

Eduardo Galeano

The Story of the Lizard Who Had the Habit of Dining on His Wives

(URUGUAY)

At the edge of the river, hidden by the tall grass, a woman is reading. Once upon a time, the book tells, there lived a man of very great substance. Everything belonged to him: the town of Luncanamarca, everything around it, the dry and the wet, the tamed and the wild, all that had memory, all that had oblivion.

But that lord of all things had no heir. Every day his wife offered a thousand prayers, begging for the blessing of a son, and every night she lit a thousand candles.

God was fed up with the demands of that persistent woman, who asked for what He had not wished to grant. Finally, either to avoid having to hear her voice any longer or from divine mercy, He performed the miracle. And joy descended on that household.

The child had a human face and the body of a lizard. With time, he spoke, but he slithered along on his belly. The finest teachers from Ayacucho taught him to read, but his claws prevented him from writing.

At the age of eighteen, he asked for a wife. His well-heeled father found him one, and the wedding was celebrated with great pomp in the priest's house.

The first night, the lizard threw himself on his wife and devoured her. When the sun rose, in the marriage bed there was only the widower asleep, surrounded by small bones.

The lizard then demanded another wife, and there was another wedding and another devouring, and the glutton asked for yet another, and so on.

Fiancées were never lacking. In the households of the poor, there was always some spare girl.

His scaly belly lapped by river water, Dulcideo is taking his siesta. Opening one eye, he sees her. She is reading. Never before in his life has he seen a woman wearing glasses.

Dulcideo pokes forward his long snout:

—*What are you reading?*

She lowers her book, looks at him calmly, and replies:

—*Legends.*

—*Legends?*

—*Ancient voices.*

—*What for?*

She shrugs her shoulders:

—*Company.*

This woman does not seem to be from the mountains, nor the jungle, nor the coast.

—*I know how to read too, says Dulcideo.*

She closes her book and turns her face away.

Before the woman disappears, Dulcideo manages to ask:

—*Where are you from?*

The following Sunday, when Dulcideo wakes from his siesta, she is there. Bookless, but wearing glasses.

Sitting on the sand, her feet hidden under many bright-colored skirts, she is very much there, rooted there. She casts her eye on the intruder:

Dulcideo plays all his cards. He raises a horny claw and waves it toward the blue mountains on the horizon.

—*Everything you see and don't see, it's all mine.*

She does not even glance at the vast expanse, and remains silent. A very silent silence.

The heir presses on. Many lambs, many Indians, all his to command. He is lord of all that expanse of earth and water and air, and also of the small strip of sand she sits on.

—*But you have my permission, he assures her.*

Tossing her long black tresses, she bows:

—*Thank you.*

Then the lizard adds that he is rich but humble, studious, a worker and above all a gentleman who wishes to make a home but has been doomed to widowhood by the cruelties of fate.

She looks away. Lowering her head, she reflects on the situation.

Dulcideo hovers.

He whispers:

—*May I ask a favor of you?*

And he turns his side to her, offering his back.

—*Would you scratch my shoulder? I can't reach.*

She puts out her hand to touch the metallic scales, and exclaims:

—*It's like silk.*

Dulcideo stretches, closes his eyes, opens his mouth, stiffens his tail, and feels as he has never felt.

But when he turns his head, she is no longer there.

He looks for her, rushing full tilt across the field of tall grass, back and forth, on all sides. No trace of her. The woman has evaporated, as before.

The following Sunday, she does not come to the riverbank. Nor the next Sunday. Nor the following one.

Since he first saw her, he sees only her and nothing but her.

The famous sleeper no longer sleeps, the glutton no longer eats.

Dulcideo's bedroom is no longer the pleasant sanctuary he took his rest in, watched over by his dead wives. Their photographs are all there, covering the walls from top to bottom, in heart-shaped frames garlanded with orange blossoms; but Dulcideo, now condemned to solitude, lies slumped into his cushions and into despair. Doctors and medicine men come from all over, but can do nothing for the course of his fever and the collapse of everything else.

With his small battery radio, bought from a passing Turk, Dulcideo spends his nights and days sighing and listening to melodies long out of fashion. His parents, despairing, watch him pine away. He no longer asks for a wife, declaring *I'm hungry*. Now he pleads, *I am made a poor beggar for love*, and in a broken voice, and showing an alarming tendency to rhyme, he

*pays painful homage to that certain She
who stole his soul and his serenity.*

The whole populace sets out to find her. Searchers scour heaven and earth, but they do not even know the name of the vanished one, and no one has seen a woman wearing glasses in the neighborhood or beyond.

One Sunday afternoon, Dulcideo has a premonition. He gets up, in pain, and sets out painfully for the riverbank.

She is there.

In floods of tears, Dulcideo announces his love for the elusive and indifferent dream-girl. He confesses that he has died of thirst for the honys of your mouth, allows that *I don't deserve your disregard, my beautiful dove*, and showers her with compliments and caresses.

The wedding day arrives. Everyone is delighted, for the people have gone a long time without a festa, and Dulcideo is the only one there of the marrying kind. The priest gives him a good price, as a special client.

Guitar music engulfs the sweethearts, the harp and the violins sound in all their glory. A toast of everlasting love is raised to the happy pair, and rivers of punch flow under the great bouquets of flowers.

Dulcideo is sporting a new skin, pink on his shoulders and greenish blue on his prodigious tail.

When at last the two are alone and the hour of truth arrives, he declares to her:

—*I give you my heart, for you to tread on.*

She blows out the candle in a single breath, lets fall her wedding dress, spongy with lace, slowly removes her glasses, and tells him, *Don't be an asshole, knock off the bullshit*. With one tug, she unsheathes him like a sword, flings his skin on the floor, embraces his naked body, and sets him on fire.

Afterward Dulcidio sleeps deeply, curled up against this woman, and dreams for the first time in his life.

She eats him while he is still sleeping. She goes on consuming him in small bites, from head to tail, making little sound and chewing as gently as possible, taking care not to wake him, so that he will not carry away a bad impression.

Translated from the Spanish by Mark Fried



Choose another
writer in this
calendar:

by name:

A B C D E F G H
I J K L M N O P
Q R S T U V W X
Y Z

by birthday from
the calendar.

Credits and
feedback

TimeSearch
for Books and
Writers
by *Bamber
Gascoigne*

Eduardo Galeano (1940-2015)

Uruguayan essayist, journalist and historian. Galeano's best-known works include *Memoria del fuego* (1982-1986, Memory of Fire) and *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (1971, The Open Veins of Latin America), which have been translated into some 20 languages. Galeano defies easy categorization as an author. His works transcend orthodox genres, and combine documentary, fiction, journalism, political analysis, and history. The author himself denied that he is a historian: "I'm a writer obsessed with remembering, with remembering the past of America above all and above all that of Latin America, intimate land condemned to amnesia."

- **The woman and the man dreamed that God was dreaming about them.**
 - God was singing and clacking his maracas as he dreamed his dream in a tobacco smoke, feeling happy but shaken by doubt& mystery.**
 - The Makiritare Indians know that if God dreams about eating, he gives fertility and food. If God dreams about life, he is born and gives birth.**
- (from *Genesis*, part one of *Memory of Fire*, 1982)

Eduardo Galeano was born in Montevideo, the son of Eduardo Hughes Roosen, a civil servant, and Licia Esther Galeano Muñozof, a bookstore manager. His family, of Catholic Welsh, German, Spanish and Italian heritage, were members of the traditional Catholic landowning and business community, but had fallen on hard times. Galeano was educated in Uruguay until the age of 16. "I never learned in school," he once said. "I didn't like it."

In adolescence Galeano worked in odd jobs – he was a factory worker, a bill collector, a sign painter, a messenger, a typist, and a bank teller. At the age of 14 Galeano sold his first political cartoon to *El Sol*, the Socialist Party weekly. Some of his drawings illustrated the columns of Raúl Sendic, who later founded the Tupamaros National Liberation Movement (MLN-T). Galeano's pseudonym was Gius, the Spanish equivalent for his Welsh patronymic, Hughes. Later he began to use his mother's family name. Galeano's first article was published in 1954.

At the age of twenty Galeano started his career as a journalist, with little formal schooling. He was the editor-in-chief of *Marcha*, an influential weekly journal, which had such contributors as Mario Vargas Llosa, Mario Benedetti, Manuel Maldonado Denis and Roberto Fernández Retamar. For two years he edited the daily *Época* and worked as editor-in-chief of the University Press (1965-1973). As a result of the military coup of 1973, he was imprisoned and then forced to leave Uruguay. By that time he had published a novel, *Los fantasmas del día del león, y otros relatos* (1967) and several books on politics and culture. In Argentina he founded and edited a cultural magazine, *Crisis*.

Las venas abiertas de América Latina (The Open Veins of Latin America), written in just three months, made Galeano one of the most widely read Latin American writers. It was the first book by the author

to be translated into English. Also a copy of the book ended in the hands of President Obama when Venezueland President Hugo Chávez gave it to him as a present. In the well-documented series of essays the central theme was the exploitation of natural resources of Latin America since the arrival of European powers at the end of the 15th century. *The Open Veins of Latin America* was written "in the style of a novel about love or about pirates", as the author himself said. Decades later, on the 43rd anniversary of the books publication, Galeano disavowed his work. "I wouldn't be capable of reading this book again; I'd keel over," he said. "For me, this prose of the traditional left is extremely leaden, and my physique can't tolerate it." *Open Veins* has been translated into more than a dozen languages.

In 1975 Galeano received the prestigious Casa de las Américas prize for his novel *La canción de nosotros*. After the military coup of 1976 in Argentina, his name was added to the lists of those condemned by the death squads and he moved to Spain. "I lost quite a few things in Buenos Aires," he recalled in *Días y noches de amor y de guerra* (Days and Nights of Love and War). "Due to the rush or to bad luck, no one knows where they ended up. I left with a few clothes and a handful of papers." This largely autobiographical work earned him again Casa de las Américas prize.

Galeano lived mainly on the Catalan coast, where he made a living as a writer and journalist, and started to work on his masterpiece, *Memory of Fire*. At the beginning of 1985, Galeano returned to Montevideo, where he re-established *Marcha* under a new name, *Brecha*. During his exile, Galeano began to write *Memoria del fuego*, a story of America, North and South, in which the characters are real historical figures, generals, artists, revolutionaries, workers, conquerors and the conquered. Galeano started with pre-Columbian creation myths and ended in the 1980s.

The trilogy consists of short chapters, episodes which portray the colonial history of the continent. "Each fragment of this huge mosaic is based on a solid documentary foundation. What is told here has happened, although I tell it in my style & manner," Galeano wrote about his work. He also often used non-literary sources, songs, letters, newspaper advertisements, oral tradition. Fragmentary *Memoria del fuego* turns its back on pseudo-objective history – it is subjective, the prose is poetic and the author's own vision comes clearly through the elaborate web of historical scenes and facts. Among the central characters of the last part, Century of the Wind, is Miguel Marmol, a revolutionary labor organizer, who survives tortures and escapes execution. Galeano also utilized the technique of short narratives in *Espejos: Una historia casi universal* (2008, Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone), which portrays the human history from prehistory to the present.

Memoria del fuego was widely praised by reviewers. The structure of the book was considered as fascinating as the history it related, and Galeano was compared to John Dos Passos and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Ronald Wright wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement*: "Great writers... dissolve old genres and found new ones. This trilogy by one of South

America's most daring and accomplished authors is impossible to classify."

"Reality speaks a language of symbols. Each part is a metaphor of the whole."

(from *An Uncertain Grace*, 1990)

In his childhood Galeano had dreamed of becoming a soccer player, as do many Latin American young boys. In *Soccer in Sun and Shadow* (1995) the author covers the history of soccer and gives highlights of the best games and goals throughout history. Galeano compares soccer with a theater performance and with war; he criticizes its unholy alliance with global corporations but attacks leftist intellectuals who reject the game and its attraction to the broad masses because of ideological reasons. Galeano's other major work includes *We Say No* (1989), a collection of essays, autobiographical *El libro de los abrazos* (1989, *The Book of Embraces*), and *Las palabras andantes* (1993, *Walking Words*). It combines urban and rural oral tradition and insights into Latin-American reality with illustrations typical of the popular *literatura de cordel*.

In *An Uncertain Grace* (1990) Galeano wrote: "From the standpoint of the great communications media that uncommunicate humanity, the Third World is peopled by third-class inhabitants distinguishable from animals only by their ability to walk on two legs. Theirs are problems of nature not of history: hunger, pestilence, violence are in the natural order of things." Galeano was married three times – in 1959 to Silvia Brando, in 1962 to Graciela Berro and in 1976 to Helena Villagra; *Days and Nights of Love and War* was dedicated to her.

During his career as a writer Galeano survived a suicide attempt, malaria, a heart attack, imprisonment, exile, dictatorship, and political persecution. Following the creation of the Caracas-based TeleSur (La Nueva Televisora del Sur), a new Latin American TV channel, Galeano was appointed a member of its advisory board. His several awards included Premio Casa de las Américas (1975, 1978) and the American Book Award (1989). In 1999 he received the first Cultural Freedom Award from the Lannan Foundation in Santa Fe. The award was given for Galeano's outspoken critique of systemic injustice and his body of work dedicated to improving the human freedom generally. In spite of his literary accomplishments, Galeano's works have not been translated into English as much as the fiction of his countryman Juan Carlos Onetti (1909-1994). *Los hijos de los días* (2012, *Children of the Days: A Calendar of Human History*), translated by Mark Fried, collected stories, fragments, historical facts, and other pieces for each day of the year. "For all of Galeano's appreciation of history's absurdities," said Greg Grandin in his review, "he has chosen a format that leads to an ahistoric, almost medieval experience of time, a liturgical calendar in which the days don't move forward into the future but rather pile up into an eternal present." (*The New York Times*, July 26, 2013) Galeano died of cancer in Montevideo on April 13, 2015.

For further reading: *Galeano: apuntes para una biografía* by Fabián Kovacic (2016); *Eduardo Galeano: Through the Looking Glass* by Daniel Fischlin and Martha Nandorfy (2001); *Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*, ed. by Verity Smith (1997); *World Authors 1985-*

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 - **Special thanks** to Rasunah Marsden who gave the idea for this page, helped with its material, and selected quotations from *Memory of Fire: Genesis*.

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