

EFRAÍN BARTOLOMÉ

Translated by Kevin Brown

Ocosingo War Diary: Voices from Chiapas (January 9-11)

9 JANUARY⁷

9:12 Day breaks cloudy but without drizzle.

There're instructions to place a white flag on houses because the Army will pass by pointing out empty houses.

Planes have been flying overhead since 7:30 a.m.

The soldiers are still in place.

A dead dog appeared on the sidewalk.

How will it be, the country these men in arms dream of?

Is it easier organizing in order to kill than it is to produce?

Hasn't there been enough bloodshed?

Were not better winds blowing, really, even in these forgotten lands?

Isn't enough blood spilled in Guatemala, in El Salvador, in Cuba, in Nicaragua?

More blood to fertilize the soil of Utopia?

And all for what?

I hear, on the radio, about a government commission consisting of people from Chiapas: Andrés Fábregas⁸, Eduardo Robledo⁹ and Eraclio Zepeda.¹⁰

A peace commission.

Peace: you never know just how good you got it till you ain't got it no more.

I overhear these words: "they were dragging the dead away with a lasso to burn them. They made all onlookers at the marketplace pull the dead body away. They were already hauling Doctor Talango off to the fire too, but some of Don Enrique's workers recognized him."

There're no classes, there's no electricity, there's no telephone.

Rumor's been spreading around that mass will be said at twelve o'clock.

But they won't chime church bells so people won't get frightened.

Many people left: almost all the schoolteachers.

And my father says: "What kind of teachers can they be? What education are they giving the children? What civics lessons?"

⁷ Sunday. The government attempts to restore basic services – electricity, water, sewage, gas – to towns recaptured by Army forces.

⁸ Mexican author.

⁹ Later, Governor of Chiapas.

¹⁰ Eraclio Zepeda, activist, story-writer and story-teller, media personality, is well remembered thanks to his appearance on the old channel 13, as presenter of "Canto, Cuento y Color." He is the author of *Benzulul*, *Trejito*, *Asalto Nocturno*, and *Andando el Tiempo*.

13:29 We return from mass: there were about 150 people despite the fact that they didn't ring church bells.

There'll be another mass at four in the afternoon.

Father Pablo Iribarren's message revolved around baptism.

The meaning of baptism and this baptism by blood that bathed us in reality.

He asks that this baptism change our vision and better the people of Chiapas, improve Mexico, better humanity.

Asked that a prayer be said for the dead of the town, of the armed faction, of the Mexican Army.

Begs God's forgiveness for us all.

Tears in the eyes of many women.

Said that, according to the latest news, the EZLN¹¹ had agreed to a dialogue.

Arriving at the exit door we saw a group of judicial federal police escorting Geno López, the Mayor's brother.

Geno says hello to me and afterwards they go in as follows.

Two stand guard at the door.

Black jackets with big white letters: JFP.

Sub-machine guns, dark glasses, menacing physiques.

Black jackets on Zapatistas and Judicial Federals.

And even though it's broad daylight, I think about Federico García Lorca's masterly verse: "Civil Guardsmen hunchbacked and nocturnal."¹²

The cold continues but the lights come back on.

A soldier informs us that 1,200 cavalry entered through the jungle, by way of Chancalá, and that they'll reach the border.

That it was indeed true about the skirmish at La Cumbre.

That 14 guerrillas died there.

"One bastard somewhere around ETA,¹³ he sure put up a fight. He was a very good shot. It took us a long time to finish him off. About 13 or 14 he was, the bastard."

16:45 My wife goes to get cloves and black pepper at aunt Flor's house.

She'll fix me some tea for my cold.

On her way back she meets up with Arístides.

At that moment a cowboy from the San Antonio ranch arrives, with a horse and a mule.

¹¹ The Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

¹² From "Romance de la Guardia Civil Española"/"Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard." Spanish original: "Los CABALLOS negros son./Las herraduras son negras./Sobre las capas relucen/manchas de tinta y de cera./Tienen, por eso no lloran,/de plomo las calaveras./Con el alma de charol/vienen por la carretera./Jorobados y nocturnos,/por donde animan ordenan/silencios de goma oscura/y miedos de fina arena." English translation: "Black are the horses./The horseshoes are black./On the dark capes glisten/stains of ink and of wax./Their skulls are leaden,/which is why they don't weep./With their patent-leather souls/they come down the street./Hunchbacked and nocturnal,/where they go, they command/silences of dark rubber/and fears like fine sand" (A.L. Lloyd, translator).

¹³ Author's note: "ETA significa Escuela Técnica Agropecuaria. CEBETA o CBTA quiere decir Centro de Bachillerato Tecnológico Agropecuario. No tienen nada que ver con los terroristas vascos."

Says that people from “down yonder,” from Las Tazas, are ganging up and are daily killing one “rich people’s” cow.

“If I didn’t come back, they were gonna kill me, too. Better I came back. What’s the point of me tending the cows if they’re killing them anyway?”

Adán Sánchez reports that they detained Eleuterio and let him go after questioning.

20:22 Oswaldo and Paca come upstairs to report that at 2200 hours there’ll be a message about Chiapas current events, on channel 2.

We’re still cut off from the outside world.

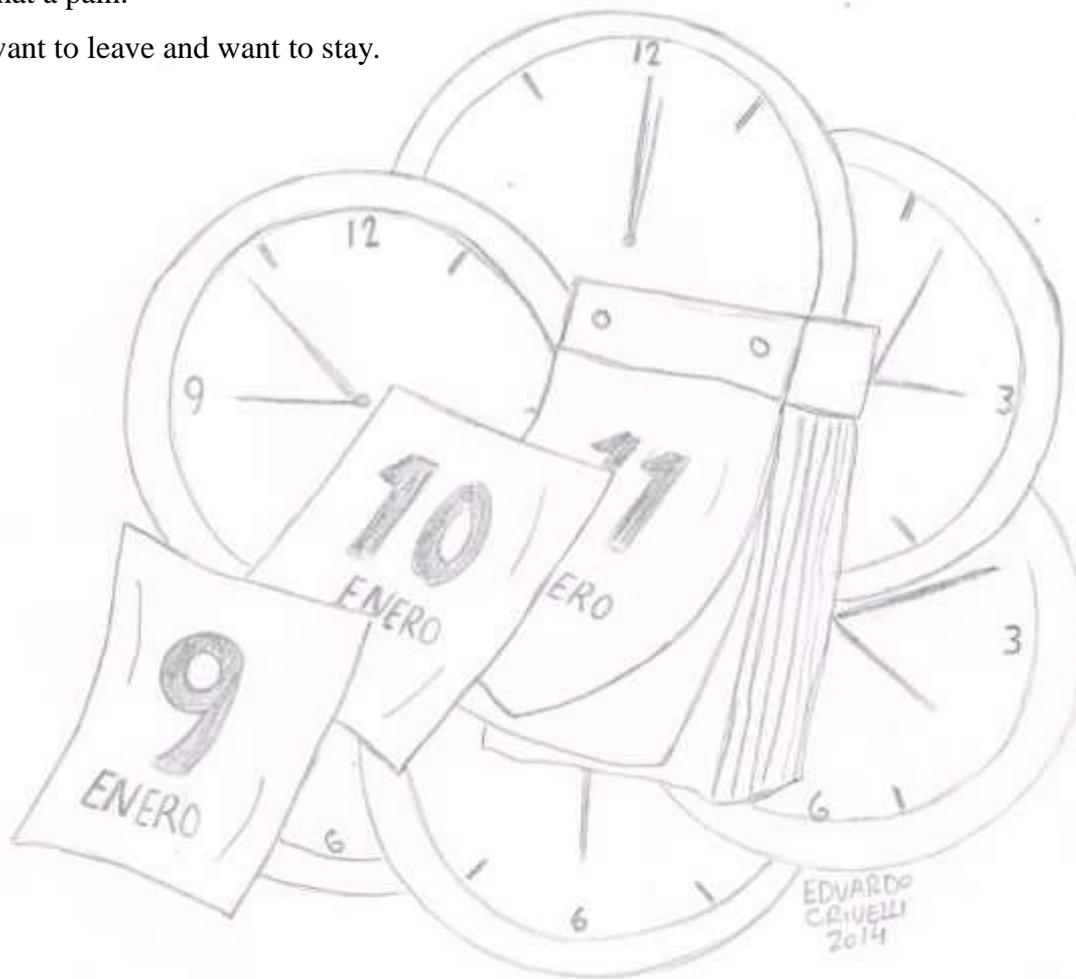
Tomorrow my psychotherapy practice was supposed to be starting.

I was supposed to collect my children’s survivor’s pension on the 5th.¹⁴

The probate hearing was scheduled around that date.

What a pain.

I want to leave and want to stay.



¹⁴ Author’s note: “Mi primera esposa (y madre de mis hijos) falleció en un accidente automovilístico en 1985. Mis hijos tenían entonces 10 (Balam) y 8 (Celina). Dado que su mamá era profesora de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, les correspondía a los niños una pensión por orfandad hasta que cumplieran los 18 años, edad en que se alcanza la mayoría de edad en México.”

“Este acontecimiento fue mi primer encuentro con la muerte. Aludo brevemente a él en la tercera parte de *Volver al paraíso*. El mismo hecho doloroso generó mi libro *Cuadernos contra el ángel*, un libro de luto, muy apreciado entre mis lectores, “de negrura resplandeciente” como señaló alguno de los críticos.”

10 JANUARY¹⁵

Another resplendent day.

Scant white clouds to the north, the rest is blue sky.

The eastern mountain range (a first body of intense greenery and a second mass of blue) is outlined with marvelous clarity.

Everything seems so peaceful.

But the superlatively blue sky was now knifed by helicopters and planes.

11:30 Soldiers are running along the school roof.

As if they'd received an alert.

11:35 Gunshots on the corner where the tortilla shop is.

Screaming and shouting.

Movement of soldiers in the street.

We run to close the entry gate and the doors.

My sister Dora's at Lety's house.

Military planes fly overhead.

Rumor's spreading: a guerrilla came to buy tortillas.

He's one of the ones left trapped in town, "at his brother-in-law's house."

His squad held a family hostage.

Someone from that family recognized him and tipped off the Army.

The soldiers came, fired into the air, already detained him.

It never ceases to amaze, people's gratitude toward the soldiers: they applaud them, shout cheers at them, bring them food, give them coffee.

"Yesterday people from Barrio Guadalupe brought them food. And the soldiers made them eat first. To make sure the food wasn't poisoned."

What must the ranches "down below" be like?

Nuevo México, Tijuana, Dolores, El Recreo, El Paraíso, San Antonio, San Lorenzo, Santa Rita, Ashín, Tecojá, El Real, the old ranches, the old means of field production, and the relentless onslaught of time that has blighted them in recent years.

Don José Cruz, owner of Toniná, remembering times past, reports: "It was something to see how they used to live at San José, for example. From far away you'd recognize Indians from San José, just by the whiteness of their clothes. They were people who'd learned how to work. They used to make their own blankets on their own looms. They planted the best cornfields, the best beanfields. They knew how to make pouches, nets, hats, clay pots, textiles, tostadas, you could buy everything there. They used to raise tobacco and made puro cigars... what puros, sir! The big house, a really big house with support beams and cedar columns, ceilings made of fine wood, wooden floors too.

¹⁵ On Monday, the Army attacks guerrillas holed up in Ocosingo. Isidro Guillermo Badillo Brana, a Mexican priest purportedly heading a guerrilla group, is captured at the Chiapas/Tabasco border. The Mexican stock market tanks. Mounting demonstrations in Mexico City and elsewhere. Former Chiapas governor and now interior minister Patrocinio González Blanco Garrido is fired by Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari for allegedly downplaying the threat posed by the guerrillas.

And the corral: a huge corral of pure stone. And the carved doors, the windows likewise, all surrounded by corridors with benches. Not to mention the furniture and fixtures. How gorgeous. Such refinement. But they were taking it all away from poor Don Mario (Balboa). Till he died of rage.”

The industry of farm estates which the Dominicans built in these valleys more than four centuries ago.

They established those means of farm production and built that beautiful house, as they did all the big homesteads.

The Reform grabbed those properties from the clergy and divided them up among the liberal ranchers: the homesteaders.¹⁶

San José came to be called San José la Reforma.

Beginning with Cárdenas’ land reform movements, the enormous spread of the farm estates were dwindling down to nothing, save for nuclei of population increasingly abundant, larger, more miserable, less productive, more in need of government assistance.¹⁷

Concludes Don José Cruz: “Now you’ll see what’s left of San José. You’ll find only misery. The Indians finished off everything. But of course, they’re a bunch of bums. And even more so without a boss.”

I listen to the old rancher’s reasoning: a way of thinking that 50 years haven’t ended up sweeping away, but whose ashes the Zapatista winds will surely scatter.

And I’m unsure whether for better or for worse.

What’s certain is that it’s inevitable.

12:46 I’m writing on the terrace, next to the clay pots from Amatenango, huge ones, which we bought a year ago December.

The sun burns despite the fact that the sky’s been clouding over in the East.

A Great Kiskadee, very large, is eating medlar tree fruit in the foliage.

14:45 Enter an Army convoy, which seems to be coming from San Cristóbal.

¹⁶ La Reforma (The Reform) was a period halfway through the 19th century in the history of Mexico that was characterized by liberal reforms designed to modernize Mexico and make it into a nation state. The major goals in this movement were: Land reform – redistribution of land, separation of church and state, and increased educational opportunities for the poor, the majority of the country’s population. The liberals’ strategy was to sharply limit the traditional privileges land holdings of the Catholic Church and thereby revitalize the market in land. The Church fought back and the gains were limited. No class of small peasants identified with the Liberal program [that] emerged, but many merchants acquired land (and tenant farmers). Many existing landowners expanded their holdings at peasant expense, and some upwardly mobile ranch owners, often mestizos, acquired land.

¹⁷ Before the 1910 Mexican Revolution that overthrew Porfirio Díaz, most of the land was owned by a single elite ruling class. Legally there was no slavery or serfdom; however, those with heavy debts, Indian wage workers, or peasants, were essentially debt-slaves to the landowners. A small percentage of rich landowners owned most of the country’s farm land. With so many people brutally suppressed, revolts and revolution were common in Mexico. To relieve the Mexican peasant’s plight and stabilize the country, various leaders tried different types of agrarian land reform.

President Lázaro Cárdenas passed the 1934 Agrarian Code and accelerated the pace of land reform. He helped redistribute 45,000,000 acres (180,000 km²) of land, 4,000,000 acres (16,000 km²) of which were expropriated from American owned agricultural property. This caused conflict between Mexico and the United States. Cárdenas employed tactics of noncompliance and deception to gain leverage in this international dispute.

Agrarian reform had come close to extinction in the early 1930s. The first few years of the Cárdenas’ reform were marked by high food prices, falling wages, high inflation, and low agricultural yields. In 1935 land reform began sweeping across the country in the periphery and core of commercial agriculture. The Cárdenas alliance with peasant groups was awarded by the destruction of the hacienda system. Cárdenas distributed more land than all his revolutionary predecessors put together, a 400% increase. The land reform justified itself in terms of productivity; average agricultural production during the three-year period from 1939 to 1941 was higher than it had been at any time since the beginning of the revolution.

Trucks jam-packed with soldiers, jeeps, clothing trucks, tanks, tanker trucks, armored personnel vehicles, an ambulance.

Twenty, twenty-five, thirty units?

“This only used to be seen in September 16 parades, on television.”¹⁸

“With that weaponry they’re gonna kill off everything, down to the last little jungle bunny.”

And one humble woman, an old lady almost, who’s heard talk of “goat horns,”¹⁹ makes this comment of literal-mindedness: “So many weapons! How were the poor little Indians going to handle the soldiers? Although they tricked them. They say that to send them off to fight they gave them only wooden rifles and some goat *horns*, like knives maybe.”

In the sky, the C-130 Hercules planes seem like dirigibles.

I go down to the town center to try and get a roll of film.

See the gigantic line from the Army food pantries.

18:00 Afternoon passes.

Arístides sends a little bread.

A bit of warm bread in a war situation.

Thanks!

Helicopters and planes brought the pantry items: the aerial flotillas have been landing all day.

A young man from the National Human Rights Commission²⁰ passes by requesting reports of people who have been disappeared or of ill treatment on the Army’s part.

Pilla and I go buy a new coffee mill.

The guy from Human Rights is also requesting “messages for those who may have family in San Cristóbal” and is giving reports about the imminent reinstallation of telephone communications.

Comments overheard throughout the day:

Alfredo Díaz: “I cursed out the motherfuckers who left. I didn’t even leave town, I who was Mayor, I whom they said stole, who was even put in jail for a few days. Our family, our house, our children are still here.”

“They detained two of Eleuterio’s sons.”

One woman, in the pantry line: “And that lousy, bald-headed, fat-ass bitch, she still has the nerve to come asking for pantry items, after all the stuff she stole at ISSSTE store.”

An elementary school teacher: “Those leaders were here yesterday, Hernández and Jacobo. Who knows how they got in. Those guys are mixed up in this mess.”

“The ones from the Coelhá collective are very involved... all of them I think.”

¹⁸ Mexican Independence Day.

¹⁹ Mexican slang term for an AK-47; “cuernos de chivo,” whose literal meaning is “goat’s horns,” is a reference to the curved magazine clip or banana clip that the armament uses.

²⁰ La Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH).

“Uhm... about 20 years ago now they were going around Guanal training.” A schoolteacher whose community was affected in that area: “During the night, the community remained silent. The next day they all looked very tired. At night only women and little kids would stay behind.”

“They holed up at El Porvenir, they’re holing up at the ranches down yonder to look for small arms, for hunting, and sometimes they destroy everything or take beans and corn.” “So many people suffering so much, for what?”

“These ideas of the bishop’s! He wants everybody to be doctors or engineers. Well, who’s gonna work the land, then? And the cattle? Indians don’t like to tend livestock. They’re scared of cows.”

“Morons, lazy bums..! They say they did it because under socialism no one will carry firewood anymore!”

“They say if we leave town they won’t let us back in for six months.”

22:00 We hear on the radio that Patrocinio resigned. That President Salinas has named Manuel Camacho Solís as national peace commissioner.

11 JANUARY²¹

Superlatively sunny day, blue, with the skirt of mist trailing the river’s course: that dense swath that dissolves in air, without anyone noticing, at around nine in the morning, at the latest.

It’s 8:25.

I’ll devote myself to observing that gradual disappearance.

Afternoon.

Once again the light I miss so much returns.

The light for which I return.

The gentle light of gold upon blue and green.

The gentle winged light on wingless hills.

Celestial breath.

Celestial air.

Luminous greenness.

Golden swaths above white clouds.

Evening aroma wafting from the humid garden.

For this light I have returned without realizing it.

This is what I’ve been searching for since the day I left.

God exists in each leaf, in each gentle gust of fresh scent.

²¹ On Tuesday, the Army scours the Lacandón Jungle in search of EZLN headquarters. The number of deaths is officially estimated at 200 total – soldiers, rebels and civilians. 1,000 more are reported wounded.

The scent of night jasmine fills me with an inward splendor.

My valley returns little by little to peace.

When we men disappear, those sightless lights shall remain over the valley.

The afternoon warblings are muffled now; some long, sweet; others short and sharp, trilling in the darkness.

The valley.

Our valley.

The land where we were born and which we learned to love unwittingly; even in spite of ourselves, perhaps because of this light.

Just because of that light that's gone away above.

Black town.

Hills.

The two lines of hills (those of nearby green and those of faraway blue) muddled suddenly in a mass of blue that borders upon black.

Then the sky of light sky blue: the delicate blue where, pulsating, the first star begins to shine.

In the morning we went to the cabin to plant two pacaya palms and one night jasmine shrub.

We stopped by my brother Rodulfo's house for a handsaw.

We needed it to cut an oak support beam where we'd put the mill base.

We went along the river.

Along the old path where I still encounter the town in which I lived.

My old town.

We saw the ceiba tree belonging to the little old house on the small ranch.

Saw the new bamboo flourishing vigorously.

Guadalupe went down with Rodulfo to harvest allspice.

There were no more seeds.

Each year it's produced by the bushel and most of it's wasted.

Nobody harvests it although my mother says people are stealing it.

My parents planted each and every tree of that vegetable garden.

That's why my mother's saddened that those "who sow nothing" should steal the fruits.

We were about to go up to our Casa de la Luna, just past the highway, when Génner arrived.

Informed me that Eraclio ("Laco") Zepeda had arrived in town and wanted to see me.²²

A messenger from the Mayor's office arrived with a telegram from Manuel, Laco's brother.

²² Eraclio Zepeda, Mexican writer, poet, and political novelist. Born in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, 24 March 1937.

There were only going to be in town an hour.

We had 20 minutes left.

Went down.

Found Manuel.

Afterwards Eraclio, Fábregas, Robledo Rincón arrived: the peace commission.

Provide encouraging information.

They're excited.

Tomorrow they'll meet with representatives of 70,000 peasant farmers who are against the armed struggle.

They already negotiated the journalists' entrance with the Army.

Indeed: the journalists arrived minutes later in three helicopters.

In the park, extremely long line of people awaiting food relief.

Some of them had been waiting four or five hours continued on there, disciplined, stoic.

"It's no longer like before when even in this town's humblest home there was food to eat."

"At least beans, corn, vegetables, plantains."

Everything changed, for the worse, with progress.

So says my *innermost reactionary sadness*.²³

So I was thinking while I watched the long line of women who, crowded in line, covered eight blocks or so.

I never saw so many women in town.

Laco appeared, his bulk as abundant as his soul, offering solidarity, support, help in leaving town.

We thanked him, but still decided not to leave.

They took pictures of us.

We went back home.

But first Pilla went into the church to get my mother a piece of Paschal candle.²⁴

I stayed behind contemplating the town's large plaza covered in cement.

The old colonial fountain destroyed by a certain mayor who wanted to "renovate" it.

The beautiful colonnades, formerly white, now besmirched by commercial signs.

Young Chayo Solórzano's lovely house, previously belonging to aunt Vidaura, which could have been a beautiful cultural center (a mini museum, a heritage house), and which has been miserably wasted and used for Judicial branch offices and before that as PRI offices.

²³ Allusion to Ramón López Velarde's "El retorno maléfico." Author of *Zozobra* (1919), Ramón López Velarde (1888 – 1921) was a Mexican poet. His work is generally considered to be postmodern, but is unique for its subject matter. He achieved great fame in his native land, to the point of being considered Mexico's national poet.

²⁴ Sometimes referred to as "Easter candle."

The old exceedingly beautiful roofs that used to surround the colonial plaza now very much afflicted by the garish colors and extremely ugly “modern” pharmacy buildings.

My old plaza.

My old park full of ceiba trees, privet trees, flame trees.²⁵

I didn't know the great ceiba tree John Lloyd Stephens admired in the mid 19th century.²⁶

Nor did I know with the privet trees of the 1920s.

But I did indeed know the great flame trees that used to set the day on fire with explosions of red and yellow, and would filter out the sun with delicate little green hands, as if sifting through it.

Green filigree in the foliage of the flame trees.

Another mayor ordered the flame trees cut down and planted Indian Laurel trees.

In a place of such varied flora were planted those cookie-cutter trees that homogenized the park like any other impersonal park in the republic.

Ah, mayors.

“An errant crowd, municipal and thick.”²⁷

Not a single ceiba tree remains in the public spaces.

There is not a single caoba tree in the public spaces.

There is not a single cedar tree in the public spaces.

The spiritual squalor of a town victimized by a progress in which seems to have married the worst taste of the businessmen, the cattlemen, the oil men, the powers that be, the dirty society of the unscrupulous and the petty and the rabble.

Well, people.

People, in short.

My people.

Evening:

²⁵ Flame trees are also known as royal poincianas; “*Ligustrum lucidum*” (Glossy Privet, Chinese Privet or Broad-leaf Privet).

²⁶ John Lloyd Stephens (1805 – 1852) was an American explorer, writer, and diplomat. Stephens was a pivotal figure in the rediscovery of Maya civilization throughout Central America and in the planning of the Panama railroad. Author of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán, Vols. 1 & 2* (1841) (Reissued by Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²⁷ Allusion to Rubén Darío's line “Un vulgo errante, municipal y espeso,” from the poem “Soneto autumnal al Marqués de Bradomín” (“Autumn Sonnet to the Marquis de Bradomín”), from the book *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905); *Songs of Life and Hope*, trans. by Will Derusha and Alberto Acereda, dedicated by Darío to the Spanish Generation of '98 novelist and playwright Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936). Félix Rubén García Sarmiento (1867 – 1916), known as Rubén Darío, was a Nicaraguan poet who initiated the Spanish-American literary movement known as *modernismo* (modernism) that flourished at the end of the 19th century. Darío has had a great and lasting influence on 20th-century Spanish literature and journalism. He has been praised as the “Prince of Castilian Letters” and undisputed father of the *modernismo* literary movement.

Some ladies are buying clothing at Teté's Novelities, my sister's store. They recount: "The Indians took my husband's truck from him in Monte Líbano. Just like the others. They arrived on foot. They told the Mayor on the 29th, and the Mayor said we'll see what the Governor said. Who knows if the Mayor warned the Governor. They also told him the Mayor to warn the townspeople, so people could know about it. The Mayor said no. So as not to cause panic. Us, we left, sure did. My child's godparents too."

A man from near Queshil: "The guerrillas took my boss's van from me. They destroyed the whole house. All the livestock they killed in a hail of gunfire. Nothing was left. They even burned the corral. Same thing happened in Saboquité."

Three cowboys brought about 400 head of cattle from various ranches "down yonder." "But guerrillas armed to the teeth caught up with us... They opened fire and made off with the cattle on the way back. A cowboy from San Lorenzo went with them. Turned traitor."

Says don José Trujillo Burguete, the former town blacksmith; used to make horseshoes, swivels, branding irons, hinges, door latches, nose leads, etc. With the arrival of progress his old trade was lost. Now he buys and slaughters lambs for barbecues. Comes to the house to buy lambs. I hear him chewing the fat with my father:

– Well, seems like everything's on the right track – my father says – between the Zapatistas and the government. Don Samuel Ruiz is going to be the go-between.

–Ah, shoot ..! It's gonna get worse! That bastard Samuel ..! I don't know why they don't just disappear him once and for all. He's done enough damage already ..!

So do passions run.

