

COLBY SEMPEK

Missing Puzzle Piece, 2013
Archival pigment print, 24 x 16 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

MAURICIO MONTIEL FIGUEIRAS

The Man in Tweed

The Need to Look

On the other side of the street, as if it were on the other side of the ocean, there is a sign: “Café.” The man in tweed waits for the light to change.

While he crosses the street, the man in tweed remembers the first time he drank coffee. Another time, another world: a smell of jungle in the steam.

On the sidewalk in front of the café are two little tables. One of them is occupied by a vaguely familiar-looking old man who stares at the man in tweed.

The old man smiles, a toothless gesture. The man in tweed swallows saliva and enters the place. A fan revolves on the ceiling like a wasp.

The only customer inside the establishment is sitting in front of a laptop. The man in tweed glimpses an Internet page: Twitter.

The customer with the laptop writes at that moment something related to a man in tweed in a café. The man in tweed shivers.

“Good morning,” says the girl behind the counter, her dark hair tied at the back of her neck. The man in tweed takes a hesitant step toward her.

“I am lost and need directions,” mumbles the man in tweed. “We are all lost,” the girl says. “Tomorrow is the first day of spring.”

“I know what you’re getting at,” says the man in tweed, thinking of black pollen, “but right now I need to orient myself.” “You can’t find the north,” says the girl.

The man in tweed remembers the idea of the north, and agrees. “Will you help me?” “Yes,” the girl says, “but first you must buy something.”

Frantically the man in tweed scrutinizes the chalkboard behind the counter. It’s filled with names that mean absolutely nothing to him: hieroglyphics.

An image emerges slowly from the memory of the man in tweed. A speeding train breaches the dark night like a bright zipper.

“Espresso,” whispers the man in tweed, and the express train vanishes into the tunnel in his mind. “See?” says the girl, smiling. “That wasn’t so hard.”

The smile that the man in tweed attempts to return ends up as an indescribable grimace. “You need a double,” the girl says, and turns around.

While the girl prepares the coffee, the man in tweed catches a glimpse of the back of her neck. There, among a few rebellious hairs, shines a ruby-colored butterfly.

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The tattoo seems to flutter on the girl’s neck as if wanting to flee its prison of skin. The man in tweed imagines a milky sky.

In the midst of that whiteness, the man in tweed sees a trace of moving blood: butterflies. Beneath the whiteness, the gardens of the world boil.

“I don’t usually dream,” says the man in tweed, and he thinks he hears the fluttering of the tattoo on her neck.

The man in tweed observes thousands of chrysalises opening in the gardens. Nude girls emerge, their young bodies glowing like fire.

The girls rise up, throwing off the viscous threads that cling to them. The rite of spring, muses the man in tweed.

The blood butterflies come down from the sky to enmesh with the bodies of the girls. The man in tweed hears a voice: “Your coffee’s ready.”

The girl with the tattoo hands him the cup as if it were a chalice exhaling fingers of steam. The man in tweed catches a crimson gleam in her eyes.

“You like butterflies?” the girl asks. “I don’t know. I don’t understand them,” says the man in tweed. “Soon you will,” says the girl.

The vanes of the fan cut the sudden silence. The man in tweed takes the coffee and turns around. The customer with the laptop has disappeared.

“Who was the man with the computer?” says the man in tweed. “I think he’s a writer. Strange guy. He often comes here,” the girl replies.

“And who is the man sitting out there?” The man in tweed points to the table on the sidewalk. “That’s not a man,” the girl answers.

Disturbed, the man in tweed looks at the girl. “Then what is he?” he says. “I don’t know, but he comes every day,” says the girl. “He’s the old man.”

“You haven’t wanted to find out who he is?” the man in tweed says. “The name doesn’t matter,” says the girl. “He’s the old man, and he’s one hundred years old. Or a thousand.”

The girl’s voice has begun to creak like papyrus paper. The man in tweed notices that her skin is getting whiter and whiter as if her blood were escaping.

“I’m sure the old man can give you the directions you need,” says the girl. “He seems familiar to me,” admits the man in tweed.

“Maybe you’ve seen him in a distant dream,” murmurs the girl. “I don’t usually dream,” says the man in tweed, and he thinks he hears the fluttering of the tattoo on her neck.

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“How do you know that you’re not dreaming right now?” the girl asks. “Could be,” the man in tweed agrees. “The world has become porous.”

“That’s how the world is. Butterflies come out of its pores,” says the girl, turning back to the coffee machine. Her tattoo faces the man in tweed.

Restless, the man in tweed leaves some coins on the counter and goes over to the door. As he passes under the fan, he hears meat-grinding blades.

From the back, the figure of the old man sitting outside the café resembles a clothes hanger. The man in tweed detects a very fine halo of ashes.

As the man in tweed approaches, something archaic emanates from the old man at the table. A smell of tombs, of destroyed cities, of evaporated oceans.

Around the old man there is agitation in the air. Like a mirage of light, the man in tweed thinks, like heat reverberating.

The old man turns to the man in tweed. He offers him a new toothless smile. Between his fingers there is a jacaranda flower that looks mummified.

“You feel that you are being followed,” the old man says to the man in tweed. “You feel the weight of several followers. You feel that sometimes someone spells you out.”

The man in tweed thinks his blood has taken leave of him. “How do you know?” he says. “I too am a glitch in the system,” says the old man.

The branches of the tree near the table weave a spider’s web of shadows upon the old man’s face. The man in tweed notices a familiar gleam.

The gleam becomes a certainty in those eyes surrounded by wrinkles, in the dusty mouth. Astonished, the man in tweed recognizes himself in old age.

As if the old man were a mirror reflecting him in fifty years’ time. Or one hundred. Or a thousand. This is the notion that strikes the man in tweed.

It’s strange to meet up with oneself in decrepitude, reflects the man in tweed. The breeze that has arisen seems to blow from centuries ago.

The old man’s smile cuts through the shadows like a jagged knife. “Now you know,” he murmurs. “Yes,” the man in tweed answers, “now I know.”

“Glitches of a feather flock together,” says the old man. “Why did you stay here?” says the man in tweed. “I stayed to look...and to guide,” says the old man.

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The man in tweed sees that the old man wears a jacket identical to his except very threadbare. Enormous broken eyeglasses stick out of the jacket pocket.

Perhaps with age the world can be seen more clearly and glasses are superfluous, the man in tweed thinks. Perhaps old age gives the world a hidden sharpness.

The old man crushes the jacaranda flower between his fingers until it’s only purple pigment. “Aren’t you going to sit?” he says to the man in tweed.

“I need directions,” says the man in tweed, occupying the second chair, “although I don’t have much time.” The old man laughs like a crack.

“I think I remember that sensation,” says the old man. “Don’t worry: for us, time is relative.” The man in tweed sips his coffee.

“How long have you been here?” whispers the man in tweed. “Eons or seconds,” says the old man. “It doesn’t matter. Everything happens in the blink of an eye.”

“I figured thirty minutes to get to my point of relocation,” says the man in tweed. “Minutes, days, centuries, it’s all the same,” says the old man.

“I’ve seen a butterfly being born in a millennium,” the old man continues, looking at the man in tweed. “I’ve seen this city emerge while we spoke.”

“You mean to say that time is malleable?” the man in tweed asks. “No,” says the old man, “I mean that time is an elephant.”

The man in tweed says nothing. “Six blind men caress an elephant and each describes it differently,” says the old man. “That’s how time is.”

“Besides,” adds the old man, “ours is a narrative time.” The man in tweed studies him. “Someone is narrating us,” says the old man.

“You mean that we are written?” asks the man in tweed. “We all are,” replies the old man. “We are all someone else’s words.”

“Who writes us?” says the man in tweed, remembering the customer with the laptop. “Ah,” murmurs the old man, “that is a puzzle for each of us.”

“And why are we glitches in the system?” says the man in tweed, with a hurt voice. “Because we’re in the wrong story,” says the old man.

The man in tweed examines his surroundings. “Here it’s springtime,” murmurs the old man. “We would belong, in any case, to winter.”

“In any case,” repeats the man in tweed. “That’s it,” says the old man. “People like us still find ourselves in search of a narrative system.”

“You have managed to pass unnoticed,” hisses the man in tweed. “I have been able to mimic,” agrees the old man, “but only up to a certain point.”

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“Mimicry,” the man in tweed says, pensively. “Yes,” the old man says. “I’ve learned to be an insect on the leaves of other people’s stories.”

The man in tweed imagines the old man as the ambiguous bark on an evergreen tree. A transparent shadow on the edge of days.

The hot breeze has swept jacarandas around the old man’s feet. His jagged skin, the man in tweed notices, has taken on an ancient purplish gleam.

“Once,” says the old man, smiling at the man in tweed, “I was uncovered in summer. They sent me a cloud of sparrows that nearly evaporated me.”

“Someone detected me one autumn afternoon,” the old man continues, scrutinizing the man in tweed. “A cyclone of dry branches bore down on the city.”

In the mind of the man in tweed, the old man walks with difficulty through a huge cloud of birds. His face is a kerosene lamp.

“Why don’t you request your relocation?” says the man in tweed. “Someone should stay here to be the stranger in town,” says the old man.

“Besides,” the old man adds, “I’m the guide. I was assigned that task.” The man in tweed looks at him and catches in his eyes a ruby-hued electricity.

“Have others like myself passed through here?” whispers the man in tweed. The old man laughs: again the crack. “Dozens,” he says, “all of them unable to find their way.”

Startled, the man in tweed has a vision: creatures like him scatter to several corners of the city, their attention fixed on the horizon.

The doubles of the man in tweed set to walking along streets striped with the shadows of twilight. A nomadic melancholy impels them forward.

Sometimes the doubles of the man in tweed stop to contemplate an arabesque of smoke, a bit of dust. Sometimes they remember a green moon.

We are the men of the crowd, the man in tweed thinks. The glitches in a narrative system that rejects us as if we were a linguistic toxin.

“Parasites,” murmurs the old man as if reading the mind of the man in tweed. “That’s what we are to others: rot in the wood of the world.”

“Why recall a green moon?” says the man in tweed. “Beneath that light,” says the old man, “the closest thing to the word *home* is engendered.”

“Will you help me reach the point of relocation?” the man in tweed asks. “Of course,” replies the old man. “Look up there.”

* * *

The man in tweed looks up. A spark dazzles him for a second: a dagger of light among the jacarandas that look like purple grails.

A drop of sweat runs down the neck of the man in tweed. Someone has placed a blind television among the branches of the tree next to the table.

First, fear: the man in tweed thinks of black pollen. Then, amazement at the incredible symbiosis between nature and technology.

The man in tweed imagines jungles where televisions ripen like dark fruit, fresh beds of planted radios tuned into dead stations.

How are the seeds that give birth to cables and roots? the man in tweed wonders. He thinks he hears faint germinations of lightning.

“Forget the unsolvable questions,” the old man says, startling the man in tweed. “The world is a wasteland where answers do not grow.”

“Are we safe?” says the man in tweed, and he looks at the blind television. “Don’t worry,” says the old man, “I control this screen.”

“Do you have an address?” the old man adds. The man in tweed recalls the map at the grocery store. He whispers the name of two streets.

“They like intersections,” says the old man, smiling. The man in tweed notices that the bloodshot electricity in his eyes has increased.

The old man directs his eyes openly to the television. The man in tweed hears a crackling sound, the first sparks of a cathodic fire.

In the dusty screen of the television blooms a white pupil that slowly grows. Anxious, the man in tweed catches the sound of static.

The snowstorm that fills the screen transports the man in tweed to the balcony facing the sea. Again the cloudy sky, the murky waves.

“You are not from here,” says the naked woman, lit by the turbulence in the television. The man in tweed prefers to turn toward the old man.

“They like hotels,” says the old man, pointing at the screen stuck between the branches. The man in tweed begins to notice a change.

Technological *pentimento*. Thus thinks the man in tweed upon seeing the figure that emerges from beneath the static like the remains of a shipwreck.

The silhouette on the television screen takes on consistency, a concrete form. Gradually the man in tweed is able to distinguish five red letters: “Hotel.”

—Translated from the Spanish by Suzanne Jill Levine

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Suzanne Jill Levine’s latest translation *Mundo Cruel: Stories* (by Luis Negron) won the 2014 Lambda Prize for Fiction. A distinguished translator of Latin American writers such as Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig, Julio Cortazar, Jose Donoso, Silvina Ocampo, and Bioy Casares, Levine is the director of Translation Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. For her work as a creative translator and literary critic she has received numerous honors including PEN awards, National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities grants, and a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship. She is the author of several books including *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction* and the literary biography *Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman: His Life and Fictions* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000). She also served as general editor of the five-volume paperback edition of Jorge Luis Borges’ poetry and essays for Penguin Classics (2010).