

On the Trail of the Tyrant

“When I saw the vessel with full sails sailing away, I felt like one born again. I gave thanks to God for having saved me from the clutches of the monster. I did not even mind being poor and destitute. I found the island and its town destroyed.”

So said a Captain Altamirano, recalling the departure in 1561 of Lope de Aguirre from Margarita Island.

Altamirano was standing on a spot much like the one where I stand now, on the peak of Cerro Copey, before a sweeping view to the sea, the distant glitter of Porlamar hanging like a parasite on the edge of the earth. Amidst the squawks of brightly plumaged birds, I throw rocks at hanging mangoes until one falls into my hands. Eating it this way feels like something suspiciously close to paradise. But this isn't paradise; it's Venezuela.

I've come here to find Lope de Aguirre, and he's proving elusive, something far away. But that is Venezuela, too, a mysterious land of autocratic leaders, an official position of enmity against my home country, and a weary population that roots for Spain during the World Cup not out of any linguistic solidarity, but rather because of some odd wistfulness for the days before independence. As one local puts it, here in the 200th year since the violent break from the mother country: “Venezuela would be better off if our king was in Madrid, and not in Caracas.”

Below me is Asunción, the sleepy colonial capital of Margarita, municipal buildings stretching in a straight line from the shaded Plaza Bolívar, with the requisite statue of the Liberator decked with flowers. Astride the Plaza Bolívar is Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Venezuela's second oldest church, begun in the 1570s. Across the plaza from the church is the Casa de Cultura, where the world's only statue of Aguirre resides. Bronzed, Lope stands roughly seven feet tall and stares ahead somewhat benignly from beneath a plumed helmet. He's arrayed from tip to toe in armor. In his left hand he holds a scroll, perhaps his famous letter to King Philip II denouncing him. The right hand grips only the hilt of a sword. The blade has long been missing, a victim of vandals when he stood in a more public place in front of the Municipal Palace.

When I first see Aguirre, I tentatively reach out my hands to touch him, awaiting a sharp reprimand. But this is Margarita Island, and rules, where they exist, seem merely suggestions. Soon, I'm running my fingers all over him, even caressing the beard. I've spent the past sixteen months writing a book about Lope de Aguirre, and now, touching the only statue of him on the planet, it has the feeling of pilgrimage, of holy reunion, of something so monumental that I fight back tears.

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I have a noon appointment the next day with Carlos Stohr. He lives on a street typical of the area around Playa El Agua: a gorgeous posada or hotel, gleaming and polished, ringed with razor wire, occupying a space next to open lots filled with mounds of garbage, grazing goats, and skeletal cows. Nearby are residential houses, each a squat one-storey structure with a satellite TV dish. Invariably, a car as old as I sits out front, a monument to ingenuity or despair, or perhaps some combination. Often, the car is running, emitting black smoke and pumping American tunes from the 80s: it's as if these songs and these cars come here for resurrection – Lionel Ritchie and a Toyota Cressida; Earth, Wind, and Fire and a Chevrolet Chevette.

I knock on the metal grating and Carlos lets me in. As he opens the door, he looks at his watch. “Am I early?” I ask. He shrugs and changes the time. Carlos is a Czech national who speaks thirteen languages, is married to a Danish woman, and has lived on Margarita Island for

more than 50 years. He's a few days shy of his 80th birthday, but he still looks vigorous, his hair retaining deep black patches. His shoulders are broad and while he moves with a slight limp, he is constant action: turning down the radio, flitting about his papers, disappearing behind a curtain to the back of the house and emerging with a small Venezuelan guitar.

Carlos is an accomplished artist, named an official graphic chronicler by the Venezuelan Chronicler's Association. His paintings of island folk life line the walls of the posada where I'm staying. He is also a historian and radio show host. Surrounded by thousands of sketches and watercolors – on the walls, in piles on half a dozen small desks, on the floor, on top of a TV that looks like it hasn't been used in decades – Carlos strums the high-pitched guitar and sings a bawdy tune about the local ladies of the night.

"Welcome, Evan" he says, shaking my hand. His grip is strong and sure, evidenced by the straight lines and surety in his artwork. "You want to know about El Tirano?" he asks.

I nod; El Tirano, "The Tyrant," is the name Aguirre is best known for on Margarita Island. Understandable: he unleashed mayhem on this island so complete that it's comparable today only to the crazed driving on Margarita's roads or to the street crime in Caracas.

Just a few miles from Carlos's house is the town of Paraguachí, which in the native Guaiqueri language roughly translates as "place of abundant lobsters." The lobsters are still here, but the Guaiqueri are long gone, decimated centuries ago by the Spanish whose descendants renamed Paraguachí as Puerto Fermin after one of their independence fighters. But in honor of Aguirre's having landed here in 1561, the town is called El Tirano and the beach, Playa El Tirano. I'll be heading there after my visit with Carlos.

We settle in on swivel chairs. I've forgotten to bring water and he hasn't offered any. And it's hot. Carlos starts by trying to define the Latin character. "We are different," he says about he and I. He, the European. I, the ancestor of Europeans.

Carlos struggles through a definition of the Latin man, what makes him tick. His introduction is peppered with positives: "nice, compassionate, full of life." But he lands where he clearly doesn't want to. For lack of a better word, he declares, the Latins are "lazy."

There really is a better word, but he doesn't use his English very often, he tells me. And while I think his English is perfect, he flips through a tattered Spanish-English dictionary as we talk, offering synonyms that have lost their general usage decades ago.

Carlos struggles through, trying desperately to define exactly what it is. I watch as a droplet of sweat works its way from his forehead, weaving a path through the forest of his substantial eyebrows. It hangs precipitously for a moment before dripping to the desk and curling the edge of one of his sketches. I watch in a haze, the room starting to spin. "Not lazy, no," he says, flipping through the dictionary, one yellowed page losing its grip on the spine and fluttering to the floor. "Not industrial," he says.

As he tries to peg it down, offering a series of Spanish words I'm unfamiliar with, it occurs to me that it's all rather simple: it's not laziness. It's lethargy, and it's because it's just so fucking hot. Carlos can offer all the parables he wants about the Latin man who lies in his hammock while the mangos drop around him. Of course he fails to make marmalade; it's too damned hot to work.

On cue, Carlos declares that he needs a nap; he suggests we meet tomorrow for lunch with Pedro Bellorin, the man who co-hosts the radio show with him.

I escape the suffocating heat of the house and retire to a hammock strung out on the balcony of my posada. Whenever I'm in the tropics, I'm drawn to hammocks, resolving that I'll get one the moment I'm home. But I never do; it's not the same. Hammocks seem to require not

only debilitating heat, but the peculiar sound of wind-whipped palm fronds, scraping together like cardboard, and the eerie, guttural calls of liquid-throated birds of paradise. I find myself sometimes in the dead of winter at home playing the tape of the yellow-rumped cacique I recorded in the Peruvian Amazon. But it's not the same as being there – it's never the same.

But I am here now. And I'm finding Venezuela impenetrable, dreamlike. It began with dire warnings from the Venezuelan next to me on the flight from the States: "Do not visit Simon Bolívar's house," he warned. "Do not take the subway. Do not go to the colonial center. It embarrasses me; Caracas is my home. But even I do not walk the streets anymore." When we landed in Caracas, he shook my hand: "Welcome to Venezuela," he said. "Now, you should head to Colombia."

The blanket of midday heat, the fluidity of dissipating time, the echo of Carlos playing his guitar, the peculiar stillness of midday, the scurry of lizard legs on the periphery. It's all something I can't quite catch up to, and it conspires to knock me out.

When I awake, I have only an hour of daylight left to check out Playa El Tirano.

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It is 449 years to the day Aguirre and his band of revolutionaries landed on this very spot. On an expedition after the mythical city of El Dorado, Aguirre orchestrated the murder of expedition leader Pedro de Ursúa in the early morning hours of New Year's Day, 1561, installing the puppet kingling don Fernando de Guzmán and declaring his denaturalization from Spain.

There, in the darkness, fever, hostility, and pestilence of the Amazonian jungle, Aguirre launched a revolution. Playing puppet master to Guzmán, Aguirre eventually tired of his ineffectual leadership and carried out Guzmán's murder as well. Declaring himself the new "Prince of *Tierra Firme* and of Peru, and Governor of Chile," he soon added another moniker, one which would lend itself to the title of a 1972 Werner Herzog biopic, "The Wrath of God."

After nine months of slogging through the jungle, down the Amazon, the Japurá, northeast into the Río Negro, east to the watery maze of the Cassaquiari Canal, they picked up the Orinoco, where I will be in a few days, out into the Amacuro Delta south of Trinidad, where the Caribbean and the Atlantic meet.

More than a year after the expedition set out from Peru, the men – ragged, tired, wasted, near starvation – landed on Margarita Island. In the forty days that followed, Aguirre and his band so thoroughly terrorized the island that the name of Aguirre sent shudders through northern Venezuela for centuries after.

José Joaquín Salazar Franco, in his 1999 book *Myths and Beliefs of the Margaritans*, relates the lingering mythology: Still not finished paying penance for his crimes, the Tirano Aguirre walks the night, causing a din by dragging chains and accompanied by the howls of his victims. One can see him in several forms, but no one dares to look directly at him for fear Aguirre will attach himself to the observer. He can appear "as a ball of fire across the sky . . . or on the sea surface hitting the woodwork of the boats."

Playa El Tirano is today a pleasant crescent cove, dotted with brightly colored fishing boats and speckled with pelicans. The townsfolk are no longer shuddering at Aguirre's name; Carlos lamented that many people in El Tirano don't even know where the name comes from. (They're certainly not profiting off it, like Transylvanian towns do with their Vlad the Impaler).

Among those who do know about Aguirre, there are still many who view him as The Tyrant, the homicidal maniac the chroniclers presented in their reports in the 16th century to the judges in Santo Domingo, all the while exculpating themselves for their initial complicity in his revolt.

“Aguirre was cunning, fickle, and treacherous. He never kept a promise. He was a lecher, a glutton, and a drunkard. He never spoke well of anybody, not even his own friends,” one of the chroniclers wrote. Another offered: “He was the worst man to exist since Judas . . . One of his regular vices was to commend his soul and person to the devil. There was not a single vice that could not be found in this person.”

And yet this man, who crafted a ranting letter of opprobrium to be delivered directly to the king of Spain, became a hero to others. Simon Bolívar, the Great Liberator and father of Venezuela, called Aguirre’s letter, “The first declaration of independence in the Americas.” Latin American novelists, suspicious of official histories, have rewritten his story to absolve him of his crimes. In this version, to which I admit sympathy, Aguirre’s murder of his own daughter, Elvira, is a loving act, committed to spare her the inevitable rape and torture for being the offspring of a traitor to the Crown.

I pick my way along the beach, letting the soft lap of waves snake around my toes. On the breakwater to my right stands a large whitewashed cross, bedecked with ungainly black vultures and standing sentinel over the spot where the Aguirre statue originally stood in the 1950s. I try to imagine him landing here. But it’s next to impossible, what with a road behind me, the din of competing radios, a house on the hill above the cove, the inevitable Dish TV bowl sprouting from the roof.

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I often find myself pulled between two basic beliefs: that life should be better than it is, and that when it appears better, it’s really worse. Back in the hammock, darkness having descended, I’m struck with the feeling that I’m missing out on something. Against my better instincts, I wander out in the direction of the beach and what I know are a few bars there. Brushing past a toothless hag offering me a massage (her emphasis on the first syllable: “MA-ssage”), I screw up my courage and enter a bar, trying to figure out a way to insert myself into someone else’s good time.

But it’s off-season, and the place is empty. Still, I imagine the scene is the same as it will be in a few weeks, when Venezuelans will descend en masse during summer holiday: a bowtied bartender twirls cocktail shakers and bottles, under the arm, around the chest and back, pouring with one hand while the other expertly slices through wedges of tropical fruit, all the while his eyes trained straight ahead, on an admiring German couple and me. I stare intently at his fingers, which I’m sure will soon be reposing next to a lime wedge or a papaya, separated from their joints. Of course, this doesn’t happen; his act has been honed to perfection. But the bartender’s mimetic display has the feel of a pantomime. It’s the same show he puts on for a packed house, despite the fact that there are only three of us.

The familiar old feeling comes back to me: I see the bartender’s performance and I feel the falseness of it, even the desperation, and yet I can’t help feeling envy at the German couple, who have by now quit watching the bartender and are instead nuzzling their noses like Eskimos. I head out.

For a fleeting moment, even the faux intimacy of a “MA-ssage” is attractive.

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A decent sleep is impossible – there are myriad noises throughout the night: incessant barking dogs, driving rain, blaring radios (bone-rattling, filling-loosening music). Once, I think it’s morning, only to discover it’s only 2 A.M. But the noises soon subside, and I can steal a few hours of rest. But by dawn, which comes very early in the Tropics, a new set of noises: the shocking alarm of roosters, followed by the solemn lowing of cows, the inane bleat of goats. By

7 o'clock, the fish peddlers with their microphones are wailing, announcing the catch of the day, followed down the street by a parade of dogs. (It seems that every other dog on Margarita Island has teats so swollen they're dragging on the ground. Assuming that gender distribution in canines is roughly equivalent to that of humans, it means every female canine on Margarita Island is or has recently been pregnant).

At 11 A.M., Carlos is outside waiting for me, half an hour late. He drives a 1970 Ford Fairlane that looks like it's held together by duct tape, chewing gum, and Elmer's glue. There's no seat belt in the front passenger seat. Horrified that he'll insist on driving, I delicately suggest that I'll take us to the restaurant to meet Pedro.

"No, no," he says, waving me off. "This car is far too dangerous."

"I meant my rental car," I say, pointing to my Renault Twingo, which I've earlier in the day filled up with gas at 4 cents a gallon. He seems thrilled.

Driving on Margarita Island is an act of faith. Just the day before, while heading up the north coast to Juangriego, through a series of small towns, each with vaguely threatening men lining and filling the streets, I took a sweeping curve to see someone screaming at me and traveling at least 80 mph in my lane to avoid a crater in his own. He swerved home at the last moment. I glanced back in tension and shock, and when I looked again at the road in front of me, I slammed on my brakes just in time to avoid smacking into a bull. It was a study in anatomy – the bones and muscle all working in concert, the thinness of the animal, its skin draped over its rib cage, revealing all the internal mechanisms. The bull stopped, stilled except for a circular working of its lower jaw. We stared at each other for a moment, its black eyes seeming to offer reproach or appeal, before a young kid gave it a thwack on its posterior and it loped across the road.

At a restaurant in El Tirano, Pedro is already waiting for us. Handsome and distinguished looking, he appears to be in his early 60s. He's also something of a local celebrity, apparently: host of the popular radio talk show, a onetime city councilman, the most respected historian on the island. I notice a couple seated behind us turns to look when Carlos introduces us and announces Pedro's full name.

The heat is something alive and enveloping; we down several bottles of water and await the house specialty, lobster swimming in a spicy orange broth with peppers and onions and some tropical intermingling of spices I can't identify, and which nearly takes my head off. Pedro manages to look cool somehow, but the sweat pours off me. No matter; the food is delicious, the beer and water flow, and Carlos and Pedro exchange beautiful, rapid-fire Spanish before Carlos translates the answers to my questions.

But when I ask what I most want to know – what these men themselves think of Aguirre: was he a freedom fighter, a revolutionary in the mold of Bolívar, or was he, as history will have it, an unmitigated villain – all I get are demurrals. I ask again, to make sure the question is clear, but still no clear answers. I think to insist; why would such a question be so impolitic? Are people listening in? Listening for the wrong answer? The king is in Caracas, over the sea and coastal mountains.

But the questions are soon subsumed by an apparent confusion over the bill. It's 520 bolivars, about four times what Carlos had earlier assured me it would be. I had insisted on paying, and I'm about 200 bolivars short. It's still a bargain at around \$70, but it does mean that in a torrent of apologies and a near tripping over my chair, I have to back away and drive back to my posada for the extra cash, all under the suspicious eyes of the owner, Doña Elise, and a bemused look on Pedro's face. Aguirre has taken a back seat to cold, hard commerce.

Life does get on – it has been four and a half centuries, after all.

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Margarita Island is the sort of place that leaves a lot of people feeling ambivalent about their vacation choice – much of this depends upon your nationality. For Venezuelans, it's great, a national birthright, like virtually free gasoline. Folks escaping the tension and madness of Caracas can choose from a slew of domestic airlines that more or less keep their posted promises. It's a quick 35 minute flight from the capital – beckoning with all its glorious beaches, warm waters, and duty-free shopping.

But if you're a North American, you can feel deceived by the slick tourist campaigns, which of course fail to show the mounds of garbage that speckle every street on the island. Margarita can be an absolute horror show to a fastidious Northern European coming from a place where one can eat off the streets. In Porlamar, the largest city, the high-rise, semi-luxury hotels ringing the sea offer hotel windows which mirror the pictures – white sand beaches, clear blue Caribbean waters, speckles of faraway islands on cloudless days. But woe to the person who turns from that window and heads in the other direction, into Porlamar proper, choked with traffic, crime, and desperation. These aren't particularly great times for Venezuela, and despite the promises of escape, this is still Venezuela.

But escape, even here, is possible. On the west side of Margarita Island is the Macanao Peninsula, a semi-desolate area of scrub desert with a mountainous interior. Diminutive fishing villages, several at the end of dirt paths through the cacti, dot the blue Caribbean coast, white sand and palm trees thrown in the bargain. It's a beautiful place if you can get past the piles of garbage and dead dogs lining the road.

Intent on doing just that, I pull off to the side, engage the car's two security devices, and head off toward the water. Picking my way through a maze of cacti and discarded detritus, I brush past the last curve and find the wide sea before me. It's an unruffled mirror, disturbed only when flocks of pelicans swoop down in search of a meal. Walking along the coast, I'm aware that I'm on a well trod path, though I see no one. But up the hill rising to my left I spot a fisherman's shrine, a tattered and faded Venezuelan flag stretching its silken frayed threads toward a crude little cross, etched with, "Pescador. Cruz." Below me is a beach of perfect sea shells – orange and pink homes polished by sun and surf. I run my fingers through and listen to them clink. I'm conscious of a heavy feeling that I'm trespassing: how can such sublimity not be off limits to strangers like me?

But no one shoos me away – there is no reprimand, no admonishment, no rusted sign I choose to ignore telling me I shouldn't be here. No, this world is mine. But the man I've come to see, at least his ghost, resides on the other side of the island. Aguirre never came to this side.

As I cross the bridge through the mangroves back to the east side of Margarita, a cadre of Venezuelan police wielding AK-47s waves me to the side of the road. The first policeman, a young smiling guy, asks for my passport. I tell him it's in my hotel. He calls over an older gentleman, the commandant, obviously, who asks again for the passport. "Hotel," I shrug, and hand him my rental agreement and Maryland driver's license, which he looks at with complete perplexity from behind red-rimmed and glassy eyes. "Pais?" he asks. "United States," I say. "Estados Unidos," waiting for retribution. He eyes my watch; I suspect I'll soon be parting with it. "Bonito," he says. "Pero es un error."

Apparently, my watch is off by half an hour. But I've functioned for days this way, meeting appointments, even making flights. He checks the car and my bags, but not my body, claps me on the shoulder, and waves me on. The lesson, I assume, is that if you're going to

smuggle drugs on the west side of Margarita Island, put them in your pockets. The other lesson: here, time is elastic.

When I rejoin the southern highway, I pull off at Punta Piedras. It is here, in 1561, when it was called Puerto de Piedras, that the Provincial Montesinos, fresh off his meeting with Aguirre defectors and taking a break from evangelizing the natives, laid up his ship and contemplated an attack on the Tyrant. He eventually thought better of it, opting instead to alert the authorities along the mainland coast, an act either of prudence or cowardice that later earned him official enmity for not engaging Aguirre.

There's a lovely church in Punta Piedras, plus a sprinkling of shops and restaurants, with the streets radiating from the central plaza, each lined by attached, one-storey residences. Activity is confined mostly to the blocks south, on the water, where the ferry terminals stand: it is here where you can get to the mainland much cheaper than flying. But Aguirre isn't here.

With darkness coming on quickly, I join the throngs on the highway and weave like a tyrant through the roads until I pull off west of Porlamar and start a slow climb into the hills, reaching the town of El Valle del Espiritu Santo at the tail end of a rainstorm. El Valle, as the name implies, sits cradled between green rippling hills, as if set down by a divine hand. The town serves as Margarita Island's spiritual center. My lack of belief notwithstanding, I must admit that serenity pervades the place. Perhaps it's the suffused light of dusk, distended by a steamy drizzle, like a giant hand has rung out the last of a sponge in the sky. Perhaps the prohibition on automobiles in the town center. Perhaps the gloriously beautiful gingerbread Church of the Virgin of El Valle, dedicated to the patron saint of eastern Venezuela. Perhaps the nearby Sanctuary of the Virgin, containing thousands of holy pieces left by visiting supplicants. Or maybe the grotto just off the plaza, with its ceramic blessed Virgin Mary, a little Lourdes but without the sad terror of the afflicted burdening its corners with their desperate pleas. The church stands on a plaza that is a checkerboard of brick and stone, soft colors that make it feel as if you've landed in someone's tile-floored kitchen.

The sun has become a faint suggestion in the western sky, but the clouds have ceased their spitting. I walk through the courtyard pulled by soft prayer echoing from the open church doors. I peek inside and see a young girl – perhaps twelve or thirteen – intoning into a microphone. She is what twelve or thirteen should be, but rarely seems to be anymore: a last hold upon innocence, a rare burst of loveliness uncorrupted by experience – a world of possibility unto herself. But what self-possession! True, she doesn't look up to meet the gaze of her audience, but there is no blush upon the neck and cheek, no rising of blood that says she's aware that a couple hundred people have their eyes upon her.

“What is going on?” I ask one of the pilgrims who's emerging from the maze of tents offering religious trinkets.

“Confirmation,” the pilgrim answers, a pretty lace shawl wrapped around her head. She wears a lacy dress also, and suddenly it is I who becomes self-conscious, in my damp shorts and t-shirt. I duck out, into a world that is now still and at rest, the soft lights of night twinkling on, a hundred dinners waiting for the arrivals from the church, the townspeople who have come to bear witness and rejoice. They will soon retire to their homes, and I will be shut out. It's not that they can smell my insufficient piety. It's not a lack of hospitality; it's just that their homes are here, and mine is two thousand miles away.

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During my time on Margarita, there are three scheduled power outages. The official explanation is maintenance, but “that is a lie,” several locals assure me. Caracas is taking energy from Margarita, which is otherwise self-sustaining, and siphoning it off to the mainland.

The great English explorer Henry Morton Stanley is supposed to have said upon hearing Big Ben, as he lay dying in London, “So that is Time!” The impending power outage, set for 8 o’clock, has taken me back to a land with Time, away from a place where events seem to unfold on their own, without regard to time or schedule.

I lay in my hammock, lazy swings contributing to my inability to take it all in. It’s as if Venezuela is out there, just beyond my reach. Aguirre is there, too, haunting the hinterlands, knocking against boats, dragging chains, appearing in the form of flames issuing from the earth. I still have places to visit, towns that were here when Aguirre landed, though physical remnants of the 16th century are long gone. I’ll have one more visit with Carlos and Pedro, but I’m beginning to suspect that Aguirre will remain a phantom, a man who has haunted me for a year and a half, one to whom I have dedicated 90,000 words, and what feels like as many hours. I have found a publisher for my book; Aguirre will see the light of day. But he’ll remain slippery, a contradictory figure for a contradictory land – a paradise with a black side.

And then, with a punctuality totally unbecoming Venezuela, the power goes off precisely at 8 P.M.

And Margarita Island goes dark.