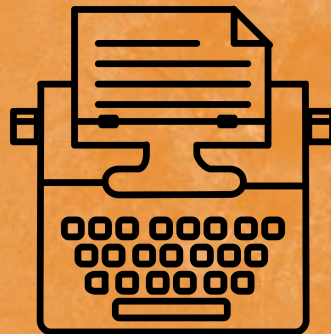


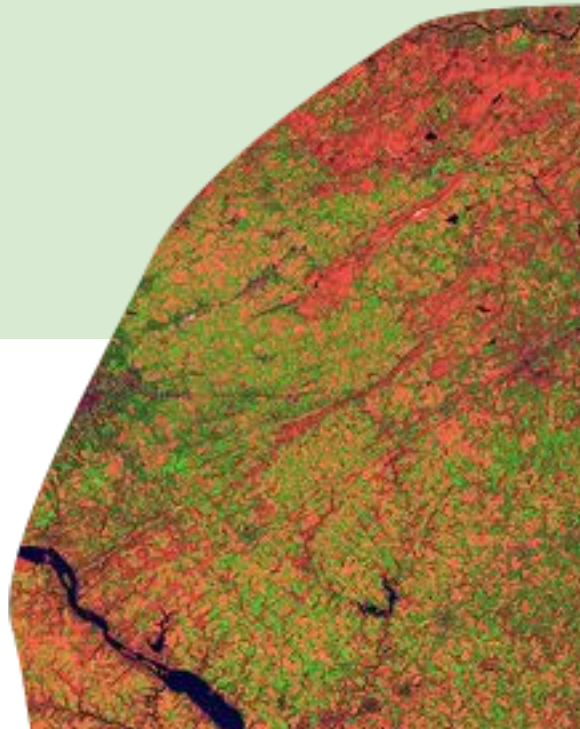
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FORMAS





Among green bushes and reddish myconias, hundreds of small flattened mounds, side by side, move slowly. They are the shells of Galápagos tortoises, the giant tortoises of these equatorial islands. A deep heat that announces rain pushes the Galápagos tortoises toward the mud puddles to cool off. Alejandro counts, again, the more than 200 tortoises that he herds. It is the fourth time he's lost count, between images and questions that haunt his mind over an event the island can't stop talking about.

It is the year 2222. The Galápagos Islands, as they are still called, hardly receive visitors from the outside world, in part because there are no ports at which to arrive. Humans live in the highlands of three islands, where they have fresh water and fertile land to farm. Those who seek to become “friars,” or local priests, practice the type of “herding” for which these islanders are known: in Cristóbal, the easternmost island of the archipelago, Galápagos tortoises are herded. On the other islands, friars herd sea lions and mockingbirds.

Alejandro has been herding tortoises for six years. This consists of caring for and accompanying Galápagos tortoises' movements between the dry and rainy seasons--of course, without himself approaching the coasts, which is forbidden. The exercise of accompanying tortoises is considered a form of meditation, a way to connect with the origin of the families of Cristóbal, who are said to be linked to the tortoise. Those of Cristóbal are known for their quiet gaze, their slow speech, and, in general, for their serenity, which they consider their greatest virtue.

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It has not been a day of contemplation or serenity today. With his long legs and quick breath, Alejandro walks across the grazing plain in the same untidy meander of his thoughts, which ponder what the event that has just occurred might mean. Finally, an aroma of freshly roasted coffee tells him he is arriving at Tres Palos, the town where most of Cristóbal's families are concentrated. Every household is debating: is this a premonition of some untold thing about to transpire? Is it only a simple sea turtle?

What has happened is this: a few days ago, Raquel, another shepherd, went to town to spread the news that a Galápagos tortoise had gone into the sea. Quickly, the news spread throughout the island. Everyone knew the old story of the tortoise that hundreds of years ago submerged herself in the sea and, in so doing, flooded the coasts. It was one of those legends that grandparents told children, and that, although respected as a sacred story, most doubted could actually happen. It just seemed unlikely--that a ground giant like a 300-pound Galápagos tortoise, with a large shell and fat legs, could swim in the sea.

There was also the matter of who had recounted the event. Raquel, restless and disheveled, had abandoned the friar's training, though not herding tortoises. Contrary to local norms, she even continued accompanying the Galápagos tortoises to the coasts, which according to strict tradition should only be done by the most prestigious friars. After the great rise in sea level that started some two hundred years ago, traveling to the island coasts, except on special days, was treated as a taboo--a provocation to the ocean. Raquel, in her stubbornness and frankness, considered it aberrant that islanders did not approach the sea. She insisted that the tortoise's idle way of being - *el estar de la tortuga* - replicated itself in the rise and flow of the sea, that it was natural for humans to spend time at its shore. Because of these positions, Raquel was expelled from the community, which did not prevent her from sneaking out to visit her friends on certain nights.

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Alejandro wanted to see it with his own eyes. He could not satisfy himself with the rumor of people who built the walls of their houses with their backs to the sea. Why would a Galapagos tortoise dive into the forbidden sea now?

As children, Alejandro and Raquel fantasized about what could be beyond the sea. It was a secret game, because just naming the sea was frowned upon in the town. As they grew, Alejandro kept a careful distance from these ponderings, while Raquel became more and more intrigued with the relationship between the tortoise and the sea. In reality, Alejandro often found himself wondering about the wide blue of the ocean that he caught glimpses of while herding the Galápagos. But no one could know that.

"I have to go to the coast, but I can't do it alone," he thought. "I need to talk to him."

Elderly, with a speckled white beard and tanned skin, Julio was another friar, and the mentor to whom Alejandro went with his doubts. He had also been Raquel's mentor, and it was even rumored that he secretly agreed with several of her positions. Julio

certainly went against the tide many times, but he did it so peaceably that he was rarely blamed for it.

“Today, in the contemplation of the Galápagos tortoise that I was teaching to the children, they asked me again to tell them the story of Sister Tortuga,” said the old friar, tying the Franciscan cord around his waist while receiving Alejandro on his wooden porch. “It was like telling it for the first time.”

Although he appeared stoic in character, Alejandro thought Julio seemed troubled. Sister Tortuga, as the legend was known, marked the turning point in the history of all the families of Cristóbal and, indeed, the entire archipelago. About ten generations ago, when there were only a few Galápagos tortoises on the island, one of them had landed on a beach and plunged into the sea.

“It was at that point that the sea began to rise, and with it, people began to leave the island and not return. It was then that we stopped inhabiting the coast,” Julio said, with a look of nostalgia for something that he had not experienced but had thought about thousands of times.

“They say that Sister Tortuga was so big she caused all the waters to rise,” Alejandro said.

“Yes, and, well, it has been told in so many ways. What my grandfather told me, that his grandfather told him, is that it was actually all slow, very slow. There was no big wave. It was imperceptible. The sea began to rise little by little, inch by inch, day by day. And suddenly the town’s old boardwalk was no longer walkable. It was all quieter than what is usually said. But no less painful for that.”

The silence that ensued was immediately interrupted:

“So, Alejo, will you come down with me to see the tortoise?” the old man proposed, with the mischievous look that had distinguished him since childhood, and the certainty of knowing what Alejandro wanted to hear.

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An enveloping nightly drizzle made it easier to leave the town unnoticed. Crossing a small forest of scalesias, with their rhizomatic branches loaded with mosses, they came to an overlook where they could sense the immensity of the ocean, and the dark profile of the island. Julio specified with authority the route they would take: “We stop, first, at Cristóbal Viejo. Then we continue to Playa Baquerizo, where Raquel is.”

Alejandro completed: “Raquel and the tortoise.” They both smiled like children.

At a leisurely pace, near dawn, an old path led them to the rubble of the abandoned city, Cristóbal Viejo. Dozens of rusty columns could barely be seen amid the swaying of the sea. Alejandro and Julio walked down a street that still stood between the outlines of old rooms covered in *matazarnos*, black rocks and small dry bushes. Cristóbal Viejo was a holy place, to which a pilgrimage was made once a year from Tres Palos and other hamlets in the highlands. One of the arrival points of the pilgrimage was La Concha, an esplanade on the shores of the sea that filled and emptied with shallow water in

accordance with the tide. It was known for being the place where “the last assembly” had taken place, the one in which the people decided to leave Cristóbal Viejo.

“I believe what my grandfather told me. Right here, those who did not want to go to the island highlands took the last boat to the mainland and did not return again. The few that remained, our ancestors, went up. That last goodbye was so sad that people grew suspicious of coming back down to the coast. It was painful to leave families and friends, but so was leaving this place behind. In the highlands, with those giant tortoises, we found consolation,” said Julio, looking at La Concha.

They took a break in the rubble of la Catedral, another of the pilgrimage stops, very close to La Concha. It was said that the rubble of the Cathedral’s columns depicted the skeleton of a tortoise, and it was considered the original church of the friars. Indeed, the religious men who originally came to these islands were known as Franciscans. With the grief caused by the abandonment of the island, a few friars stayed and accompanied those who decided to inhabit the upper part. From that insularity that disconnected them from the rest of the globe, a new type of spirituality structured around the question of how to relate to the non-human. New meanings of “reuniting” with the transcendental began to emerge from a conception of brotherhood with the rest of the creature world: the sister tortoises, brother bat, brother mockingbirds, sister sea lion, sister finches and others. In those centuries, each island seemed to have turned that fraternal understanding toward the contemplation of specific species through herding. Thus, in these islands a different relationship with nature had been built, or, rather, a relationship between all those who inhabited the islands, be they humans, plants, animals, stars and even objects.

All this did not cease to captivate the lost or curious mainlanders who rarely came to the archipelago. Certainly, things had changed in the Andean continent after the rise of the sea, but there was an archaic prevailing premise of fragmenting everything between those with spirit, the humans, and that which they considered to lack tremendous quality. Some Andeans branded the islanders totemists; others, more sensitive, said that it was an ontological matter.

From this new spirituality, in addition to meditative herding with animals, the friars also carried out contemplative exercises with holy places, such as the rubble of the Cathedral. It was said that it was a sacred place and that the materiality of the rubble could vibrate and reveal meaning. Julio and Alejandro contemplated the rubble of that church facing the sea. Alejandro's anxious nature, however, hampered his meditation efforts. Finally, he said:

“But then, did the Sister Tortuga exist or not? Is it a real or a figurative story? How is it possible that all this we see now destroyed was inhabited once?”

“Of course, the Sister Tortuga existed,” Julio answered with forceful calm. “What I do not believe is that she caused the ‘great wave’ that is often talked about. It was more of a sign, a message that things could change more than one thinks. Even if you spend 4 lives and you never see a Galápagos tortoise go into the sea, it doesn't mean it can't happen. Sister Tortuga existed. I believe it. And more deeply now that this other giant tortoise has come down to the sea.

“But if so, what can happen now? What relationship did Sister Tortuga have with the abandonment of Cristóbal Viejo?”

“I'm not sure. But we know two things: one, Sister Tortuga existed, just as our grandparents have told us. And, two, as we see these ruins, this city got under water and was abandoned. What can we learn from these two things?” The friar paused, caressing the rust of an old iron between his fingers. “That unimaginable things can happen. It can happen that a giant tortoise goes down to the coast and swims in the sea. It may happen that the largest city on the planet gets abandoned. It can happen that the sea rises and falls. It can happen, as we have been told, that the Galápagos tortoise almost disappeared before; and it can happen, as we see before our eyes, that there are hundreds and thousands of them today.”

“Then, it could be that simply, at the time of Sister Tortuga, people were starting to notice something that could have been happening for a long time: the rising of the sea. Remember, also, what grandparents told us: in the past, the people of the city lived in a hurry, busy, without stopping. They said they couldn't be alone in a room, that they couldn't stand themselves, that they couldn't... be. Some say that those of the mainland, even today, continue like this. Remember why we contemplate, why we do all this now. Because we learned from the Galapagos tortoise that it is necessary to stop, walk slowly, contemplate. If we value something now, it is to be able to be, *estar*. As you say, perhaps long before Sister Tortuga, the sea was already rising, but people didn't even notice it. And perhaps Sister Tortuga's message was that the extraordinary can happen slowly, it may even be happening right now, if you look closely, if you just observe, if you feel.”

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They returned to the road to Playa Baquerizo. The conversation with Julio felt like a revelation to Alejandro, but his long and hurried steps betrayed his haste to reach Raquel's mysterious beach. Together, since childhood, they had been unified in their vocation to become friars, with Julio's mentoring. Alejandro could not forgive the path she had taken by leaving, almost without hesitation, the formality of community life. They had not spoken to each other since.

A slight salty smell announced a small white sand beach. There was Raquel, with her characteristic sun-tanned skin, sitting near a mangrove. And there, too, it was: an adult Galapagos tortoise submerged in water. As on land, he was calm.

Julio greeted Raquel affectionately, and without saying anything, he walked away to the other end of the beach where he observed the tortoise swimming. Alejandro and Raquel were alone for the first time in several years. Raquel's brand-new smile undid the tension with which Alejandro initially approached her.

“So you came down to the coast? You had to see it by yourself, huh? Man of little faith.”

“So this is where you have come to live?” Alejandro replied with a certain masculine awkwardness, neutralized by Raquel's response:

“I was waiting for you.”

Raquel began to walk, showing Alejandro part of the beach as if it were her house. They did not approach Julio; they understood he wanted to be alone with the Galápagos tortoise.

“Well, yes, I had to see it, I had to see it.” Alejandro shuddered, and restless, as always, he asked: “And what is the tortoise doing?”

“*Nada*,” Raquel replied with a nostalgic laugh of the old humor of friends, but she continued more seriously: “He is simply there. The tortoise has gone out to the beach, but reentered the sea. Maybe he wanted to cool off. Alejo, do you want to go for a walk to Tijeretas to catch up?”

“And if the tortoise comes out of the sea?”

“Hey, we’re not here to watch over him, but to accompany him. Also, Julio will be here and will want to be alone.”

Alejandro had forgotten these random twists while talking with Raquel; he recalled that internal voice, driven by social norms, that had judged Raquel for her unpredictable behavior. Still, he followed her, wondering if it made sense to have gone to see the tortoise and to now leave him so soon.

They took a path towards the cove that they called “Tijeretas.” It was a clear day. The fresh green of the coast, which opened with the drizzle of recent days, contrasted with the deep blue of the ocean. From the cove you could see small heads of sea turtles coming out to breathe. Young sea lions played chasing each other. The frigates flew overhead, wagging their scissor tails. Raquel and Alejandro approached a shore. She sat up and stretched her feet out into the water.

“The water is already starting to get cool,” Raquel began.

“Hey, you have no respect for anything. How can you not mind touching the sea?”

“Why? Don't we believe in acting like the Galapagos tortoise? Well, right now there is one nearby swimming in the sea.”

Alejandro blushed. He knew Raquel well enough to know that she wasn't looking for a fight. She was just being serious.

“Ok, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to complain. But I don't understand why we came here and left the tortoise. What happened is not trivial. Didn’t friar Zarathustra once say to the sun: What would your happiness be reduced to if you did not have those to whom you shine!?”

“Hmm. You’re still the same, Alejo. You have something of the Andean people who think that their immense mountains exist only to be admired. My grandma used to say, ‘Flowers do not bloom to please others, they bloom for themselves, for their own joy.’ And, well, yes, we have decided to herd Galápagos tortoises, contemplate them, learn from them. Certainly, they should be happy, as we are, for that company. But it is very different than their reason for being is to be the admiration of others.”

“Well, but then what is the revelation of the Galapagos tortoise in the sea?” Alejandro insisted.

“If there were a revelation, it’d be the fortune to share the joy of that flower that blooms or, now, to be able to share this exceptional happening of a giant tortoise swimming in the sea.”

“But we’re not there sharing this fortune with the tortoise. We must return.”

“You know, before, people moved without observing. Now, let’s not observe without moving,” said Raquel, shaking her feet in the water. “Look, if Sister Tortuga taught us to observe that the sea could rise, how could it mean that we stay locked up there in the highlands fearing the sea that surrounds us? Please, do not force me to get stuck.”

Alejandro sighed, torn between the discomfort of returning to a straightforward Raquel, and the sweet suspicion of making sense of what she was saying.

“The sea that surrounds us,” he repeated timidly, with a short step towards the shore. “Without being afraid of the sea? But it is immense, unpredictable!”

Raquel answered with a smile.

“So” continued Alejandro, “what you say is that if people from the past never stopped to contemplate because they were busy all the time, we should be careful not to stagnate in contemplating without moving?”

“Just like the Galapagos,” she answered.

They both paused. Alejandro took a step closer to the shore. He sat up and stretched his legs towards the water with the strangeness of a thing done for the first time.

“It’s cold, huh?”

“Now I understand why the tortoise has gotten into the sea,” Alejandro answered in a low-childish voice.

“Exactly! Now do it with all of your body. Come on, the sea is calm.”

Suddenly, Raquel got up, took off her old Franciscan habit and, naked, jumped into the water. She called Alejandro.

“You know I can’t swim. How did you learn, Raquel?”

“It took me a while, but I learned by watching the marine iguanas. I suppose that is what the tortoise saw. The question is how these iguanas learned to swim.” They both laughed.

The hours had passed, and the sun was just over the ocean, plunging towards the sea. So did Alejandro. With suspicion, held by the rocks on the shore, he slowly introduced his body. The cold of the water was transformed into an internal heat that seemed to be enlivened by the movements of his feet. He took a deep breath, while feeling the penetrating taste of the sea splashing on his face. “The sea that surrounds us”, he whispered, letting himself be enveloped by this enormous being.