

Here Come the Tigers

James Thurber

IT WAS AFTER midnight and I had got up to turn off the radio and go to bed when a baritone began to sing “Bye-Bye, Blackbird” with the rueful reverence the song deserves. I sat down again, and I was lost. If I had shut off the radio, turned out the lights, and locked the door, Jordan and Hayes would have driven up to a dark house and gone away, or if they had hammered on the door, I would have let them hammer till they got discouraged and drove off. The lights were on, though, and the door was unlocked. The tires of a car swashed over the gravel of the driveway and came to a sudden, complaining stop. My door opened and they tumbled in without knocking, like a pair of comics taking an encore. I turned off the radio and reached for the light switch.

“Hold!” Jordan cried. “Stay that naughty hand!”

I took my hand off the switch. “I’m tired,” I said, “and Alice is asleep.”

“Sleep! Sleep—on a wild night of wild discovery!” Jordan moaned. He went over to the bar in a corner of the living room and began mixing a bourbon-and-soda. Hayes took Jordan’s place at the bar when his companion flopped into a chair and swung one leg over an arm. “We have discovered a new dimension of meaning,” Jordan said. He took a great gulp of his drink. “And a new plane of beauty.”

“You want a drink?” Hayes asked me.

“It’s late,” I said, “and I’m tired.”

Jordan snorted, choked on his whiskey, and coughed for a full minute. “The man wants torpor,” he spluttered finally. “On a night like this, the man wants torpor.”

“Torpor is a good word,” Hayes said. He sat on the arm of a chair. “Shall we take it apart for him?”

“You guys are stiff,” I said.

Jordan frowned, finished his drink, and went back to the bar. “Stiff is better,” he said. “I think stiff is probably perfect. Let me get at it.” He dropped into the chair again, with a new highball.

I stared at the ceiling. If I didn’t humor them, they might go away.

“We’re starting too high,” Jordan said. “We’re the hell too high. He won’t get it. Look at him.”

“Nuts,” I said coldly.

“Let me unwrap stiff for you,” Jordan said. “God knows that ought to be simple enough. Listen to this. It’s perfect. Stiff, tiff, fists, fits.”

“He means that the mood and tone and color of a word are echoed in its component parts,” Hayes said. “Tiff is argument, fist is fight, fits—fits—”

“Don’t make it glare,” Jordan said. “You’re making it glare. Let him feel it. You got to feel it.”

“Look—” I began wanly.

Jordan regarded me sorrowfully and shook his head. “He’s going to compare it to Joyce or Dada or Gertrude Stein,” he said. “He is an enemy of the new dimension. Oh, no, he can’t be,” he added. “Not in *this* house, he can’t be.” He had some trouble getting up but he made the bar.

“It’s *his* house,” Hayes said.

I was glad he was soberer than Jordan, who after a moment of deep thought said, “Last place in the world a man should make an ass of himself. Host, you know, and all that.”

“Where have you guys been?” I asked.

Jordan looked at Hayes and shrugged, splashing a dollop of his new drink on the carpet. “We have been in a new dimension of meaning and beauty,” he said, “but I doubt if you could understand it.”

“Well, what the hell is it?” I demanded. I went to the bar and poured myself a short drink. “Are you going to crawl around it all night, or are you going coming out with it?”

“Tell him the quatrain,” Jordan said. “I want him to hear the quatrain.”

Hayes studied the floor for awhile. Then he recited the quatrain:

“There are lips in pistol
And mist in times,
Cats in crystal,
And mice in chimes.”

I stared coldly at Jordan’s transfigured face. “Is this the spearhead of the New Beauty?” I asked.

Jordan globbered his drink down, ran his hand through his hair, and glared at me demoniacally. “Shows what What’s-his-name of ‘Christabel’ and Keats of ‘Eve of St. Agnes’ could have done if the goddam fairy casements had opened on this lovely dimension!” he shouted.

“Coleridge,” Hayes said. He was nursing his drink along, and seemed to be getting sober.

Jordan went to the bar and slobbered out more bourbon. “Well?” he demanded, but he didn’t wait for me to answer. “We were unlocking animals from almost every word you can think of when we got to cats in crystal and mice in chimes. Tell him some of ’em, Tom. You got ’em all written down.”

Hayes put his drink on the floor and pulled a piece of folded cardboard out of his pocket. I saw that it was a dinner menu with pencil scribbles on the back. “There’s the wolf in flower, the gander in danger, and the frog in forget,” he said. “There’s the emu in summer, the ant in autumn, the wren in winter, and the pig in spring.” He turned the cardboard upside down and scowled at it. “There’s the gnu in jungle,” he went on, “the swan in answer, and the toad in toward.” He put the menu down, and I thought he looked a little unhappy, as if the whiskey and the spell of the new dimension were wearing off at the same time.

Jordan kept snapping his fingers, trying to remember other beasts in other words.

“Try to find the tiger in a six-letter word, Hayes said to me. It isn’t easy. There are three six-letter words with tiger, but it isn’t easy.”

“It’s not a game, it’s more than a game,” Jordan said severely. “Let’s not get back to the game.”

“It began as a game,” Hayes said to me. “It’s an old word game. You try to see how many words you can make out of another word.”

“We played it a million times before,” Jordan said, “but tonight, for the first time, I see what we got, like Emily What’s-her-name hearing the river in the trees. You might hear the wind in the trees all your life and never hear the river. Give me that thing, Tom.” He reached out and took the menu from Hayes, and began turning it slowly in his big hands. The writing on the back apparently ran in all directions. He sighed dolefully and handed it back to Hayes. “There’s practically a sentence in woman,” he said. “It’s perfect in mood and tone. In mood and tone it’s practically perfect. See if you can find the sentence, Tom.”

Hayes padded away an incipient yawn. “Woman: moan, now won wan man,” he chanted, and then the yawn got the best of him.

“What’d I say it had in it, Tom?”

Hayes consulted the back of the menu. “The thunder of Genesis,” he announced finally, “it says here.”

“It’s practically Biblical,” Jordan said, “with only five letters.” He went to the bar again. “Who wants a drink?” he asked. Neither of us said anything. Hayes had slumped a little in his chair. I leaned back, gazed at the ceiling, and hunted the tiger. For the next five minutes, I heard the sound of Jordan’s voice but I didn’t take in the sense. I found the roach in orchard, the horse in shore, the owl in wobble, the stag in ghastly, and the bear and zebra in brazen, but no glimmer of a tiger anywhere.

“It’s like little boxes, one inside each other,” Jordan was saying when I came out of my own jungle of words. “You lift out concentric meanings of practically identical mood and tone. Yet people have let the component parts of words go for a thousand years. They lose the depth and the roundness and the whole quality.” He turned to Hayes. “Take pistol apart for Jim,” he begged. “Take pistol apart.” I got up and went to the bar and poured out a stiff rye. “Go ahead,” I said.

“It kind of rips and squirts and goes all to hell, the way pistol should,” Jordan said by way of foreword.

“Shoot,” I said.

“No gags,” Jordan implored me. “For God sake, no gags.”

“Pistol,” Hayes began. “Slip, spit, split, spilt, spoil, spoilt, slop, slot, tips, tops, spots, pots, stop.”

“You see what I mean?” Jordan asked. I visualized the word and studied it for awhile.

“He left out oils and soil,” I said finally, “and what are Lois and silo doing in pistol?”

Jordan turned to Hayes, who had shut his eyes. “Didn’t I tell you we’d be up against that?” He demanded. “What’d I say we’d be up against, Tom?”

“The obscurantism of the explicit,” Hayes brought out after frowning over it.

“That’s it! That’s what I said we’d be up against, like in chalice.”

Hayes decided to try another drink, and he went over and poured himself a short one. “You get lace and hail and ice and Alice in chalice,” he said, “but you got lice to account for.”

“So what?” Said Jordan. “So what the hell?” He spread his hands.

“What about the rats in crystal, with the cats?” I asked.

“Jordan hasn’t got the technic and ethic worked out yet,” Hayes told me.

“I can handle the rats,” Jordan said.

“And the salt and the slat and the cyst and the cart?” I asked.

“Yeh, and the star and the cry and the satyr. They all mix into crystal.”

Hayes yawned openly. He was drinking slowly. “It seems a little thin, somehow,” he said. “I mean the whole thing, in times like these.”

“What does?” Jordan stared at him blankly.

I saved an argument by suddenly running across Roget in forget. “If there were no forget,” I said to Jordan, “it would not be necessary to create Roget.”

“I don’t think you get the idea,” he said. “I don’t think he gets the idea, Tom. What was it I said earlier this evening? I said, ‘Tom, he’ll never get it in a million years.’ I said, ‘Tom, the obscurantism of the explicit is what’s going to louse up this lovely thing.’ Didn’t I say that, Tom?”

“Yes,” Hayes said, tapping another yawn.

“Do hotels for him, Tom. Maybe that’ll give him the idea.”

“Hotels,” Hayes read. “Sot, lost, hose, stole, shoe. Hotel so hot she shot host. . . . I’m tired.” He sagged in his chair.

“A lost mood, see?” Jordan tried to express it with a gesture of his hands. “You got to feel it like a child. Do you feel it?”

“I certainly do,” I said.

“What are you tired for, Tom?” Jordan gave his friend a worried glance.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It just seems a little thin, somehow.”

“What does?”

“Mice in chimes. It seems a little thin.”

“What’s he talking about?” Jordan asked me.

“I mean when you get to thinking of the hare twisting in the frozen grass and the mastiff bitch in the moonshine cold,” Hayes said.

“What the *hell’s* he talking about?” Jordan almost wailed.

“What’s-his-name and Keats,” I said.

Jordan made a small despairing gesture. "Do phrase," he pleaded.

"Oh, for God sake!" Hayes got up and went to the radio.

"Don't wake Alice," I said.

"Do phrase and then we'll get the hell out," Jordan said.

"Do phrase," I insisted quickly.

"Explain about it first in its own words," Jordan said. "You know."

"O.K., O.K." Hayes sighed and sat down. "You don't have to dwell on the parse phase, the sharp rasp, the rape shape," he droned.

"Now show him where Tenniel and What's-his-name, the *douanier*, come in," Jordan said eagerly.

"In the apes and the asp and the hares," Hayes went on. "In the peas and the pears and the tea, in the serif and the harp."

Jordan's eyes glowed, like a cat's in a barn. "Tenniel and What's-his-name, the *douanier*, he said in a throaty voice."

"Come on, let's go, I got to go," Hayes said, getting up.

"You didn't have a hat," I told him.

"Take the oranges and gibbons of What's-his-name," Jordan went on, in a rapt croak.

"Rousseau, for God sake," Hayes said. "Come on."

Jordan got to his feet. His eyes moved slowly around the room.

"You didn't have a hat," Hayes said. "Come on."

He got Jordan just outside the living room door. Four more steps would have taken them through the hall to the front door.

"Where do you get the tea in phrase?" I asked suddenly. "There isn't any 't' in phrase."

Jordan turned and loped back to his chair and sat down hard, like a tired setter. "A posset for the highway!" he bawled.

"You asked for this," Hayes told me wearily.

"Mix him a short one," I said.

Hayes went slowly back into the living room and I closed the door behind him. I knew Alice was standing at the head of the stairs in the dark. "What *is* it?" she whispered.

"A posset for the highway," I told her.

"Jink Jordan? Oh, no!" She went back to her room.

I lingered in the hall, hoping they would come out, but Jordan's voice was loud and argumentative. "Will you stop saying it's thin, for God sake?" he shouted.

"All right, all right, it's exiguous, then," Hayes said.

"It's exiguous because it's undeveloped, that's why," Jordan replied. "You can't develop a thing like this in one night."

I went back into the room and shut the door behind me. Jordan was sitting in the chair I had been in, pulling some papers out of his inside coat pocket.

"Put that stuff away," Hayes commanded him sharply.

"Just a second," Jordan said. "I knew we'd left something out. How in the hell could you let me leave Blake out?" He began to pour over a pencilled scrawl on the back of a typewritten page. "We proved Blake had it," he said loudly. "We proved Blake knew all about it, and here it is!"

Hayes grabbed the sheet of paper away from him. "If I read it, will you get up and go home?" he asked. "And don't drink that so fast."

"Read it," Jordan said, waving his glass. "Wait a minute!" He pointed a finger at me. "How many tigers are there in—what's the line, Tom?"

"Tiger! Tiger! burning bright in the forests of the night," Tom recited.

"One tiger," I said. "How many Toms are there in 'Tom, Tom, the piper's son'?"

Jordan set his drink down and waved his arms despairingly. "Journalist!" He said bleakly.

“This is kind of interesting,” Hayes said hurriedly. “There are actually five tigers in the first two lines of the poem—that is, the necessary letters are repeated often enough to spell the word five times, three times in addition to ‘tiger, tiger,’ with a couple of ‘t’s and an ‘i’ left over.”

Jordan finished his drink in a gulp. “Nursery rhymes!” he said bitterly.

“In those two lines,” Hayes cut in, “Blake used only twelve letters of the alphabet, so Jink thinks he was on to the new dimension.”

“Thinks!” Jordan cried.

“Wordsworth, who was not on to it,” Hayes continued, “used nineteen letters in ‘She dwelt among the untrodden ways, beside the springs of Dove.’”

Jordan shook his head at me slowly. “It’ll take me ten years to work this thing out,” he snarled, “and you giggle at it like a girl. Tell him about Planters Peanuts, Tom.”

Hayes handed the sheet of paper back to Jordan and ran his hand over his forehead. “There are nine letters in Planters Peanuts, or only three fewer than Blake used in those two lines. Come on, let’s go.”

“One more, maybe?” Jordan said, handing out his glass.

“I’m going,” Hayes snapped. “I’ll wait just two minutes for you in the car.” He walked over and opened the door, closed it behind him, went out the front door, got in the car, and slammed the car door shut.

“There goes one of the sweetest characters in the whole world,” Jordan said.

I started turning out the table lamps, and Jordan got to his feet. “So long, Jink,” I said. He walked slowly to the door, opened it, and said over his shoulder, “Not in a million years.” The only light left on now was the one in the hall. Jordan closed the front door after him with great care. After a moment, the engine started and the car drove off.

Half an hour later, in bed, I had almost dropped off when, in the narrow strip of lucidity between the bright compound of consciousness and the dark jungle of sleep, I remembered, with a start like a gunshot, the tiger in the three six letter words. I tried all the permutations I could think of, using one consonant after another, from “b” to “z”. I couldn’t fit the tiger into any six-letter word except tigers, and that obviously didn’t count. I began all over again: tibger, bitger, grebit, trebig, briget, ticger, grecit, gercit, tidger, gertid, dregit.

The dawn was fluttering at the window when I finally found the three words, one after another, with tiger in them.

Alice woke up. “Haven’t you been to sleep *yet?*” she asked.

“Gaiter, goiter, aigret,” I said. “Avoid the consonants. It’s as simple as that.”

“Go to sleep,” she said.

I managed it finally. It wasn’t easy.

(AUTHOR’S NOTE: shortly after the foregoing story appeared in *The New Yorker* the editors received and passed on to me a letter written by Mr. George Rose Smith, an eminent tiger hunter of Little Rock, Arkansas. Mr. Smith’s letter went in part as follows: “In James Thurber’s recent story, *Here Come the Tigers*, his friends assured him that there are three six-letter words containing the letters t-i-g-e-r. Thurber spent a sleepless night in tracking down the tigers in gaiter, goiter and aigret, and apparently concluded that he had exhausted the possibilities . . . Disturbed by the thought that the tiger is as near to extinction as Thurber intimates, I sent two native beaters through the Websterian veldts and quickly bagged the limit of ten.

“The girt group of words is infested with the beasts, both girted and begirt being perfectly good usage. For some reason engirt is branded as obsolete, though it happens that we in the South have occasion to use it almost daily. The prefix re- conceals two fine tigers, in regilt and regift. In the latter the prefix is used in the sense of ‘back to an original or former position,’ so that regift is closely allied to the familiar concept of an Indian giver . . .

“The suffix -er is also good for two tigers. Tigger is an attractive word, which the lexicographer (probably

late for a date) hurriedly defines as ‘one who tigs.’ Tig itself means to run about, as cattle pestered by flies. Pestered by tigers is doubtless historically correct, but such tiggin doesn’t become habitual. Our lexicographer spent more time on tinger, defining it as ‘one who, or that which tinges.’ We do not seem to have any word for one who, or even that which, tings. Perhaps the best choice would be ting-er, the hyphen giving a subtle indication of the tiger’s stripes. The definition of gitter, a foreign word for a kind of grating, already carries this connotation of straight lines.

“A rare tiger is preserved in the Scotch word erting, which means urging on—a derivation from a root meaning to tease or provoke. This ancient custom of teasing or provoking tigers, while not mentioned in modern histories of Scotland, was probably a tribal method of demonstrating bravery.

“Thurber and his companions were interested in finding animals in odd places, as the mice in chimneys and the cats in crystal, but they completely overlooked the tiger in a six-letter animal, the common or garden variety of grivet. As every schoolboy knows, the grivet is an intelligent and docile monkey, having a dull olive-green back. . . .”)