Calixto Garmendia

This Zine is based on a story by Ciro Alegría with drawings by Jesús Cossio and includes a reflection written by James Scorer

1. Zine Transcript

COVER

Calixto Garmendia, a story by Ciro Alegría with drawings by Jesús Cossio

COVER IMAGE

Calixto Garmendia from the waist up. Calixto is mestizo, dark-skinned and with indigenous features. He has short, black hair, backward combing and a moustache. He's wearing a white shirt. His mouth is open, his left-hand points upwards with his index finger and his right hand is fist shaped. His expression conveys anger.

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Text by James Scorer (see second part of the document)

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"Let me tell you," A man named Remigio Garmendia said to another named Anselmo, raising his face. Last night, this morning, even this afternoon, I have been remembering a lot... There are times when life is overwhelming... you must learn. Life, short or long, is not just yours. His voice was deep and full of emotion. He brandished his calloused hands at times. -I was born in the mountains, in a small town in the Andes. My father was a carpenter and sent me to school. I attended until the second year of primary school, after that there was nothing. And I was lucky to be born in the village, because the children in countryside had no school at all. Outside his carpentry shop, my father had a little land next to the village, beyond the ravine, and he cultivated it with the help of some Indigenous people whom he paid in silver or in exchange for carpentry jobs.

IMAGE 1

Portrait of adult Remigio Garmendia. Remigio has short hair combed to one side and wears a white shirt and blazer.

IMAGE 2

Remigio appears from behind talking to Anselmo who holds a glass in his right hand.

PAGE BREAK

From one end of the corridor of my house, we could see the wheat yellowing, the corn greening, the beans bluing in our small land. It was a joyous period. With food and carpentry, we had plenty, considering our poverty. Because of his character, my father did not bow his head to anyone. His carpenter's bench was in the corridor of the house, facing the street. The mayor would pass by, "Good morning, sir," my father would say; if the sub-prefect passed, "Good morning, sir," and that was that; if the ensign of gendarmes passed, "Good morning, Ensign," and nothing else; if the judge passed, the same thing. That's how my father was with the bosses.

IMAGE 1

Remigio's family in front of their house. Calixto wears a pencil in his ear, he wears a white shirt, suspenders and grey pants. His left hand rests on the shoulder of the young Remigio who holds a head of corn. In the foreground is Remigio's mother with two braids, earrings and a sweater.

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They wanted him to be afraid of them or ask them or owe them something. Those who rule get used to all that. My father disliked them. And it didn't end there. Suddenly people came from the village, whether indigenous, Cholos or impoverished whites. From to ten to twenty or more, they all arrived at the house. "Don Calixto, help us make that claim." My father's name was Calixto. He would hear what it was about, if it seemed fair to him, he would accept and lead the claim for the people. He spoke with good words. Sometimes he helped the claimants win and sometimes he lost, but the people always trusted him. Any abuse that was committed, my father was present to claim on behalf of the injured.

IMAGE 1

Calixto listening to the townspeople.

IMAGE 2

Calixto marching with the townspeople.

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The authorities and rich people of the town, owners of haciendas and estates, had their eye on him. They considered my father haughty as he did not leave them alone. He didn't even realize, living as if nothing could happen to him. He had made a large armchair, which he put in the corridor. There he used to sit, in the evenings, to talk with friends. "What we need is justice," he said. "The day Peru has justice, it will be great." He did not doubt that there would be and he twisted his moustache with satisfaction, preaching: "We must not consent to abuse." It so happened that an epidemic of typhus came, and the cemetery was filled with the dead people from the town and the countryside. The authorities took over our land for the new cemetery. My father protested by saying that they should take land from the rich, whose estates reached the very end of the town.

IMAGE 1

The mayor of the town looks with distrust and suspicion at Calixto who is being held by a guard. The mayor is mestizo, wears a hat, suit and tie.

PAGE BREAK

They said that my father's land was already fenced, they sent gendarmes and started the burial of the dead. They said they would give him an indemnity of seven hundred soles, which was at least something at that time, but then they came with excuses such as that there was no money at the moment ... They were also charging my father for each claim he made. One day, after arguing with the mayor, my old man began to sharpen a blade. My mother saw something in his face and she grabbed his neck and cried, telling him that nothing would come of going to jail and leaving us even more helpless. My father held back but he was falling apart. I was a child then and I remember all that as if it happened this afternoon.

IMAGE 1

In the cemetery, a hole is being dug to create a new grave.

IMAGE 2

Calixto on his back drops his blade to hug his wife who holds him tightly.

PAGE BREAK

My father was not a man who gave up his rights. He began writing letters claiming injustice. He wanted to at least get paid. A scribe wrote him the letters and charged him two soles for each. The notary put at the end: "I beg on behalf of Calixto Garmendia, who does not know how to sign, Mr So-and-So." My father sent two or three letters to the deputy of the province. Silence. Other letters to the senator for the department. Silence. Even letters to the President of the Republic himself. Silence. Finally, he sent letters to the newspapers of Trujillo and Lima. Nothing. The mailman arrived in the village once a week, pulling a mule loaded with the mail bag. I would go through the door of the house and my father would come in behind and wait in the office, until they sorted the mail. Sometimes, I went too. "Letter for Calixto Garmendia?" my father asked. The controller, who was a skinny and good-natured old man, took the letters that were in the bag, sorted them and at the end said: "Nothing, friend."

IMAGE 1

Silhouette of the postman walking with a wood stick and carrying the mail by mule

IMAGE 2

The postman holding letters in his two hands

PAGE BREAK

My father would come out commenting that next time there would be a letter. Over the years, he claimed that at least the newspapers would respond. A student told me that newspapers often believe that matters like these are of no general interest. If they are in favour of the government and its authorities, they will remain silent. It took my father several years to become disillusioned with claiming his rights. One day, in desperation, he went to plant the part of the cemetery that still had no corpses, to assert his ownership. He was taken prisoner by the gendarmes, sentenced by the sub-prefect in person, and spent two days in jail. The forms were then finalized, and the land was legally municipal property.

IMAGE 1

Calixto and his son waiting in front of the house

IMAGE 2

A padlock and chain secure two iron gates

PAGE BREAK

When my father went to talk to the Trustee of Expenses of the Municipality, the man opened the desk drawer and said: "There is no money, there is nothing. Calm down, Garmendia. Eventually you will be paid." My father filed two appeals with the judge. They cost him ten soles each. The judge declared them inadmissible. My father no longer thought about sharpening the blade. "It's sad to have to talk like that," he once said, "but I would not have time to kill everyone I should". The little money that my mother had saved in a pot hidden on the roof of the house went on letters and paperwork.

IMAGE 1

Calixto on his back with his fist-shaped hands

IMAGE 2

Empty ceramic pot. The last two coins are on the table

PAGE BREAK

After six or seven years of dispossession, my father got tired of asking to get paid. He aged a lot in that period. What hurt him the most was the outrage. He once thought about going to Trujillo or Lima to complain, but he didn't have money for that. And he also realized that, seeing him poor and alone, without influence or anything, they would pay no attention to him. Who and how to ask for help? The little land was still a cemetery, receiving the dead. My father didn't even want to see it, but when he happened to look, he would say, "Something of mine has been buried there too! My hopes for justice!" He had always taken care that justice was done to others, and, in the end, he had not been able to obtain it even for himself.

IMAGE 1

3 characters. On the left the judge with white skin, on the right the mayor with mestizo features, and in the centre the policeman, a mestizo with a darker skin. The 3 characters have a look of pity and disapproval.

IMAGE 2

Adult Remigio and his mother in the foreground. In the background is Calixto without colour and in profile.

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Other times he complained about lack of work and he always ranted against tyrants, rich people and bosses. I grew up in the midst of that struggle. My father had nothing left but his modest carpentry shop. As soon as I had the strength, I started to help him at work. It was very scarce. In that sedentary little town, new houses would be erected once every two years. Doors lasted a long time. Hardly anyone used tables and chairs. The rich of the village were buried in a casket, but there weren’t many of them and they did not die frequently. The Indigenous buried their dead wrapped in blankets fastened with string. Same with cane laborers, whether Indigenous or not. The truth was that when we received the news of a rich dead man and there was an order for a casket, my father was happy. He was glad to have a job and also to see one of the gang that ruined him go into the hole. What man who has been treated like this does not have his heart damaged? My mother believed that it was not good to rejoice the death of a Christian and commended the soul of the deceased by praying a few Our Fathers and Hail Marys.

IMAGE 1

Remigio's mother praying. She has two braids, a coat and a skirt. In the background there is a crucifix hanging on the wall.

IMAGE 2

A body wrapped in sacks and ropes.

PAGE BREAK

We worked hard with the saw, the brush, sandpaper and nails. We usually made it of alder wood, and it was white. Some wanted the coffin that way and others that it should be painted mahogany or black and polished. The dead would rot the same under the earth, but even so there are tastes. Once there was a big event in my house and in the village. An outsider opened a new store, which turned out to be better than the other four that there were. My old man and I worked two months making the counter and shelves for the groceries and goods. A band played during the opening and people talked about progress. In my house there were new clothes for everyone. My father gave me, to spend on whatever I wanted, the greatest amount of silver I had ever seen in my hands: two soles.

IMAGE 1

Coffin under construction

IMAGE 2

Remigio holds two coins with his left hand. He wears a patched shirt and a vest.

PAGE BREAK

Over time, the store did nothing but diminish the business of the other four, our clothes aged, and everything was forgotten. The only good thing was that I spent the two soles on a girl named Eutimia, that was her name. One night she let herself be taken among the bushes. From then on, she did not charge me anything and if before she had taken the two soles, it was because of how poor she was. In carpentry, things went on as usual. Sometimes we made a trunk or a small table or three chairs in a month. My father worked unwillingly. Before, he enjoyed polishing and doing great work. Later he didn't care anymore, and he got out of the way with a little sandpaper.

IMAGE 1

Eutimia among the bushes. She wears two braids and a white short-sleeved shirt. Her gaze is calm and kind.

IMAGE 2

Calixto walking out the door.

PAGE BREAK

Until finally the order came for another coffin, which was the main income. We generally charged ten soles. This also gave my father joy, he used to say: "Another bandit in the hole, ten soles!"; We worked hard, and my mother prayed hard, to feel some relief. But is that life? As a boy, I was disgusted that life was so mixed up with death. The situation became sadder every time. At night, at about three or four in the morning, my father would put a few large stones into his pockets, take off his shoes so as not to make a racket and walk crouched towards the mayor's house. He threw the stones, quickly, on to different parts of the roof, breaking the tiles. Then he returned running in the dark, to avoid suspicion and laughing. His laughter seemed at times like the squawk of an animal. At times his laughter was so human, so unavoidably human, that I felt even more sorry.

IMAGE 1

Portrait of Calixto laughing malevolently.

PAGE BREAK

He would calm down for a few days and start again. On the other hand, in the mayor's house they started keeping watch. Because the mayor had done countless shenanigans, they didn't know who to blame for the stones. When my father deduced that they had got tired of watching, he would break the tiles again. He became an expert in the field. Then he broke tiles of the house of the judge, the sub-prefect, the ensign of gendarmes, the trustee of expenses. He also broke the tiles of the houses of other notables, so that if they wanted to investigate, they would be confused. The eight gendarmes of the village went out on rounds many nights, in groups and alone. They could never catch my father. He had become an artist in breaking tiles. In the morning he would go for a walk in the village to enjoy seeing the servants of the houses he had attacked with new tiles to replace the broken ones.

IMAGE 1

Portraits of the judge (white), subprefect (mestizo), ensign of gendarmes (mestizo) and the trustee of expenses (white)

IMAGE 2

The mayor looks with hatred at the gendarme holding a stone.

PAGE BREAK

If it rained it was better for my father. Then he would attack the house of the one he hated most, the mayor, so that the water would cause damage or fall on top of him and his family. He even said that he would calculate it so the water went in the bedrooms. It was unlikely that he could judge it so accurately in the dark, but he thought he did, for the joy of thinking about it. The mayor died unexpectedly. Some said that he died of binging on pork meat and others because of the anger caused by his enemies. My father was called to make the coffin. He took me to do the measurements with a string. The corpse was large and fat. You had to see my father's face contemplating the dead man. He looked like Death coming to get the mayor.

IMAGE 1

Silhouette of man running in the rain

IMAGE 2

Portrait of Calixto by candlelight. He wears a white shirt and a black blazer. Peaceful and happy look.

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He charged fifty soles in advance. As they asked the reason for the price, he said that the box had to be very large, because the corpse was also large and fat, which showed that the mayor ate well. We made the coffin for the devil. At the time of the burial, my father watched from the corridor as they put the coffin into the hole and said: "Eat the earth that you took from me, eat, eat." And he laughed with that horrible laugh of his.

IMAGE 1

Open coffin. You can see the belly of the dead

PAGE BREAK

From then on, he went on to break the tiles of the judge's house and said that he hoped to see him enter the hole as well, as well as the others. His life was to hate and think about death. My mother consoled herself by praying. Me, by taking Eutimia into the bushes. But it hurt me very deeply to see my father like that. Before, his life was to love his wife and child, serve his friends, and stand up for anyone in need. He loved his homeland. With injustice and helplessness, they broke his soul.

IMAGE 1

Remigio's mother, older, holds in her left hand a lit match to light 3 candles that accompany a Virgin on the table.

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My mother gave him hope with the new mayor. It was as if my father healed suddenly. That lasted two days. The new mayor also told him that there was no money to pay him. In addition, he said he had committed abuse by charging fifty soles for a dead man's casket and that he was an agitator. This was no longer true. It had been years since people, knowing my father was on bad terms with the authorities, had come to the house asking him to defend them. They did not even stick their head round the door.

IMAGE 1

Portrait of the new mayor. A mestizo with little hair and blue eyes, he wears a suit and a tie. He points with the index finger of his right hand.

IMAGE 2

Open bottle next to a pewter cup and a pencil torn in half.

PAGE BREAK

My father yelled at the new mayor, became furious and was put in jail for fifteen days. When he came out, they advised him to go with my mother to ask for forgiveness to the mayor, for both to cry and beg him for payment. My father began to cry, "That never! Why do they want to humiliate me? Justice is a right! I ask for justice!"

IMAGE 1

Remigio now a young adult looking at his father. Calixto and his wife aged with a look of tiredness.

IMAGE 2

Calixto's right arm with his shirt sleeves rolled up and his hand in the form of a fist.

PAGE BREAK

Soon after, my father died.

IMAGE 1

Anselmo with his back watching Remigio tell the end of the story

THE END

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CIRO ALEGRÍA BAZÁN (1909 - 1967) Peruvian writer, politician and journalist. Representative of the Peruvian indigenist narrative with his works La serpiente de oro (1935), Los perros hambrientos (1939) and El mundo es ancho y ajeno (1941).

IMAGE 1

Profile portrait of Ciro Alegría

BACK

Image in red. Calixto's right arm with the sleeve of the shirt rolled up and the hand in the form of a fist.

1. Reflection written by James Scorer

The story of Calixto Garmendia is a story of voices. The voice of Calixto’s son, Remigio, rings out ‘hondo’ y con ‘un rudo tiembre de emoción’ as he relates the story of his father, a man whose words are not heard.

The story of Calixto Garmendia is also a story of the land: as a typhus outbreak spreads through the area, Calixto’s plot of land, where his family watch ‘amarillear el trigo, verdear el maíz, azulear las habas’, is taken over by local authorities and used as a cemetery to bury the dead. His complaints about this abuse of the land fall on deaf ears.

Reading between the lines of Ciro Alegría’s 1954 story about class struggle, land ownership, protest, and state indifference, though, the story of the carpenter Calixto Garmendia is also about race. Embedded in these landscapes of class inequality are also the ‘indios’ who work on his father’s plot of land, the multi-racial crowd who ask Calixto to vocalize their complaints, and the indigenous populations who bury their dead wrapped in blankets rather than the wooden caskets used by the wealthy and constructed by Calixto.

In his visualization of Alegría’s story, Jesús Cossio uses visual vignettes and shades of colour to transform this verbally implicit discourse of race into the visually explicit. Cossio narrates the story through portraits rather than the land: the territories of his pages are comprised of angry faces, tired faces, faces of mourning, of indifference, of disdain. And even in the clothes they wear Cossio captures the racial discourse underpinning the narrative: braces, ties, patched ponchos, folded handkerchiefs, chulpas, and trilby hats all tell a story.

Part of the racial inequalities embedded in Alegría’s story is, as is often the case with (neo)indigenisms of this period, the question of whether – or how – the subaltern can be heard. The Indigenous populations of the area are voiceless without Calixto the spokesperson: ‘Don Calixto, encábecenos’. But the illiterate Calixto’s call for a hazily defined ‘justice’ also falls on deaf ears. The symbol of his failure – not to speak the truth to power so much as to ensure that power hears the truth he speaks – is encapsulated in the letters that he pays a notary to write on his behalf and to which he receives no response. Such is the futility of words vocalized by another.

Alegría’s story, then, much like this zine, poses a question not only about how to seek out forms of resistance when voices of dissent go unheard but also about how to address the futility of Calixto’s ‘papeleo’. Both Alegría and Cossio ask whether there is still something in the power of printed words and images that might highlight the injustice of lands transformed from ripening vegetable plots of multiple colours to a repository for the decaying remains of the dispossessed.

James Scorer