

Edgardo Krebs, marzo 2016

I always know when someone dear to me or important in my life has passed away. I cannot describe the sensation, only say that the other world that lives inside of us, responsible for our more mysterious dreams and premonitions, tapped me on my shoulder a few days ago. I began thinking of my friend and mentor Rafael Squirru (1925-2016). I knew what it meant. I've been through that before. Today I learned that he, indeed, had died on March 5. He was an art critic, a poet, a translator of Shakespeare. Not an ivory tower intellectual, but a doer, a man of action, as insolent and unapologetic in defense of art and high standards as one of those tough guys played by James Cagney in black and white Hollywood films when he roughed people up. He had studied law in Edinburgh. Never practiced but retained a bedrock admiration for the Scottish Enlightenment and the discipline needed for clear argumentation. I once called him out of the blue to ask him to write a piece for a literary journal I was a contributing editor at. He invited me for dinner in his apartment. His wife Mary (of Scottish Argentine descent) liked me. The following day I turned around on the street when a tall man with a beret, Squirru, called me at the top of his voice and in the middle of traffic (Che, Krebs!!!) to tell me that Mary had a young girl she wanted me to meet. I was adopted. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. We lived a block away so Squirru insisted that every Wednesday morning I pick him up at his place and we walked together to a bar where he had his table. We had breakfast surrounded by a constant floating cast of painters and writers. All this happened during the Dirty War years. Everybody I met at that table was extraordinary. When time came for me to leave for Oxford, Rafael gave me a painting by a well known Argentine artist. "We are going to sell it and you will take the money. I want to make sure that you leave Argentina. If necessary I will kick your ass all the way to the pier and throw you into the water." He had a Maussian sense of the gift. Everything you give will come back to you. And he was most generous at giving. But very demanding as well: no lazy thinking, no second rate work. I attended some lectures he gave on Shakespeare. I had been reading a Pelican book on English culture during Shakespeare's time and ventured to make some comments on that. He stopped the class right away and threw me out. "We are here to read Shakespeare, he said, don't bother me with second hand bullshit." In the sixties he had a position at the OAS in DC, as secretary of culture. He did many holy-crazy things during his tenure. Also witnessed the riots that followed Martin Luther King's assassination. And befriended JFK. When JFK was slain, Squirru commissioned an Uruguayan sculptor to make a statue of the American president. The statue shows Kennedy wearing an Indian poncho. When the sculpture was inaugurated in Quemu Quemu, province of La Pampa, a military regime governed Argentina. Rafael broke all the protocols, insulted with well honed irony the top brass that attended the event, and as a consequence was declared persona non grata in the Province of La Pampa. He was an elective, adoptive father to me, a benign, tough and impossible to classify force. Chau, Rafa! Qué personaje!