Felix and the Flying Tiger

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Abstract: A capitalist fable, “Felix and the Flying Tiger” was one of two “Best Essays” at the 2023 Master’s in English Regional Conference held at Bridgewater State University. After considering the themes and messages of Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Circular Ruins” and “The Library of Babel,” Ferdinand de Saussure’s Lecture on General Linguistics, and Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” I sought in short story form to answer the question: How do humans make meaning under capitalism? My main thesis in “Felix and the Flying Tiger” is that despite their current ability to transcend language, the sign system of brand logos that we adorn ourselves with, that we cloak our children with, that we invest in, and that we identify and communicate with, is ultimately meaningless and non-transferrable to future generations. When the reader recognizes the globally iconic Starbucks, Apple, McDonald’s, and Puma logos, they have unlocked a secret meaning that the narrator in this story never will. But does this really matter? Here, my “Library of Babel” is the ruins of a once-vast shopping mall where citizens, archaeologists, and academics of a future generation attempt to decipher late capitalist iconography.

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The vast dig site extended for several days in every direction. Felix’s recent promotion meant that he was to penetrate and oversee one unruly south-westerly quadrant, which had been responsible for some intriguing finds several months prior, most notably the flying tiger emblem as it had come to be known. The project, from the start, had been a dizzying one; sharp beams and wired nests had coagulated to form a nearly impenetrable labyrinth of metal. The initial excitement of the site’s sprawling discovery had overtaken the free cities, as secrets of ancient civilizations were promised to every man. Academics and consultants from all disciplines hurried to factor the discovery into their findings and methods. It was, as Felix later recalled nostalgically, the best three months of his life. He had purchased two new navy suits and a pair of wingtip shoes in preparation.

During this initial period, the groundbreaking had been stalled as arguments ensued about the optimal techniques and strategies to employ for peak results. The western provinces preferred their massive, hydraulic hoses while the east lobbied for heavy machinery consisting of robotic bulldozers, excavators, and cutting-edge backhoes; the cold-climate, northern academics clamored loudly and honorably for a return to classical archaeology, complete with trowels, sifters, and patience. Contests were soon held in the hopes of soliciting a yet undiscovered but ingenious tactic. Eventually, central organization devolved into local coalitions until it was decided each municipality was responsible for its techniques. Classes of pupils
were schooled in each. By this point aboard a lengthy train, Felix counted himself lucky to hail from one of the more intellectual provinces detached from brute labor, which concerned itself primarily with applying history and philosophy to significant findings. His high appointment made sense.

During the preliminary weeks, his excitement steadily and unnoticeably shifted into a stimulating yet formless confusion that was easy to mistake for childlike glee. With his stately access came new awareness that certain widely accepted theses were increasingly subject to scrutiny pending various discrepancies that had not been discussed at Felix’s local university. First, there was the issue of the flying tiger. A few months earlier, the predominant archaeological theorem had been that the most prevalent symbols, often found adjacent to identical symbols and affixed to some sort of textile or object, were the uniforms and emblems of fallen groups who hailed from those territories some centuries prior. It naturally followed, in papers and in journals, that the flying tiger was one such uniform and held insight into a particular kinship group and its culture. At this, the anthropologists had momentarily rejoiced.

The lack in central management at the site and elsewhere, however, had caused significant communication delays, which prevented Felix’s predecessor from receiving timely word that the flying tiger had also been found in Quadrants 4, 13, 265, 337a and, most recently, the western sea corridor. It was Felix’s first task, then, to use his shiny merits toward repositioning the flying tiger in the current understanding as an ideological symbol that occurred in pockets across a patchwork rather than as a lone identifying badge. A key that unlocks a massive door. The esteem of his quadrant and his further promotion depended on it.

For this, he consulted the widely mined emblems from all dig quadrants and their foremost experts, who were and had been grappling with the same task with varying degrees of success and transparency. Felix began with one of the most prevalent symbols: the smiling sea goddess with her two-pronged tail and star crown, found in better samples imbued with distinct green coloring. She had been discovered so frequently that it was determined she must have been an adored deity, triggering the inclusion of theologians for consultation. The theologians (and their translators) were not able to conclusively determine if she proved the remnants of a monotheistic society as such drastically different signology was also found in rival numbers, suggesting possible polytheism or divergent belief systems. More research was needed for a definitive result. Felix was eventually told this and yet on some evenings, when the clanging, whirring machinery had quieted and he was certain he was alone in the lab, he too knelt and prayed to the smiling sea goddess. In those moments, far from the theologians, Felix was sure she was a god.

Under shifting time constraints, Felix moved to consider the great, once-bitten apple. For this, he approached the philosophers and agriculturists who were not used to mingling and were, at first, reluctant to share their findings. Sometimes found in white, black, and even more rarely kaleidoscope, the great apple had come to represent the duality of knowledge among the southern semi-arid provinces, the yin and yang of nature to the western tribes, and still yet the bounty of autumn to coastal river folk. The philosophers and agriculturists failed to see eye to eye on the great apple’s significance (and its missing piece) and tried

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to rectify their understanding with the existence of the equally prevalent golden mountain. Together, it was undeniably determined, the idols suggested a culture that was intimately linked with the natural world. The sea goddess and flying tiger only further confirmed their theory. Felix slept well for exactly one evening after this was relayed to him. By morning, it was still unclear why, though, the flying tiger had been found in areas that were and always had been entirely uninhabited by tigers.

Lastly, Felix arrived at the linguists, his hope worn down with his shoes. While the flying tiger had not yet been found with lettering, a true academic never fails to consider the prevailing discovery in his field. He had wanted to forget it – the ominous, unexplained, and strangely beautiful word that hung over every lecture, summit, and discipline: Amazon. Deciphering it seemed to be the key to his future, and since he was no closer to unlocking its mystery, he had been happy to cozy up to the flying tiger. At least tigers were real.

The linguists had considered amazon as a reference to mazes, in history and in myth, as related to the current usages of “amazing,” and further evidence of reverence, or as the possible surname of a powerful family, whose history and dealings would, no doubt, be significant to uncover. The linguists, too, had considered whether the symbols were caricatures in a picture-based language that, when combined, formed words, sentences, and even complex concepts. What did it mean then for the tiger to jump down from the mountain onto the apple? As Felix neared a year at his post, only one hypothesis had been entered into with complete agreement: The imagery was undeniably revered by whatever fallen culture had created it, and the emblems, widely dispersed across vast geographical distances and affixed to a breathtaking variety of objects, undoubtedly played a crucial role in the culture that imagined them.

By the evening before his yearly review, Felix wasn’t sleeping at all. He was certain his job would be in question in the morning. He spent most of that evening, much like the ones that came before it, ironing his suits and compounding his extensive findings into a presentation that would further prove that, while he was nearly there, more time was needed to unlock the secret of the flying tiger (or had it been a leopard all along?). Surely, further experts from newly emerging disciplines could be approached and he would attempt to argue that he was the best liaison to facilitate that. Still, he struggled to ignore the gnawing urge to refuse presenting at all. Felix wondered what, if anything, it would do. In another part of the evening, a more frenzied part that felt like his own, he composed a third option quickly and out of sheer necessity:

O Smiling Goddess
With your endless tails
Won’t you show me the way
To Amazon?

Note on Author: Maryellen Groot is a writer and educator currently pursuing an M.A. in English (Writing) and a certificate in Writing & Rhetoric at Salem State University. She holds a joint B.A. in Written Arts and American Studies from Bard College. Maryellen studies creative writing, creative writing pedagogy, literary theory, and American literature. Her fiction focuses on themes of capitalist alienation.
and the use and abuse of American mythos. Recently, she presented a short story entitled “Felix and the Flying Tiger” at the 2023 Master’s in English Regional Conference held at Bridgewater State University, which was one of two “Best Essay” winners. She further developed this piece with the mentorship of Dr. Halina Adams. Her non-fiction work has previously been published with Vox. She is currently a writing tutor at the Mary G. Walsh Writing Center and lives in North Andover with her husband, Bobby.