

Caged (Original)

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One evening in April, my family and I found ourselves in a cage in the middle of a two-hectare forest with a full grown tiger circling us, growling hungrily as we cowered behind bars.

My father wanted us to feel what it was like to see wildlife up close, thus buying us tickets to a zoo-like attraction in the Philippines. The Tiger Safari of the tourist attraction handled animal viewing differently. Instead of observing tigers and taking pictures of them from their glassed containers or barred enclosures, there were specially designed Safari jeeps that people rode in that were then entered to a simulated natural habitat of the animals. So instead of confining and protecting them from us, it was the other way around; we were the ones of in cages.

"We're in their territory," the tour-guide explained to us as he drove the jeep inside the enclosed terrain. "Don't provoke them. You're safe inside the jeep."

Me along with other tourists held our breaths as two monstrous beasts approached our vehicle. They moved slowly, curious whether the tour-guide had come to feed them or not. When they realized that he had no food prepared for them, the first tiger stalked away, running at full speed in the opposite direction. The one that came with it stayed, looking at the vehicle as if its new toy. Then without warning, it slammed its paw and pushed its claws against the spaces in between the metal bars of the jeep, just inches from my face.

I wasn't afraid; not even as the tour-guide's voice wavered in an attempt to calm the other tourists, not even when my own mother, panicked, pulled me away from the tiger's paw. There was no fear, only shame. The tiger and I were watching each other, and it dawned to me that this is what animals feel when they are greeted by cameras and watched by visitors. They felt trapped, watched, and used.

The tiger retracted its paws eventually and walked away, bored.

My mind had flashed back to every zoo I visited, every cage with an exotic animal I've

watched, and every creature I've snapped a photo of just because I felt it deemed worthy of my attention. I felt ashamed of my kind, ashamed of what we have done to animals.

The world has made it unsafe for the being it was made for. Looking out and living in this earth today; my idea of nature was paved with cement and buildings, of cars and traffic lights, and of smoke and loose trash bags. What have we done to nature? Why have we trapped them in cages and act as if this is the way to protect them?

I was back in the jeep, and the tour-guide had maneuvered the vehicle back to the entrance. I looked at every animal pass by and took in the strength of their legs, the hunger in their eyes, and even the wings behind their backs. They're made for the earth. They're made for trees, for lands, for mountains, and for oceans. So why is that it is only us that live our lives in control of our own?

The Philippines houses 52,177 species and many of these biological beings are endangered because of the abuse of the country's natural resources. In the last 500 years, the country has witnessed the devastation of over 93% of its forests' cover. A study by the Philippine Congress said that by 2036 there would be no forests left in the Philippines unless reforestation is implemented. Every single day, my country -among other countries- destroy homes of animals. And then we find them in cages and containers... because we think this is the only way to keep them alive.

"We're in *their* territory," I remember the tour-guide saying. And I think that is what we've made clear to most creatures; that we are in charge of how this world runs.

This has to change. We shouldn't be caged by the belief that we are the only being with the right to live freely. The Earth should be as safe to them as it is to us.

Give animals the freedom they deserve.