

DAVID LIGARE

Rock Arch with Sun, 2023
Oil on canvas, 60 x 84 in.



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

MAURICIO MONTIEL FIGUEIRAS

The Woman of M

An excerpt from a
novel in tweets

Translated from the Spanish by Suzanne Jill Levine

The Sun

The woman of M likes to think about the sun. To represent it as a great carbuncle of fire burning at the bottom of a cosmic pit.

Sometimes, on the darkest nights, the woman of M manages to calm herself by closing her eyes and visualizing the king of stars. But only sometimes.

Chromosphere and photosphere, Crichton cycle and radiation pressure. With solar terminology the woman of M can build litanies.

Evoking the age of the sun eclipses the incipient light of senescence. “Four thousand six hundred and fifty million years,” the woman of M says to herself.

The sun’s statistics scald the mind that attempts to make sense of them. The fifteen million degrees centigrade of its nucleus reaches the woman of M like an explosion.

In the beginning there was darkness. The woman of M tries to reconstruct the first flash of fire, the birth of a light that burned the void to a crisp.

The photographs of solar storms refer back to enormous blood clots or bruises. An organically shaped star appears before the eyes of the woman of M.

Extensive emissions of plasma register on telescopes that are left blind. *That*, thinks the woman of M, *is the sperm of the sun.*

Sun spots could indicate the secret antiquity of the universe. The woman of M carefully examines the skin on her hands.

A membrane covers the whole solar system: the heliosphere. She’s the one, the woman of M understands, that resists the onslaughts of the void.

The sirocco must be a minor offspring of the solar wind. The woman of M sees an astronaut walking along a desert made of space sand.

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Hydrogen and helium conquer the heart of the sun. *Even chemical elements*, thinks the woman of M, *are victims of attraction.*

Within five thousand five hundred million years the sun will burn up until disappearing. *What eyes will witness that?* the woman of M wonders.

From red giant to white dwarf: solar extinction will be a chromatic vanishing. The woman of M begins listing colors.

The sun was born from the residue of stars and will die in an expansive nebula. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” whispers the woman of M.

It becomes difficult to conceive of a universe without a sun. The woman of M tries to think of faces on those upon whom the dead star will shine.

On days in which the morning light is really a stream of molten metal, the woman of M leaves her house with her head held high.

The heat gushes out like a fistful of yellow hands on her features. The fragrance of the sun inflames the woman of M’s sense of smell.

An overwhelming sensation of burning settles in her pupils fixed upon the exact center of the sky. The woman of M tries to imagine what’s behind the sun.

Behind the sun stretches a planetary system identical to the one in front of it. The woman of M is not surprised by such doublings.

In that system there is another small blue world. In that world there is another town where another lonely woman imagines what’s behind her own adored sun.

The Tornado Hunter

On evenings when the sky turns purple as if it had just received a brutal beating, the woman of M remembers the tornado hunter.

The miniscule man who years earlier had arrived unexpectedly to the town introduced himself with that title. The woman of M can still hear his voice.

“I hunt tornadoes,” said the little man, who, as if by magic, had burst upon the woman of M’s porch that violet twilight.

In this sentence there was something airy, the lightness of a bird’s feather falling. The woman of M thought of warm sparrows.

The little man appeared to have brought with him a sky sowed with clouds similar to bruises that made the woman of M tremble.

“Don’t worry,” said the hunter, “I’m here to deal with that.” Near the woman of M new sparrow feathers fell.

“How do you know if a tornado is coming?” asked the woman of M. The hunter broke into a radiant smile, a broad slice of light.

“How do you know if a man is approaching? It’s an instinct that travels in one’s blood.” The hunter’s reply left the woman of M speechless.

On the street the wind had suspended its dance. The town, noted the woman of M, sank into a meteorological paralysis.

“The calm before the storm,” said the hunter. And then, looking at the woman of M, he added: “Make sure to close the doors and windows tight.”

The woman of M saw how the hunter extracted from amid his dark clothing a luminous bottle tied to a funnel. “The hunting net,” she said to herself.

With short but decisive steps, the hunter abandoned the porch. Overcome by stupor, the woman of M followed him to the street.

A colossal cloud began to expel the tip of the tornado. It looked like, the woman of M remembers, the tail of a furious dragon.

Suddenly it gave the impression that the atmosphere was cracking. Beads of ice spilled all around the woman of M.

The deafening clatter of ice on the roofs of the town was the biblical sign that the woman of M needed to return home.

Doors and windows were shut hermetically in a matter of minutes. The woman of M became a human-scale tornado.

A primitive darkness took over her house. The woman of M felt caught in a fist that made her pant and palpitate and sweat.

The noise of the ice turned into a sucking sound that grew louder. The sky, imagined the woman of M, wanted to drink up the earth to quench a terrible thirst.

Added to that image was that of the hunter kneeling down in the heart of town. The woman of M saw the bottle with the funnel as a chalice.

Drawn by a force concentrated behind the glass, the tornado entered the chalice. *What is little is immense*, brooded the woman of M.

At the end of a time that stretched to its maximum tense, the woman of M confirmed that stillness had been reinstated.

The creaking, damp house became accustomed to the new temperature. The woman of M walked through it holding her breath.

On the street a cold, viscous breeze rocked and waved threads as if made of smoke. The woman of M contemplated the gray sky.

There was not a trace of the huge cloud or the little man. A burst of wind that carried the smell of emptiness tousled the woman of M’s hair.

A bird feather whirled within the burst of wind as if inside a bottle. The woman of M received it right in the palm of her hand.

Although it was kept carefully between the pages of a book, the feather disappeared one day. The woman of M still doesn’t know what became of it.

On evenings when the heavens look battered, the woman of M wonders if the tornado hunter is a memory or a daydream.

The Sinking Town

One rainy morning, while she watches how the deserted street fills with liquid silhouettes, the woman of M thinks of the sinking town.

The image hasn’t returned for some time now. “The water,” the woman of M says to herself. “Must be all this water that grows around me.”

From the porch of her house, seated it would seem on a bed of dampness, the woman of M lets her fluvial memory drag her along.

Her memories pursue each other like trees shattered by the flooding. Amid the dead leaves, the woman of M makes out a precise figure.

The visit to the sinking town occurred one midday when it had just rained. The woman of M can still smell that whiff of wet atoms.

The fat clouds recently relieved of their load fell apart like a theater curtain. The woman of M felt completely gray.

Someone had spoken to the woman of M about the sinking town. Which is why she'd found herself before the body of water bristling in the wind.

Someone. A reporter on the newscast that the woman of M would watch at nights when she needed to hear voices that didn't come from inside her head.

The reporter had referred to a hydroelectric plant built near where the woman of M lived and had shown images.

Now the woman of M looked with her own eyes at the bell tower and the cross that stood out above the lake to mark a liquid grave.

Memory is a sinking town, thought the woman of M. *The tumultuous waters of oblivion bury most of our memories.*

Rusty iron, unfinished towers, vestiges of construction sites. The woman of M knew these were the things that survived the flood of time.

Just then a movement attracted the attention of the woman of M. The cross of the drowning church shook with a gentle dark flapping.

It looked as if the cross were trying to take flight. The woman of M imagined lines of crosses soaring through the clouds, an airborne cemetery.

The shaking, however, was coming from a bird perched in the bell tower. The woman of M saw two enormous black wings, a bloodstained beak.

A prehistoric light emanated from the bird, which, after screeching a metallic cackle, took off toward the horizon, away from the woman of M.

The flight of the bird outlined in the sky a furrow reflected on the surface of the lake. The woman of M noticed a new commotion.

A bubbling started to surround the bell tower like an ephemeral crown. *Something*, thought the woman of M, *always fights to leave the depths of memory.*

Something, or someone. The woman of M glanced at her watch: it was lunchtime. Maybe the inhabitants of the sinking town were coming out to eat.

The bubbling increased little by little: a boiling, a restlessness. In the mind of the woman of M something started: a parade of drowned men and women.

The horde marched along streets where fish similar to miniature lightning swam. The woman of M saw features eaten away, incomplete masks of bewilderment.

Some of the drowned people stared at the abyss; others lacked eyes. But all of them, the woman of M noticed, were dazzled by the shadows.

Their astonishment did not prevent quick greetings, the necessary pause on a corner. The woman of M thought she heard words made of water.

The drowned people entered houses and restaurants waited upon by other drowned people. The woman of M wondered about the menu of death.

The streets began to remain empty. A little boy on a wet, awkward bicycle increased the stupor of the woman of M.

The sinking town recovered its calm. The dance of algae on the sidewalks planted in the woman of M the idea of vegetal lust.

As slowly as it had blossomed, the bubbling started to quiet down. "The dead are hungry," mused the woman of M and she rubbed her eyes.

Once again the bell tower unfolded its limpid reflection in the lake. The underwater daydream of the woman of M ended up fraying, in tatters.

And then, marking the end of a fathomless ceremony, the sunken church bell began to toll, to the surprise of the woman of M.

The sound stretched like a sad canvas along the surface of the water. The ears of the woman of M resounded with a cavernous echo.

The ringing of the bell seemed to touch the most intimate nerves of the landscape. The woman of M detected a vibration in the atmosphere that enveloped her.

This was not another daydream: the lake vibrated, the reflection of the funereal sky vibrated. A tear vibrated on the wrinkled face of the woman of M.

Absorbed by the rain that wants to flood the morning, the woman of M remembers that this vibration evoked the beating of a heart.

The heart is a sinking town. This sentence strikes the woman of M together with a bronze reverberation that pierces the rainfall.

A bell tolls at some imprecise point of time. The woman of M abandons her damp seat and descends the steps of the porch.

The raindrops are needles on her cheeks. As lending herself to be woven by the deluge, the woman of M opens the palms of her hands.

It will soon be lunchtime. As she gets wet, the woman of M imagines what menu would be served in her own restaurant beneath the forgetful waters.

Mauricio Montiel Figueiras (Mexico, 1968-) is a writer of prose fiction and essays, as well as a poet, translator, editor, and film and literary critic. He is the author of fifteen books in different genres. His work has been published in magazines and newspapers in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Italy, Peru, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. He has been a resident writer for the Cheltenham Literature Festival in England (2003) and the Bellagio Center in Italy (2008). In 2012 he was appointed a resident writer for the prestigious Hawthornden Literary Retreat in Scotland. In 2020 he was selected as an artist in residence for the Saari Residence in Finland. Since 1995 he lives and works in Mexico City.