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Transcendence through Amber Eyes

EVER SINCE I CAN REMEMBER, I have always felt a connection with tigers. It is hard to explain this connection, except to say that it is a profoundly surreal feeling I get when gazing into a tiger's eyes and sense its strength, otherworldliness, and plight to survive in today's world. Now don't get me wrong; I also have a healthy fear of this formidable predator and would never try to bear hug or wrestle one. I value my life and limbs too much. That being said, just to be in the presence of such a beautiful, mystical and dangerous animal as the tiger takes me to a whole other place that seems to transcend space and time. Perhaps I was a tiger in a past life? Hard to say. Whatever this pull, this attraction, it is what led me here to my coveted window seat at my local zoo's tiger exhibit and mere inches away from the massive beast.

Just on the other side of the huge exhibit window, a wall of ivory and black striped underbelly fur fills my gaze, rising and falling at a steady, languid pace. Here lies the majestic sleeping beast with all of his killing tools, the searing claws, gnashing canines, bone-crushing limbs, and powerful, muscular form, all taking respite from the afternoon heat in the cool shade of a hollowed out cave. As I watch intently, the tiger's deep slumber begins to permeate the window and seep into every waking bone of my body. It is pointless to resist; I succumb willingly to his power. All tension and resistance slowly starts to melt away as a profound heaviness takes over my feet, then legs, continuing up to my torso, arms, hands, shoulders, neck, face and head. My eyelids are the last to surrender, at first resisting the temptation to close and lose sight of the mesmerizing creature before them, soon falling to a half-open resting position, as if sleeping with my eyes open.

While my body rests, my mind wanders. How did I get here? How did I get so fortunate as to discover this secret portal into the tiger world? Whatever it was that led me to this spot I am grateful, even though where I sit is not the most comfortable of perches: rough, uneven concrete and a stone platform designed more for looks than comfort. But I'm not thinking about the comfort level of my seating choice at the moment. All I am focused on right now is the very large apex predator on the other side of the window. Filling in every inch of his rather large den by the window, this heaving blanket of orange and black fur ebbs and flows like waves on a shore, melting into the land beneath it and becoming one with it.

A sudden rustling in the distance prompts the tiger's ears to prick up. The skull of this mountainous mass raises up just enough to determine the source of the sound while two piercing amber eyes flash open to reveal their alertness. Just a stone's throw away, a foraging songbird has infiltrated the inner sanctum for a brief moment to grab a quick bite and then vacate as fast as it came. The brief interruption is soon forgotten as the massive head flops back down in exasperation. Releasing a guttural sigh, the tiger resumes his slumber.

After several minutes of quiet uninterrupted bliss, my concentration is broken by the tramping of tiny feet darting about from one viewing area to the next, followed by the repeated shouting of kids to their parents,

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"There it is!" and "Oh, I see him!" as they work themselves into a frenzy. I am quick to block out the din of these tiny, hyper voices and soon their clamor fades into a muffled existence as I become more and more drawn back into the world of this majestic sleeping god. My initial trepidation of being so close to a tiger with nothing more than a thin layer of glass between us has given way to a sense of calm that washes over me now. In my meditative state, the languid pace of the tiger's breathing is matched with my own, and with each slow inhale and exhale I descend further into oneness with the creature. Everyone and everything fades away into the background until it is only me and him.

In the distance a lone bell begins to chime; an unremarkable, repetitive tone that seems to keep pace with each tiger breath. At first melding into the background like a sound bath to accompany my mind body experience, it now grows louder with each beat, as if signaling the end to my meditation session and impelling me to rejoin the conscious world around me. Thoughtfully and with purpose, I rise to stand and prepare to leave the animal world with a renewed sense of calm. As I take one last glance at my entrancing meditation partner, I am overcome by a feeling of honor and privilege that this greatly revered creature has allowed me to enter his mystical world, if only for a fleeting moment.