

The Hour of the Little Ones, Part X: The Student Others



To the young university students on strike:

Sorrow takes hold of us, brother men,
from behind, from the side,
and it crazes us in the cinema,
it batters us in gramophones,
it thrashes us in beds, it falls straight down onto our tickets,
onto our letters . . .

—Cesar Vallejo¹

All night long, raining. Dawn arrives and still the rain is there, washing roads, hills, fields, paths, huts. It is like a pounding of urgent drops, and completely without order, falling on roofs, on trees, on puddles that are already full and, finally, onto the ground. Because that is how the hour of the little ones goes—disorderly, desperate, manifold.

1 Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo, who was involved with communist and anti-fascist movements, died an illegal immigrant in Paris in 1938. The passage cited is from “Los Nueve Monstruos” (“The Nine Monsters”), which was included in the volume *Poemas Humanos*. See *Human Poems*, intr. by Clayton Eschleman (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

Down below . . . we will have to wait to know what is going on down below, because now one cannot take a step without the mud seducing you and you end up kissing it with your entire body. Yes, it is rather complicated to define a fall this way, but it is raining so much that there is time for that and more. A fall . . . There are times that one falls and there are times that one is fallen on. I mean, there are falls and there are falls.

What? Yes? The rain is slowing down? Yes, but the mud is not. Good, let's go, but slowly. It is dark. Perhaps there will not be anyone, or perhaps the shadow that concerns us has finally gone to sleep. Shall we have a look? Do you have a lamp? Fine. Hmmm. No, there is no one.

There is the usual disorder on the table. But today there is a different sheet of paper on it. At one side, a copy of *La Jornada* newspaper dated October 15, 1999. The headlines say "Riot Police and Strikers Clash on Beltway." A photograph takes up half the page. What? Do you want it described to you? Good, bring the light closer . . . there . . . Fine. It's in black and white. In the foreground there is a girl knocked down in the street, with her face bloody. Next to her, someone is being kicked by three riot police (two in the foreground and a third, between those two, half hidden by his shield and using his right hand to support himself while he's kicking). There are more details below: the photograph is by Rosaura Pozos, the girl on the ground is called Alejandra Pineda, and the person next to her, under the boots of the riot police, is her brother, Argel Pineda, one of the representatives of the General Strike Council. The scene is the South Beltway. In the photograph, the rest of the riot police (at least six more, if one carefully observes the number of helmets) are looking to the right of the photograph; only the last one in the scene is turned towards the pair of students, hesitating between continuing on ahead or joining the ones who are thrashing the young person on the ground.

More details? Good. At the back of the action of the blows against Argel and Alejandra, five men can be perfectly made out. Three of them are pointing their lenses (two are carrying still cameras and one a video camera) toward the right of the photograph. The other two are looking towards the scene of the kicking. One of them, with a checked shirt, is scratching his ear or holding something to his ear, the other is simply looking. Further back, far in the background, two vehicles can barely be made out: an automobile whose driver is blocked by the legs of the man who is just looking, and the front of another vehicle (probably a van), whose driver is looking in front of him, that is, to the left of the photograph. In the very far background, to the right, three "entertainment guides," whose texts cannot be read (that on the extreme right seems to be announcing a news program). In the same perspective, to the left, there is something that looks like a tower, of the type that has lamps or entertainment guides in its topmost part.

Good, I think that's all then. What did you say? The written sheet? What does it say? Yes, I'll read it . . .

LETTER TO A PHOTOGRAPH

Letter 4X

Madame Photograph,

You will excuse me, but I was not able to see you until the dawn of the 17th day of October. No, do not think that I am reproaching you. I understand that, with so much rain, you have been delayed. Besides, the weight you carry is not at all light. You know? When I saw you, I felt a sadness here. Yes, I already know that there are photographs that hurt; I only wanted you to know that you are one of those.

If we go by the reporter's work (Roberto Garduño), we will have more means by which to read you. The girl, Alejandra Pineda, is a student at Preparatory School No. V, and her brother Argel is from the Faculty of Political Science, both from the UNAM. After the photograph (so we assume from the narrative), that is, after the blows from the riot police, Argel tries to help and to calm Alejandra, "who asked about her *compañeros*: How are they? They aren't hitting them more? My head hurts a lot, we don't want any more repression, we want free education." (*La Jornada*, October 15, 1999, p. 66). According to that reporter, and to some statements gathered by the same newspaper, the students were already withdrawing towards Ciudad Universitaria when they were attacked by the riot police.

What you speak with your image, and what the chronicles, reportage and statements describe, say some things to me. But—do you know?—there are other questions that are not answered by your image or the inside pages.

Then I would like you, Madame Photograph, to allow me to ask you a few questions. All right?

1. How old was Alejandra before the beating? 17, 18? And Argel? How old are they now?

2. If my eyes do not deceive me: the riot police are beating up Alejandra and Argel on the Beltway access road and not on the main lanes (which are the ones they were going to "clear")?

3. The riot police who are looking to the right in the photograph: are they looking that way in order not to see what their *compañeros* are doing? Or are they protecting the three who are beating up Alejandra and Argel, in order to prevent someone from coming and rescuing them? Further over there (to the right of the photograph), is another beating taking place? Are the students withdrawing?

4. The Mexico City government: is it beating up Alejandra for the crime of being Argel's sister? Is it beating up Argel for the crime of coming to Alejandra's aid? Is it beating up both of them for the crime of being "ultras"? Is it beating them because the cars are demanding free transit? Is it beating them because the polls demand it? Is it beating them to attract applause on Televisa and TV Azteca? Is it beating them for being young people? Is it beating them for being students? Is it beating them for being university students? Is it beating them so it can demonstrate that they govern with firmness? Pardon me, Madame Photograph, but I do not understand. Why are they beating Alejandra and Argel?

5. The women who congratulated Rosario Robles for having become head of the Mexico City government: did they also congratulate her for ordering the beating of Alejandra?² She: did she send Alejandra a kind word? Were they silent? Or did they say to themselves: “She deserved it for being rebellious”? What? Yes, excuse me, you would have no way of knowing that?

6. You, Madame Photograph, show at least three riot police hitting the student: why were only two brought before the authorities?

7. That billy club the riot policeman on the extreme right is carrying: is it an appeal to dialogue? A demonstration that the current government in Mexico City is “different” from the previous ones? Or is it merely the measure of the distance that separates words from actions?

8. Who is the man in the checked shirt talking to, if it’s a cell phone he has at his left ear?

9. The driver of the car that is moving, who is not visible in the photograph: would he applaud the beatings the police are giving Alejandra and Argel?

10. What is it that Alejandra has under her body, other than blood, I mean? A poncho? A sweater? A piece of cloth? A jacket?

11. The driver furthest back: is he inviting us to do the same? To pass by in front of the photograph of bloody Alejandra and fallen Argel, without looking at them, without looking at her?

12. On page 69 of the newspaper in which you are the headline, there is another photograph (also by Rosaura Pozos, with the caption “Scene prior to the police clearing of the South Beltway”). In the foreground can be seen a young man, in a checked shirt, on his knees in front of a line of riot police. The young man has his backpack in front of his knees, and he is showing the riot police a book. On the police shields can be clearly read: “Public Security. Riot Police. Federal District.” In the mid-ground, a woman with a hat. Further back, a cameraman. At the rear, trees and buildings. The questions . . .

12a. What is the title of the book the young man is showing the riot police?

12b. Is the young man on his knees saying something to the riot police?

12c. Was not Point Three of the list of demands from the National Strike Committee of the 1968 movement, I cite it verbatim, “Abolition of the Riot Police Force, direct instrument of repression, and no establishment of similar forces?” (“War Report,” Julio Scherer and Carlos Monsiváis, p. 161)³

12d. Is the existence and operation of the Riot Police Force constitutional?

What do you say? This is something that should be asked of the other photograph? Good, you are right. Allow me some questions:

2 Rosario Robles replaced Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas as President of Mexico City in 1999. Although a member of the PRD, she governed with an iron hand, often undermining popular mobilizations.

3 Julio Scherer García (and Carlos Monsiváis?) *Parte de Guerra: Tlatelolco 1968: documentos del general Marcelino García Barrigán: Los hechos y la historia* (Mexico, D.F.: Aguilar, 1999).

Do you remember that the reason for the march by the students was to protest the news coverage by TV Azteca and Televisa of the university conflict?

If you, Madame photograph, had not spoken: would we have remained with only the version that the electronic media and the Mexico City government gave out on the night of October 14 of 1999, in which the students were the aggressors, the police who intervened were all women, and only one student was injured (“nothing serious”) by a “vehicle that ran over her”?

Do we have the right to expect that a government headed by the PRD would act differently?

Should we remain silent and not ask anything?

You know, Madame Photograph, that you justify “Letter 3A.”⁴ But you will see how much I would have wished that you had not verified that letter, but rather those who, in front of a hollow mirror, boast of being “proud officials of a democratic government like Mexico City’s.”

And you know what? Every time I look at you, Madame, I do not know why, but I am taken by an irresistible urge to pick up a rock and to hurl it far and break forever the silence that there, above, accomplice, remains quiet.

What? Yes, go on, Madame Photograph, continue on your way and continue asking. So inconvenient you are, Madame Photograph, such a busybody.

Vale. Salud, and I believe that what Alejandra had under her body is a flag. And I also believe that it was raised up, along with her.

The Sup, accumulating questions as if they were rain.

* * *

4 “Letter 3A” to Carlos Monsiváis, published in *La Jornada*, October 8, 1999, is part of the “Siete Veces Dos” series.