

A Panama Man

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—the eighty-eight years it took Eduardo Eliseo Estevez to even handwrite his first word: “Atrasado,” it began again some three or five years later, in the alms of an old hospice just south of Caracas, or, as he preferred to call it, despite every one of our arguments to the contrary, “Santiago de León de Caracas.” It was an unusually hot afternoon, I remember it still. We were out by a table by a Tabebuia tree, the ground covered in its sprightly trumpets. He was stopped, looking at them all, the pencil in his hand hardly more familiar to him than the colour of his eyes. Had we been in Santiago “—de Varaguas, no Chile—” he might have blinked and turned to me and said: “La luz es demasiado lento.” When at last he smiled instead, the many furrows of his face at once betraying the Ngäbe ancestry on his mother’s father’s side, I like to think that he was enjoying knowing he had such little time left to live.

I had brought with me the yupana abacus from Panama City, Eduardo had carved when he was only nine. It was strange to me that it felt to melt into the palm of my hand, like a cubist’s rendition of a cut-open orange. And the smell of it, of sweat and Spanish cedar, seemed to intensify the longer I held on to it, and the more I wished to hold it. I was otherwise at a loss as to how to describe it simply: There were a total of twenty-two concentric square dishes, not all of them the same size, some of them cut within or beside another, with two peaks in diagonally opposite corners sloping towards a central dish, and the other two corners sloping away from it, everything symmetrically. How it worked, precisely, was far less obvious. Emilia Eliseo Suarez “—de soltera

Tu La Pena—" Eduardo's late mother, had once recalled a missing photograph of her son pouring water very carefully into one of its topmost dishes; this was 1964, three weeks before the Martyr's Day riots, two days after I first met the then thirty-six-year-old Eduardo in Santiago proper, de Varaguas, busking as a portraitist. What had caught my attention then was the apparent ease with which he expressed such photorealistic detail so quickly. There were never any mistakes in any of his works, no scaffolded lines, and the almost Vermeeresque handling he had of light was much too vivid not to have been somehow manufactured. When I did finally sit for him, following a fifteen-minute wait for the previous sitter, he began immediately, without stopping or speaking, until he was finished. I paid him again, and he indulged me a second, and then a third drawing, both of them identical to the first and taking no more or less time each than fifteen minutes to produce. By then it was already late afternoon, Eduardo was proceeding to pack up his easel on account of the neighbouring shadow of the Catedral de Santiago Apóstol, before I noticed the abacus, then unknown to me what it was, resting at the foot of his chair.

At first, I had believed it to be my mainland accent: He did not reply to my asking what it was, even while he was bent over to pick it up. It was as if he himself were as unfamiliar with it as I was, slowly turning it in his hands, feeling it for its presence, a delicate ritual I had only as recently as my visits to the hospice in January come to understand as a sort of reacquaintance. Having placed the abacus gently in his lap, I did somewhat doubt that he would recognise it, or myself, again, in the April of the next year.

During those last few weeks, it was impossible to tell just how far away he really was; whether he knew he was down in Venezuela, imagining, or back in Panama, in Panama City, reintroducing me to his widowed mother there. Our friendship had been a fast one, although I could hardly begin to appreciate it then, why, but I did know that it had something to do with my portraits, rather than my inquiries into the nature of the abacus. Because it was getting later, and the bus for Panama City had, fortuitously I must admit, blown its head-gasket, I was insistent on driving him home; the least I thought I could do given the situation. I told him that I was on my way up to Colón, to take photographs, and he mistook me for an artist like himself, despite my numerous objections, my camera, that, by comparison, what I did was, at its best, cheating the light out of its time, “engañando a la luz fuera de su tiempo. Sí.” He was always repeating what I said quietly under his breath, drumming each of its syllables across the whites of his knuckles, to be certain. When we made it to his house, it was nearly three in the morning, two women were arguing out on the street, there was a dog between them, barking. Eduardo assured me it was nothing, that for a while now, the one had owed money to the other, and that things must have finally come to a head. He invited me in for coffee, somewhere to sleep should I need to, and I did. We passed through an archway into a courtyard cloistered by two adjoining sublets, where entry to the house itself was at the end of these, potted in begonias. Inside was small and badly lit, quiet enough that I could hear the sounds of my own ears. Books and newspapers lined either side of a narrow corridor, like

rabbit's teeth all the way down an oesophagus. A tiny light could be seen flickering at the mouth of this, leading to a kitchenette. Upon a closer inspection, this light belonged to a quaint, battery-operated candle that was keeping vigil over a photograph of one Raimundo Teodoro Estevez, Emilia's late husband of twenty-six years, and Eduardo's father of ten. I did not know then, who it was, or why I felt so suddenly, and with such an intense shame, its peculiarly pathetic atmosphere. Everywhere, like a dust I had inadvertently breathed in, crushed underfoot, mistaken for coffee granules at the bottom of my cup, were microscopic eyes, though they were not so much hallucinations as they were at the very cusp of being seen; something I still put down to my exhaustion.

When I awoke, it was already the evening of the next day. Music was playing, a favourite record of Emilia's that Eduardo, and later myself, would inherit, and that had originally belonged to Raimundo: Getatchew Mekurya's *Shellela*, ringing softly from the lounge. It was only then that I learned of Emilia, mistaking her for Eduardo, in front of the foggy glow of a television set; a true skeleton of a woman, lanky and hunched into her ribs due to polio. I was more surprised that she herself was less surprised of me, in the ink of the dark of that night, reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder, and then, like two strangers meeting, one having waved at the other from afar, realising the inappropriateness of this gesture given its misinformed pretext. She had smiled with a start and made to get up, meanwhile my profuse apologies, and in perfect English assured me and did call me by my name, that it was her fault for not getting Eduardo, who had thankfully walked

in by then, to wake me sooner, when she had advised him to. “Mi madre,” he had said to me hurriedly, trying to repeat it in English, kissing said “—murder—” on the head before returning to the kitchen. A spread of dishes had been laid out on a table opposite the stove, meticulously arranged and noticeably equidistant from one another, quite the feat in retrospect: Asparagus, blanched and marinated in a vinaigrette; next a bowl of kidney beans and guacamole; three plates with two empanadas each; and an overly generous side of plantains “—en tentacion,” silky with syrup for dessert. While I was indeed hungry, and expected, if not obliged, to eat, I could not shake the pangs of shame for the pathetic feelings I had felt earlier, and felt again, as I sat myself down. Emilia shuffled in beside me, Eduardo next, so that we were parallel the stove and an empty chair, presumably Raimundo’s. We ate after the whispering I gathered was grace. Occasionally, Emilia would hum the first four or five notes from the chorus of a song, but never the same song twice; to which Eduardo would either nod or shrug or shake his head discretely, embarrassedly. Coaxed by her sudden loss the following year, he had divulged to me these were, in fact, parts of entire conversations, mostly lost now, in their secret language together. Raimundo had had his own repertoire as well, a humble penchant for jazz and assorted operas; whereas Emilia’s were often Panamanian lullabies or folk refrains. It was not the notes of songs in and of themselves that then corresponded to letters or individual words, however, but changing sentiments particular to Raimundo’s relationship with Eduardo, Eduardo’s with Emilia, and, depending on the family’s

dynamic in situ, regarded the events surrounding a song's past, present, as well as future, application. For example, *Gli aranci olezzano*, from Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, could, at once, literally mean *The smell of oranges* in the right context, the noun *smell*, or the verb as in *to smell*; the fruit *orange*, the colour *orange*; or, and much more elaborately, could also refer to the piquant memory Eduardo had had of biting into a lemon as a child by mistake, his ensuing displeasure, the childish impulsivity of this act, warding like the aphorism *look before you leap*. It was beautiful in its clumsiness. Another family might have considered sign language easier for Eduardo to observe at a glance, thus preserving his precious concentration, while also providing him with a means of universal communication, at the very least with other signers. That he actually preferred it this way, despite being able to sign, made sense only to Eduardo; where the effort of looking, the minutest of saccades, was a dizzying magnitude of imperceptible decades. His ability to speak, suffice it to say hold a conversation, was demonstration enough of Eduardo's extreme attentiveness, though it is hardly reckoned by my account alone. Emilia had been a widow for eighteen years, half of her son's life. Raimundo had been the heir of a successful rubber plantation in Venezuela, the finances from the sale of which had kept Emilia and Eduardo afloat all those years, and purchased their adjoining sublets for a supplementary income. Eduardo did not need to draw. Perhaps there is something noble in this revelation.

A nurse approached us, half-in-half-out of habit. She had been straightening her coif as she crossed the yard, when she

tripped, much to Eduardo's amusement. She introduced herself as Sister Borja, a pithy woman, barely younger than Eduardo, the skin hanging from her face, I distinctly recollect, in jowly slacks of disapproval. I could tell immediately that she would prove to be difficult; from the slowness of her movements, her speech, to her overall capriciousness. Today was bath day, she had said loudly, first to Eduardo, mistakenly in Portuguese, and then again to me, in a broken, but no less patronising, English. It took several of my visits just to convince her I was his benefactor, a superficial title I had taken on begrudgingly at the bequest of the hospice's lawyer, a Señor Cólicos. He had an office overlooking the perimeter of the yard, an old belfry of the former convent's. On breezy days, his silhouette could be confused for the missing bell that, legend had it, had shattered spontaneously during a toll for mass in 1812, killing a hundred or so unsuspecting nuns in the process. Cólicos thought the legend to be nonsense, gently swaying back and forth with his glass of rum when he told me; that it was too implausible for it to have survived being tolled a thousand times beforehand if the iron had been improperly fired, and that it was more than likely, given the year coincided with an earthquake in Caracas, that it had fallen of its own accord then. Sister Borja doubted this. Upon walking in on our conversation, evidently overhearing it in the stairwell as she skulked up its steps, she explained, as if she had witnessed it herself, that it had been, as if it had had to have been, a stray Spanish cannonball during The Venezuelan War of Independence, hitting the pivot of the bell, or else going through the nave. Yet the remains of the bell from both stories were still



missing. They were stunned; and before they could answer me, I added, not knowing it to be true or not, that the bell, being a rich source of iron at a time when ammunition was no doubt in short supply, had probably been melted down. What about the nuns, they asked me in unison; to which I then casually remarked, a bit too casually, that it was entirely conceivable that there had been no nuns to begin with, that either side had fictionalised their deaths as a way of propagandising fervour in their troops. I only recount this utterly bizarre set of circumstances because, on the midnight of Eduardo's death, Sister Borja first led me up the belfry before taking me to his room, for intentions I had assumed then were to do with his will. There, she and Cólicos confronted me with supposedly incontrovertible pieces of the alleged bell in question, relics that the reverend mothers of the old coven had handed down from one superior to the next, and now to Sister Borja, complete with stains of "—sangre—" that may as well have rusted on.

I adjusted the pencil in his grip, noticing the irony of the first word Eduardo had ever written. It was a tender moment I wished I had experienced for as long as he had, before he was carted off; stripped behind half of a partition, and watered down with a hose; the while with his eyes forever trained on me, like a dog without enthusiasm. These are the things that, instead of my remembering them, they remember me. They still remember me. For this reason, I can be no witness to their having happened, as the most distant stars are both happened and happening, and remain, provided they are kept far enough away. Now that we

are nearing the end of my own manuscript, I would rather that we not conclude, neither at all, nor with Eduardo's funeral; a lax November day, I forget the date itself. After Sister Borja wheeled him back in front of me, he lurched forward with the pencil, wet from when he must have been gripping it under the hose, and with some paper, nodded once that I should write; something, it was then unclear to me what, but it has since become, hopefully, obvious. I shook my head, wanting that he should continue, and he did. It was humbling to watch, each letter, each word, was so sure of itself, so perfect and without hesitation, I could not help admiring them instead of reading them. I left him that way, truly and in my mind, and the next month, on the eve of my return, he died. His belongings were few by that stage, an empty suitcase, a handful of sketches, what he was wearing, what he had yet to pay for the chemotherapy. I was so furious with Sister Borja I almost forgot his manuscript, a letter, C3licos handed to me sheepishly, and which I have translated thusly:

Belatedly,

I begin again. This is the song of my heart. The mother rhythm. It is how I came to be and how I came to know of that of which you ask of me. Time is a great distance between us, the sum of eighty-eight years, one month, one week, one day, and sixteen hours for every of your seconds. I am this age to your eyes, now, having lived over twenty times, or so I have read, as much as the universe is old. Whether it is because all the things about me, and myself, act slowly, or whether it is my thoughts

which go too fast, as a hummingbird is described to be, I cannot write for certain. You did trust me once, in the palatial past, not to forget the lines of your face. I ask that you trust in these lines in the same way.

When I imagine, and I do, the vast horizon of my life, it is as empty as the sky can be sometimes, but no less incredible. What more can I say about it other than that it is, like the sky is blue. That it, too, rains. I would wish only that I knew what is meant by this word, among many others, besides how *I* know what it is they mean. What it is like to make an unconscious mistake. To spend time together. The answer to the abacus, you will find, is one and the same. Go, as I go, forth in your ancient days, as but a man. No more or less than this. The moment is as much to everyone, should I look away or not. I am no prophet. I am no thinker. I am no artist. I am no vigil. And when I do die, and I will die, soon, my years will be an unfolding history of the future as if it were planted in the past. There is nothing more to say.

a Panama man.