

Excerpts from the Works of Eduardo Galeano
Ventanas, Tejidos, Abrazos
(Windows, Weavings, Embraces)

Eduardo Galeano

The following selection is taken from three books by Eduardo Galeano: *The Book of Embraces*, *Walking Words*, and *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World*. The pieces represent the author's fragmentary, aphoristic style and cover a range of themes common in all of Galeano's work. The excerpts from *The Book of Embraces* are accompanied by images created by Galeano that were included with the original text. The excerpts from *Walking Words* were originally used as breaks between fantastic, mythological stories gleaned from indigenous American peoples. The excerpts from *Upside Down* are taken from boxed inserts that interrupt longer, more polemical essays on the world at the end of the twentieth century.

Patrick Madden, Editor

WINDOW ON THE WORD/1

Storytellers, storysingers, only spin their tales while the snow falls. That's the way it's done. The Indians of North America are very careful about this matter of stories. They say that while stories are being told, plants don't pay attention to growing and birds forget to feed their young.³

CELEBRATION OF THE HUMAN VOICE/2

Their hands were tied or handcuffed, yet their fingers danced, flew, drew words. The prisoners were hooded, but leaning back, they could see a bit, just a bit, down below. Although it was forbidden to speak, they spoke with their hands. Pinio Ungerfeld taught me the finger alphabet, which he had learned in prison without a teacher:

"Some of us had bad handwriting," he told me. "Others were masters of calligraphy."

The Uruguayan dictatorship wanted everyone to stand alone, everyone to be no one: in prisons and barracks, and throughout the country, communication was a crime.

Some prisoners spent more than ten years hurried in solitary cells the size of coffins, hearing nothing but clanging bars or footsteps in the corridors. Fernández Huidobro and Mauricio Rosencof, thus condemned, survived because they could talk to each other by tapping on the wall. In that way they told of dreams and memories, fallings in and out of love; they discussed, embraced, fought; they shared beliefs and beauties, doubts and guilts, and those questions that have no answer.

When it is genuine, when it is born of the need to speak, no one can stop the human voice. When denied a mouth, it speaks with the hands or the eyes, or the pores, or anything at all. Because every single one of us has something to say to the others, something that deserves to be celebrated or forgiven by others.¹

A CHILD'S WORLD

You have to be very careful when you cross the street, Colombian teacher Gustavo Wilches explained to a group of children. "Even though the light is green, never cross without looking first one way, then the other."

Wilches told the children that once he was knocked down by a car in the middle of the street. His face darkened as he recalled the disaster that nearly cost him his life. The children asked: "What kind of car was it?" "Did it have air conditioning?" "A sunroof?" "Did it have fog lights?" "How big was the motor?"²

THE FUNCTION OF THE READER/2

It was half a century since the death of César Vallejo, and there were celebrations. In Spain, Julio Vález organized lectures, seminars, memorial publications and an exhibition offering images of the poet, his land, his time and his people.

But then Julio Vález met José Manuel Castañón, and all homage seemed insignificant.

José Manuel Castañón had been a captain in the Spanish War. Fighting for Franco, he had lost a hand and won various medals.

One night, shortly after the war, the captain accidentally came upon a banned book. He took a look, he read one line, he read another, and he could no longer tear himself away. Captain Castañón, hero of the victorious

army, sat up all night, captivated, reading and rereading César Vallejo, poet of the defeated. Next morning he resigned from the army and refused to take a single peseta more from the Franco government.

Later, they put him in jail, and he went into exile.¹



WINDOW ON THE WORD/2

In Haiti, stories may not be told during the day. Anyone who tells a story before dark is disgraced: the mountain throws a stone at his head, his mother walks on all fours.

Nighttime draws out what is sacred, and those who know how to tell stories know that the name is the very thing that it names.³

CELEBRATION OF SILENCE/2

The singer Braulio López, half of the duo Los Ohmareños, arrived in Barcelona as an exile. One of his hands was broken.

Braulio had been a prisoner in the Villa Dovoto Jail for possessing three books: a biography of José Artigas, some poems by Antonio Machado, and Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. When they were about to release him, a jailer had come into his cell and asked: "You the guitar player?" And then he stepped on Braulio's left hand with his boot.

I suggested that I interview him. The story might interest the magazine *Triunfo*. But Braulio scratched his head, thought for a moment, then said:

"No."

And he explained to me:

"My hand will heal, sooner or later. Then I'll be playing and singing again. See? I don't want to doubt the applause."¹



FAMILY CHRONICLE

Nicolás Escobar's aunt died in her sleep, peacefully, at home in Asunción, Paraguay. Nicolás was six and had already logged thousands of hours of television when he learned that he had lost his beloved elderly relative. He asked, "Who killed her?"²

HAPPENINGS/2

In the old days, Don Verídico planted houses and people all around his saloon "The Resort," so that it would not stand alone. This happened, so they say, in the town created by his own hand.

And they also say that there was treasure there, hidden in the house of a feeble old man.

Once a month, the old man, who was nearing his end, would get out of bed and go collect his pension.

Taking advantage of his absence, some thieves from Montevideo broke into his house.

The thieves searched every nook and cranny for the treasure. All they found was a wooden chest covered with blankets in one corner of the cellar. The enormous padlock that secured it resisted the lockpickers' attack undefeated.

So they made off with the chest. When they opened it far from the house, they found that it was filled with letters. They were the love letters

the old man had received throughout the course of his long life.

The thieves were going to burn the letters. They talked it over. Finally they decided to return them. One by one. One a week. Since then, every Monday at noon, the old man sat high on the hill and waited for the postman to appear down the road. As soon as he saw the horse, fat with saddlebags, emerge from among the trees, the old man started running. The postman, who knew all about it, held the letter in his hand.

And even St. Peter could hear the beating of that heart, crazed with joy of receiving woman's words.¹



WINDOW ON THE WORD/3

In the Guarani language, *ñe'ẽ* means both "word" and "soul."

The Guarani Indians believe that those who lie or squander words betray the soul.³

CONSUMER CIVILIZATION

Sometimes, at the end of the summer when the tourists left Calella, you could hear howls coming from the forest. They were the cries of dogs tethered to the trees.

The tourists used the dogs to relieve their loneliness during their vacation, and then, when the time came to leave, tied them up deep in the woods to keep them from following.¹

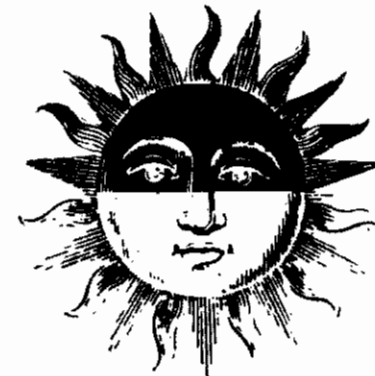


FOR RELIGION CLASS

When I went to Rome for the first time I no longer believed in God, and for me earth was the only heaven and the only hell. But my memory of God the father from my childhood wasn't a bad one, and deep inside I kept a special place for God the son, the rebel of Galilee who defied the imperial city where my Alitalia flight was then landing. Of the Holy Ghost, I confess, not much stayed with me, just a vague recollection of a white dove that dives down with outspread wings and impregnates virgins.

As soon as I walked into the Rome airport a huge sign loomed before my eyes: BANK OF THE HOLY GHOST.

I was young and it made quite an impression on me that this was what the Holy Ghost was up to.²



CELEBRATION OF CONTRADICTIONS/1

Idiot memory repeats itself as tragic litany. Lively memory, on the other hand, is born every day, springing from the past and set against it. Of all the words in the German language, *aufheben* was Hegel's favorite. *Aufheben* means both to preserve and to annul, and thus pays homage to human history, which is born as it dies and builds as it destroys.¹

WINDOW ON THE WORD/4

Magda Lemonnier clips words out of the newspapers, words of all sizes, and she keeps them in boxes. In red boxes, angry words. Loving words in a green box. Neutral ones in a blue box. Sad ones in a yellow box. And in a transparent box she keeps words that are magical.

Sometimes she opens the boxes and upends them on the table, so the words can mix as they please. Then the words tell her what is happening and foretell what will occur.³

CHRONICLE OF THE CITY OF MONTEVIDEO

Julio César Puppo, known as The Lumberjack, and Alfred Gravina met one night in a café in the neighborhood of Villa Dolores. And so, by chance, they discovered they were neighbors.

"So close without knowing it."

They offered each other a drink, then another.

"You look very well."

"Don't you believe it."

And they spent several hours and plenty of drinks speaking of the crazy weather and the cost of living, of lost friends and the places that no longer existed, of memories from their early youth:

"Remember?"

"Of course I remember."



When the café finally closed its doors, Gravina accompanied The Lumberjack to the door of his house. But then The Lumberjack wanted to reciprocate:

"I'll come with you."

"Don't bother."

"It's no problem."

And they spent the whole night going back and forth. Sometimes they would be stopped by some sudden memory or the need for a little more stability, but then they would immediately continue going from one corner to the other, from the house of one to the house of the other, from one door to the other, as if drawn and propelled by an invisible pendulum, loving each other without saying so and embracing without touching.¹

THE ZAPATISTAS

Mist is the ski mask the jungle wears. That's how it hides its persecuted children. From the mist they emerge, to the mist they return. The Indians of Chiapas wear majestic clothing, they float when they walk, and they speak softly or remain silent. These princes condemned to servitude were the first

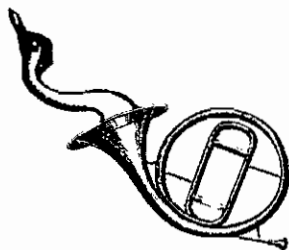
and are the last. They've been run off the land and out of the history books, and they've found refuge in mist, in mystery. From there they've emerged, wearing masks, to unmask the power that humiliates them.²

THE FIESTA

The sun was gentle, the air clear, and the sky cloudless.

Buried in the sand, the clay pot steamed. As they went from ocean to mouth, the shrimp passed through the hands of Fernando, master of ceremonies, who bathed them in a holy water of salt, onions, and garlic. There was good wine. Seated in a circle, we friends shared the wine and shrimp and the ocean that spread out free and luminous at our feet.

As it took place, that happiness was already being remembered by our memory. It would never end, nor would we. For we are all mortal until the first kiss and the second glass, which is something everyone knows, no matter how small his or her knowledge.¹



NOTES

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