting atop a howdah on the back of an elephant. I used to spend hours in front of the cages at the zoo; I admired the huge encyclopedias and the natural history books just for the splendor of their tigers (and while I can hardly remember the face or the smile of a woman, I can still remember those images).

My childhood ended—the tigers and my passion for them faded away—but they are still in my dreams. They continue to thrive in that sunken, hazy realm and so while I sleep, some dream will lure me and I will suddenly realize that I'm dreaming. Then I think, "This is a dream, a pure invention of my will, and since I have unlimited power I will make a tiger appear."

Oh, what incompetence! My dreams are never able to make the wild animal I long for appear. Although the tiger does appear, it's either stuffed or feeble, or deformed, or of an unacceptable size, or far too fleeting, or a bit too much like a dog or a bird.