

THREE YEARS WITHOUT JAVIER

By Griselda Triana



Caption: Javier Valdez in a protest by journalists

Today [marks] three years since Javier Valdez Cárdenas was murdered, and progress in the search for justice is not what we, as a family, would like to see. His murder remains unpunished, we do not know why he was taken from us, we are still waiting for answers.

In the face of an event like the one we have experienced in Culiacán since that May 15, 2017, we still have not run out of resources for resisting. At least not me, because my hope remains strong that in the future all those responsible will pay for what they did to Javier and to our entire family and to society as a whole.

While it is true that three years later we cope with this burden in a more serene way, we still haven't found the peace that our heart needs. We are still missing Javier; my daughter, Tania, and my son, Fran, need their father, and I, my lifelong partner.

I do not have any doubt that Mexican journalism needs Javier's pen more than ever. Every Monday his *Malayerba* column is missing in the *Ríodoce* weekly, those short chronicles about the lives of people in the world of drug trafficking that he published in the media outlet he co-founded with his colleagues; his reports as a correspondent for the newspaper *La Jornada*, where he worked for over 18 years.

Many victims lost their voices when he was killed, because he would write about women who were searching for their missing children, he showed interest and concern for children and youth who were easily co-opted by criminal organizations, he would give a voice and a face to victims of violence. They got rid of him because someone did not like what he wrote. Just like that. It was many against him alone. In a few seconds, they ended his life with twelve shots.

It is inevitable not to recall minute by minute what happened that noon in Culiacán, a few yards away from *Ríodoce*, when he was leaving. They were waiting for him, even though they wanted to make his murder look like a robbery attempt. The crime scene is always on my mind: his body face down over the asphalt, with a blue blanket covering his face and the hat I gave him covering his face.

I cannot forget the call from Ismael Bojórquez, his editor, our friend, to tell me that Javier had been shot. The tone of his agitated voice remains etched in my memory. Afterwards, everything became a whirlwind. Our life [fell] apart.

Leaving Sinaloa was not easy, but the fear and the pain were unbearable. I had to leave the place where I grew up, where I met Javier and got married, where we raised our family, the city that inspired him to write his chronicles. Every chance to return was dashed.

Loss after loss. Mourning after mourning. This what life usually looks like when violence takes the person you love the most.

During these three years, I have not stopped demanding justice. This February 27, there was a glimmer of hope that we could know why Javier was killed. It was during the [abbreviated] trial in which Heriberto Picos Barraza, known among criminals as "The Koala," admitted his involvement the day of the murder. He is serving his sentence in a medium-security federal prison in Sinaloa. He was sentenced to just 14 years and 8 months' imprisonment for having "collaborated" with prosecutors.

The new adversarial criminal law system allows culprits to admit their crimes in exchange for shorter sentences. Although it is a small victory, it did not leave me satisfied because he did not confess details or why Javier was killed.

The investigation has not been easy for the Attorney General's Office's Special Prosecutorial Unit for Crimes against Freedom of Expression, and for Propuesta Cívica, an organization that represents me.

A statement by the Attorney General's Office about the facts of the case, which I listened to in the courthouse—I was in a separate room—presented some evidence about what happened that May 15. All of them were members of a cell from the criminal group led by Dámaso López Serrano, known as the “Mini Lic”. His testimony clarified the uncertain picture and allowed us to know which criminal organization had ordered Javier's murder.

One of the challenges for Mexican authorities will be to have the leader of this criminal group, who is jailed in the United States, as a protected witness, transferred to Mexico and make him accountable for this crime. That which is called a crime against freedom of expression, for me it was the murder of my husband for 26 years.

That will be the focus of our demand to know the truth, but we need to have guarantees that that criminal—the son of Dámaso López, known in those circles as El Licenciado, Joaquín Guzmán Loera, El Chapo's *compadre*— won't have any such privilege that allows him to evade his appearance before our country's judicial authorities.

The emergency caused by the coronavirus has made it impossible to resume the intermediate hearing, which has been canceled several times. One of the murderers awaits sentencing. Another murderer has been dead since October 2017.

Due to the crisis, we won't be able to have the civic events we held to honor his memory over last two years in several regions in the country, but particularly in Culiacán, with the participation of artists, poets, human rights defenders, journalists, citizens who considered him a friend and an ally, to keep the widespread injustice and impunity in the spotlight.

The coronavirus pandemic hits many countries in the world, and the toll it is taking on our country is high. I respect those who are facing this pandemic and the people who are suffering the most, and I mourn the loss of thousands of people who have died because of the infection.

But authorities should not forget those of us who every single day, and over several years, are searching for justice. We cannot pretend nothing else is happening and cannot hide other tragedies that tens of thousands of victims experience in this country and those who were violently taken from us for their journalistic work.

I do not forget. We do not forget. Here we are. We miss Javier. In 2017 he had turned 50 years old. We miss his presence arriving early in the morning at the café; in the Monday meetings at *Ríodoce's* newsroom, from where he would do journalism that would upset those who feel powerful; his phone calls to *La Jornada's* States section. We miss him at his mother's house, particularly on Fridays, when he used to eat dinner with her.

I miss him every night, specially on those when he would ask me not to go to bed before him. His chronic sinusitis that he would show when the weather changed. His hands, and his big and strong presence.

Our afternoons at “El Guayabo”, his favorite bar, where he would drink whiskey and many litters of water, and eat avocados, a place where he would chat with everyone who would approach him, and which he drew from to write many of the stories for his “Malayerba” column.

I miss his easy tears like the day when Tania, our daughter, got married and I was afraid he would have a heart attack due to his feelings of emotion, happiness, and sadness to see her leave. I miss his relaxed way of talking and his Northern accent.

I miss waking up on a Sunday morning and hearing early in the morning the noise of his computer keyboard as he was typing, when he would prepare breakfast for me and we would spend the rest of the day together watching TV series.

I am writing on this Tuesday, May 5. Everything was going well until this afternoon, when I receive a message from a close friend who is asking how I am doing. My automatic answer is: “everything is all right”. But I am not all right. I can tell because the tears come out easily and immediately.

The photographs are spread over the dining room table, I drink coffee in one of his mugs, the yellow one that Tania gave him one Father’s Day, I have next to me his book “Periodismo escrito con sangre,” an anthology of stories from six of his eight books.

Since May 1, I have posted on *Facebook* excerpts from one of his last stories, included in this book, it is my way to honor him. How can I keep myself from crying if so many memories are there, gathered together? I have next to me those pictures from our time as students when we were boyfriend and girlfriend. Me, pregnant with Tania, then with Fran. At work, with our friends, from our vacations just the four of us, from our *Posadas* at *Ríodoce*.

Memories build up and reach deeply inside me, because I will not be in Culiacán this May 15. I will not go to the place where his ashes rest, I won’t walk down the streets and avenues of the city he loved so much, specially the Álvaro Obregón Avenue on which we walked together so many nights. I will not come to our home; I will not see the people who loved him. This hurts so much.

My eyes are swollen, and my nose is red. I have a runny nose and I am having a hard time writing. I sob, I cannot help it. The month of May will always be sad, very sad.

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These are some excerpts from his books that I have been putting together with these pictures of us.



Caption: Javier and I waiting for Tania's birth

"You feel as if in a high wire act, I call it 'acrobatic' journalism: doing a balancing act in order not to remain quiet or silent. And in rallies you chant, 'they won't silence us.' The reality is they already did. Partially or completely, as in Tamaulipas or in Sinaloa or in Chihuahua. They are in command and we are not the ones who type on computers when we write news reports; they are the ones who choose the letters, the words, the paragraphs, and the pictures in our stories".

Javier Valdez, "Periodismo en tiempos violentos" ("Journalism in Violent Times"), from the anthology *Periodismo escrito con sangre (Journalism Written with Blood)*.



Caption: Javier when he was working at Canal 3 in Culiacán

"In México it's increasingly difficult to do journalism. These are violent and turbulent times, of rampant decay and horrific breakdown which does not allow for a dignified life. And if in our country there are no conditions for a dignified life, it's even worse for practicing journalism. Late last year I published my most recent book, *Narcoperiodismo*. But just as I wanted to finish it, new cases of murdered, disappeared, or threatened journalists were popping up. It's a book with stories that have no ending. It was difficult to finish it and send it to the editor. Even now it hurts to have brought it to an end that dilutes itself, becomes stained with blood and pain".

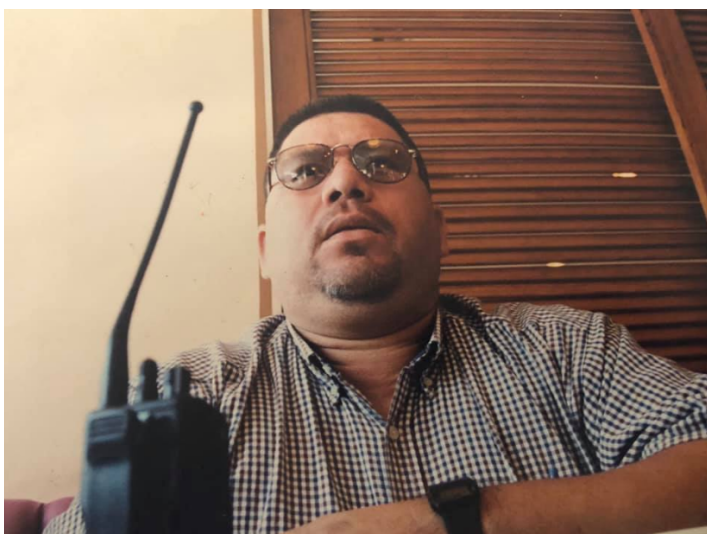
Javier Valdez, "Periodismo en tiempos violentos" ("Journalism in Violent Times"), from the anthology *Periodismo escrito con sangre* (*Journalism Written with Blood*).



Caption: Javier reporting in Sierra de Chihuahua

"In such environment, journalists and courageous and dignified journalism are more fragile and vulnerable. In addition, there's a society that doesn't protect, doesn't support courageous journalism in Mexico. This condition appears particularly in diverse regions. That's why to do journalism in such conditions is an act of resistance, of exercising freedom of expression in the face of many threats, and many journalists are watched in their newsrooms by a spy who works for the narcos, or they are threatened by criminals from both outside and inside government and they seem to type news stories as if with an assault rifle aiming at them."

Javier Valdez, "Periodismo en tiempos violentos" ("Journalism in Violent Times"), from the anthology *Periodismo escrito con sangre* (*Journalism Written with Blood*).



Caption: Working in a cafe in Culiacán

"In March 2017, three reporters were murdered in México, among them my friend and colleague Miroslava Breach Velducea, who was hit by eight bullets when she was leaving her home. A message that was left by her killers said, 'you talked too much'. And if that's the case, all of us honorable, courageous journalists in this country who practice this 'acrobatic' journalism, we talk too much. Let them kill us all, since the sentence for doing this type of journalism is death anyway."

Javier Valdez, "Periodismo en tiempos violentos" ("Journalism in Violent Times"), from the anthology *Periodismo escrito con sangre* (*Journalism Written with Blood*).



Caption: On Álvaro Obregón Avenue, while covering a protest by healthcare workers

"Miros, as we used to call Miroslava, was the correspondent for *La Jornada* in Chihuahua, like me in Culiacán. I felt her death narrowly passed by me. You tell yourself, it happened over there, in Chihuahua. But no, the reality is it was here, nearby, a few centimeters from these fingers that type, from those eyes that read newspapers, from those stories that we would never hear about if not for journalists. If Miros dies, we die too. Society as a whole suffers the amputations of ears and eyes and hands that criticize, denounce, investigate, and publish in the media. It's not one more journalist, it's a society that gets wounded by the death of each journalist."

Javier Valdez, "Periodismo en tiempos violentos" ("Journalism in Violent Times"),
from the anthology *Periodismo escrito con sangre* (*Journalism Written with Blood*).