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from Tiger Country

Stephen Bodio

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...when I got back I showed the pictures to my karate instructor. He's a mean old Korean, about sixty-five, head like a bowling ball...anyway he looked at the mountains and said, "Are tigers here?"

"No sir," I said. "We got deer and elk and black bear and mountain lion. Used to have wolves, and jaguar, and bigger bears. No tigers."

He looked at me like I was a little slow. "Looks like tiger country to me."

—excerpt from a letter

Prologue

Think of a dry plateau the size of Connecticut...maybe a little bigger, with an average height above sea level of, oh, seven thousand feet. That's right—the flat ground is "higher" than Vermont's mountains. Brown plains, nappy and dry like a lion-colored pool table.

Add the following: not just a few but many mountain chains, most north-south; one going more like east-west; all reaching above nine and some ten thousand feet, blue with pine and fir and spruce. No ponds or lakes, natural ones anyway, but lots of snow in the winter, especially above eight thousand feet. Vertical weather. A day-night temperature difference of forty degrees, winter and summer.

People never made much impact here. The paved roads run around the edges; only one goes "through" so to speak, and it's

two cars wide and twisty as a snake. There are two thousand people on the plateau today, more or less, most of them in towns where the only pavement is the road through.

The size of western land, and the distance you can see across it, baffles by its apparent openness. East of the Mississippi you can drive almost anywhere on paved roads and find signs of human occupation anywhere you go. You bring these assumptions west as surely as the first European settlers brought theirs. One of the hardest preconceptions to throw off is that, because you've seen the west from the interstate, you've seen the west. That forty-mile stretch between exits may be forty miles without a single paved crossing; or, the interstate exit itself may give out on to a dirt ranch road. It may be one hundred miles at right angles to that exit before you hit a paved crossing. What you've just defined by its edges is a block bigger than Rhode Island or Delaware, with no pavement in it.

The interior of this block is likely to be rugged, impassable, and, except in Texas, owned by the federal government, a.k.a. you and me. Any place where there are real mountains is likely to include National Forest; places without forest will be owned by the Bureau of Land Management; around the edges of these blocks, or mixing inextricably with them, are the ranches. There are more than a few big ranches, big because it's so dry. In most of the west ranchers own bottomlands and springs. But in order to have enough year-round pasture to make a living, they lease vast tracts of BLM and Forest Service land. Nobody here is getting rich.

This part of New Mexico is still the real West. It's a long way from Santa Fe and Taos, from tourists and New Age entrepreneurs and crystal miracles, from silver 'n' turquoise everything and

coyotes with bandannas and Neo-Native American art. It's a long dry drive to the nearest ski slope, Mercedes Benz, or Arab horse.

It's a long way from most regular western history, too. It's a five-hour drive over mountains to the high plains and all their romantic ghosts — Comanche, buffalo, lobo wolf. It's the same distance to Four Corners and the Navajo nation. It's a fair drive even to White Sands and its interesting legacy of stolen ranches, Oppenheimer, and the Bomb. It's a whole nation away from the Spanish land-grant north, that strange mix of Europe and America, with its sheep and Penitentes and trout streams and little churches with peaked tin roofs.

Most of its history is prehistory: Pleistocene, the Old Ones, the Anasazi (a Navajo name — we don't know what they called themselves), were here for a good part of their cryptic history, and left one famous ruin and hundreds of smaller ones, many still undisturbed.

The Apaches followed. For a while they were invincible in these, their woods and mountains. The horse soldiers under General Crook finally beat them with superior numbers and strategy; the soldiers held the waterholes and harassed the Indians down into Mexico. Crook never beat them on tactics, though.

The miners flourished after the Apaches. They made a lot of holes and took away various things that were useful to them. But, except for the open copper pit at Santa Rita, way down south, and a bunch of what look like caves, the miners' traces are fading faster than the Anasazis'.

Finally, there were the ranchers. They were good tough men and women, and we should not dignify the craven attacks on them that are part of the historical moment's required attitudes. But all of the "Old" Spanish and New Anglo alike were of Euro-

pean descent, and they did exactly what their ancestors had done: they fought what they thought was a necessary war against their competitors, animal and human.

A few held on. Black bears, some black and shiny, others the color of Irish setters, adapt pretty well to humans, especially by *their* standards. They raid beehives and garbage cans and climb telephone poles when they get confused. They are wonderful animals, but they often act more like pretty pigs or giant raccoons than Real Bears. The Plains tribes knew the difference.

And there are cougars, still. (You should prefer that name to lion. It's American; besides, there's nothing lion-like about them.) Deer are their fodder, and we still have plenty of deer. Besides, the cougars are invisible.

And, of course, coyotes are everywhere. They are smart and sophisticated, have a sense of humor and know what to fear. They are so little threat to cattle that cowmen, as opposed to sheepmen —"woolgrowers" they call them now, which says something about domestic sheep as animals—treat coyotes with a mixture of affection and contempt, at least when they don't feel a need to test their rifles. Besides, coyotes can live on juniper berries and mice when the going gets tough.

But the real competitors are gone, or changed beyond recognition. The Apaches have achieved at least one small victory: on their reservations they now charge rich white men and Japanese industrialists the price of a small car to shoot carefully-nurtured and pre-spotted bull elk, a ritual that these clients honestly think is hunting rather than a sort of decadent agriculture.

The Real Bears—Plains Indian for grizzly—and the real wolves, and the "tiger"—what the Mexicans call the jaguar—are just gone. Europeans never did get along with wolves and brown bears, for

good reason. In our own Dream Time, bears competed with us for housing and meat, and wolves lived lives so much like ours that we made up stories of their exchanging shapes with us. When we began living in one place and keeping prey as our property, the war began in earnest. We brought it across the ocean with us, north across the Big River, west across the Plains. Wolves ran hit-and-run guerilla strikes on us, just like the Apaches did. Contemporary accounts, trying hard to insult both tribes, are full of comparisons.

The bears, though they didn't constantly run off young stock the way the wolves did, were even more frightening. A grizzly could, and would, kill a human. In the fall, when winter sharpened their appetites, they'd raid down out of their mountain fortresses like goblin kings, like Grendel. A big one could carry off a full grown longhorn steer if that were his notion. If you chased him with hounds, he'd run 'til you couldn't hear the dogs, then turn and kill them all. If you caught up with him on horseback, he might charge faster than the horse could run. If you dismounted to shoot, there was no guarantee that a puny nineteenth-century black powder load would so much as slow the bear down before he mashed you to a pulp.

The pioneer stockmen were not people who expected, asked, or gave quarter. They hunted down every grizzly and wolf they could find, though "hunted" has a sporting connotation that I doubt many of these warriors ever felt. Government agents like Ben Lilly made their cause a religious crusade against servants of the Devil; Lilly considered defenders of predators to be heretics. Empathy is a grace rarely granted to foot soldiers.

One government agent had a change of heart. Aldo Leopold himself, patron saint of the modern conservation movement, was

once a hired gun, an ace predator-controller. But right here in the heart of this country he saw certain things in a dying wolf's eyes, and it changed him. When they killed the last grizzly on Escudilla he dared to see and speak the heretical truth: that it was only a mountain now.

The last Real Bear in the southwestern United States held on for a few more years; his skin came out of the high Magdalenas on the plateau's eastern edge in 1930, on the back of a burro. The last jaguar in New Mexico died in the snows of the Continental Divide here in 1903, victim of an alarmed ranch wife with a bucket of poisoned milk. The wolves, with their social intelligence, hung on longer. Their bands retreated across the Rio Grande into Old Mexico, as the Apaches did before them.The government mopped up the survivors with traps and poison in a campaign that lasted until the sixties. And don't think that such methods weren't used against wild humans, in crueler or at least less sentimental times; or aren't elsewhere, today....

The country still does look real, though.