

## Tossing Baby to the Tiger

The housecat is the tiger's closest relative. The tiger's most distant relative is the child's father. The child is the housecat's best friend. The housecat is the most distant relative of the child's mother. The zoo is related to nothing living.

This is not to say that there is nothing living at the zoo. Everyone knows the zoo contains living things. It confines them, it preserves them, it displays them. This is what it is for. But it is not related to anything living in the way that the tiger is related to the housecat, or the mother and father and child to each other.

The contention, the premise, the supposition that the tiger is related to the father, this is more open to question. Likewise regarding the relation of the mother to the housecat. That the child and the housecat are best of friends is evident. Look at the two of them, lolling and playing together in the child's playpen. The child crawls right over the housecat—and by now the child weighs more than the cat—and the housecat could not be happier. Claws stay in their sheaths. Fangs are not displayed. Purring can be heard.

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The zoo is a dead place to be filled with so many living things. But every living thing in it is dead. Don't think they don't know it. Look at the eagles in their aviary. It's a large aviary, open to the sun and sky, with only a heavy mesh between the birds and their freedom. The eagles sit hunched on the branches of their dead trees, watching sparrows and swallows flit by on the other side of the mesh.

Look at the cheetahs in their run long and narrow, surrounded by high, smooth walls no cheetah could ever scale. The cheetahs don't even look up anymore, to see the people looking down on them. They just pace back and forth, back and forth, testing the insurmountable limits of their small home.

Look at the wolves in their den, copulating and socializing and raising their young. They don't care that they're in a zoo. Anyplace where they're safe from being hunted down and exterminated is fine by them. It's almost the same for the Siberian

tigers, though they don't have the careless joys the wolves share. The Siberian tigers have the shocked looks in their eyes of the few who have survived and don't know how it all could have come to this.

The meerkats, two doors down from the Siberian tigers, stand and peer all around.

The polar bears have mood swings. Sometimes they're fine, the polar bears, eating fish and tossing toys around their pool. Other times, they eye the people watching them and think of seals. The seals are more like the wolves, and are happy to be safe from polar bears and skull-crushing clubs. It seems the seals could be happy all day with swimming and sliding and barking and eating. They are disgusting. One wishes they would rise in revolt, or turn rabid. A little more anger and a little less sullenness on the part of all the animals contained by the zoo would be refreshing. The Bengal tiger, pacing his den, sometimes lets out a roar, but it's difficult to tell if anger is any longer a part of his vocabulary. For the real anger at the zoo, look to the gorillas, the chimps and the monkeys. The monkeys fear nothing, and love nothing better than screaming at the people. The chimps, the gorillas, the orangutans -- all the apes smolder in their enclosures, watching the people who watch them, waiting for the moment to throw themselves at the plexiglass shields the people watch them through, to see the people scramble backwards in fear, hear their shrieks and the wails of the frightened children.

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When the child was a baby, he was Rocket-Baby. The housecat watched him fly. Rocket-Baby's motor was the child's father, who also watched him fly, and who barely let go when Rocket-Baby reached apogee. Rocket-Baby floated free for just a moment below the living-room ceiling, to be caught again by the father on re-entry, for a safe, though rather rapid, descent to the carpet. Bunny-suited feet barely touching carpet a moment, Rocket-Baby was again propelled upwards; time and again, flying and falling. The child's father grinned and said *Wheee! It's Rocket-Baby!*

The housecat, crouching by the playpen, watched. Rocket-Baby looked concerned, even terrified, but did not cry. The child's mother was in another room.

The child's mother came into this room. *What are you doing?* she said to the child's father as he caught Rocket-Baby again.

*We're playing Rocket-Baby!* the child's father said. He turned to the child's mother and grinned. He held the child in his arms.

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The housecat watched out the front window of the house. The cat's distant cousin, removed uncountable times, was carrying her child to the car, where the tiger's most distant relative was placing the stroller, folded, into the trunk. The family was going to the zoo. The housecat, knowing, as all cats know, only that which is important, had no way of knowing this.

At the zoo the Bengal tiger paced. Back and forth. Back and forth. The monkeys screamed. The wolves went into heat. The seals had unseemly fun. On the breeze, the polar bears caught the scent of the seals, were distracted, morose. An orangutan slapped at the plexiglass separating it from squealing children. Meerkats stood on their haunches and scanned for danger, not realizing it was too late.

The Bengal tiger paced, roared a huge roar. Sparrows sprinted skyward at the sudden sound, wings fluttering.

The father and mother took turns wheeling the child in the stroller as they made their way through the zoo. They looked at all the animals, including those as yet unmentioned, such as the elephant, which later would go mad and kill one of its handlers and have to be put down. At the Bengal tiger den, the mother and father stopped to watch the tiger pace, beyond the railing and far below. The father bent down to the stroller, unsnapped the child's safety belts, and lifted the child up for a better view.

*See the tiger?* the child's father said. He leaned over the railing at the edge of the den, so the child would have a better view. The tiger paced the floor of his den. He roared.

*Oooo!* the child's father said. *Big, scary tiger. See the big, scary tiger? I bet a big, scary tiger like that could eat you up in just one bite.*

*Don't you dare!* the child's mother said, grabbing for the child. The tiger roared. A monkey screamed. The meerkats stood, peering all around.