

The Hour of the Little Ones, Part II: Those from Below



For all those who are little and different:

soon will come those crazed with power
refined/disloyal/a bit cannibalistic
owners of the mountains and the valleys
of the floods and the earthquakes
those standard-bearers sans standard
charitable and mean
clothing letters favors demands
sheathed in the letter box of time
—Mario Benedetti¹

This and the remaining letters in this series were first published in *La Jornada*, October 21, 1999. Originally translated by irlandesa.

1 See *Buzón de tiempo* (Alfaguara, Spain: Santillana, 1999). This and other poems from this volume were published in *La Jornada* on September 13, 1999 and are cited throughout this series of letters.

The storm is letting up a bit now. The crickets take advantage of its clearing and go back to sawing through the dawn. A great black hood covers the sky. Another rain prepares itself, even though the puddles down below report they're already full. Night comes with her own words now, and she takes from her side apparently forgotten stories. This is the hour of the story of those from below, the hour of the little ones.

Down below, the long wail of a snail calls, shadows respond with silence, snug is their armor, and hurried the black that cover their faces. The guards exchange passwords, and to the "Who goes there?" hope invariably responds, "The Homeland!" Night keeps vigil over the world of the forgotten. To do that she has made soldiers of what she remembers, and she has armed them with memory, in order to relieve the pain of the smallest ones.

Raining or not, down below the shadow without a face continues his vigil. Surely he continues writing, or reading, but, always, smoking that ever shorter pipe. Good, there's nothing to do up here, so let's visit the little house again. That way, if it rains again, we'll have a roof over our heads. Here we are. Damn! The mess is even more widespread now: papers, books, pens, old lighters. The shadow toils over his writing. He fills pages and pages. He goes back to them. He takes things out, he adds to them. On the little tape player, a very otherly sound, like music from a far-off land, in an equally distant language.

"Very otherly," I said. Yes, at the hour of the little ones, the other, what's different, also has its place. And that's what our visited shadow must have been thinking because I've managed to read "The Other" at the top of one of the pages.

But let's give him time to finish or to better define the bridge between what he thinks and feels and that elusive coquette that is the word. Well, he seems to have finished. Slowly he rises and slowly he goes over to the corner that serves as his bed. We're in luck, he has left the candle to keep vigil. Yes, a few pages have been conveniently left on the table. On the first page, we can read . . .

Another Letter, Another Broken Silence

Letter 4b

For the victims of earthquakes and floods.

The following letter was not written by me, I received it. Tumbling about in a little paper boat, a river of rainwater brought the wet pages and damp letters to my hut.

October 8, 1999, 4:45 am

Sup:

Here's something for you to distribute among your networks. Aside from the tragedy of nature, what hurts most is the criminal violence that, from the heights

of Power, rains over a discouraged, crippled, ignorant, exhausted population full of pain. Let's do something for the more than 500,000 victims. These torrential rains have left children, old ones, men and women WITH NOTHING, especially the indigenous and *campesinos*, those condemned by this merciless and genocidal, ruthless and demagogic system. I am sharing with you a letter sent to me by a young woman with whom I was speaking yesterday morning; in it the harsh reality that batters us is felt:

Or, as took place in the Town called _____ (fill in the name of any affected community, the story is the same), visited by Zedillo and Governor _____ (fill in the name of any governor, they're all the same), and their entire information machine, with many trucks of supplies and aid, and as soon as the helicopters carrying them took off, they also pulled out taking the trucks with supplies, leaving just a few of them, which moves us to something more than indignation. In each Town they inform us that they're not giving us aid because they're aiding and attending to others who are more needy, not knowing that there is communication between all the Towns (via CB radio, which functions effectively, at least for learning about the situations in the Communities), and that's how we found out that there is no effective aid for any of the towns. Only a few report minimal and scant aid that is consumed as soon as it is received. In the particular case of _____ (name of an indigenous community)—and it would appear to be the case on all sides—the only thing that is needed is for the road to be restored, since the civil organizations will take charge to see that everything from the food to housing needs is set right. The concentration of the best and only means of communication (helicopters) causes the Government to become arrogant and to think that they are the only ones who understand and manage the situation. But the government machinery is insufficient for the opening and restoration of roads. Nonetheless, the officials in charge of that area do not turn to the Towns and Organizations that have the capability and the willingness to help.

_____ (name of state) needs to stop being the last state in the unfair and inequitable distribution of federal funds.

At the beginning of his administration, Zedillo said that he would put his social policies to the test in this state. He failed, because not only did he not manage to grant the state the resources necessary and sufficient for us to rise above marginalization and the thousand-year setback to which we have been subjected (it is no use mentioning that the primary problem of _____ (name of state) is impoverishment, and that everything else is its effects), but, moreover, he didn't do enough to safeguard that the little that arrives is administered well, and, finally, in the cases of disasters, neither was a satisfactory response established (although in the Media, they've been embellished and shown off).

The tragedy continues: the torrential rains were added to the earthquake. Just last night our promoters reported through CB radio an extremely serious situation that I'll sketch here: In _____ (indigenous community), 100 homes destroyed by the EARTHQUAKE and 80 swept away by the river, a helicopter brought them a

minimal shipment of provisions, there are close to 250 sick children; in _____ (name of municipality) the Communities of _____ and _____ (names of indigenous communities) are destroyed, nothing has been brought to them, a helicopter landed just to greet them and then it left; in _____ (indigenous community) they only took a minimal amount of aid to the community of _____ (indigenous community) (a third of the Community was buried under a mountain), while the other nine communities are still without communication; in _____ (municipality), in addition to 70% of the housing having been left destroyed, the river swept away cornfields, coffee plantations and cut off roads, they have already been visited and they left them provisions (25 packets of meal, three boxes of water and 12 boxes of oil).² The situation is dramatic: not only has the emergency not been overcome, but it keeps getting worse: they lack medicine, clothing, blankets, non-perishable food, tarps. That is why we have joined four Organizations together in order to collect resources and pool donations. We are not going to stop. Not anymore.

The letter ends there. I mean, what can be read. The rest is smudged by water and with mud.

Durito, hanging from one of my chinstraps (thanks to his hook), has followed the reading attentively.

“What do you think?” I ask him.

“It’s not the government’s criminal irresponsibility that is surprising. Certainly they’re not responsible for earthquakes and the rain, but it is repulsive how they have confronted the situation. The misfortune of those from below only serves them to appear on the front pages and in the subject lines of electronic news posts. But that’s not what catches your attention; that was to be expected. The truly strong and impressive thing is that ‘We are not going to stop. Not anymore.’”

“Yes,” I tell him, “as if another silence has been broken.”

“There will be more . . .” says Durito, dropping to my boot.

Outside, the morning is breaking through the dawn.

Salud. Salud, and, I agree, “not anymore.”

The Sup, falling respectfully silent.

² Torrential rains beginning in September and lasting through October affected over a million Mexicans in six states. The damages were further complicated by a 7.4 magnitude earthquake that struck off Mexico’s Pacific coast on September 30th.