

our weapon

SUBCOMANDANTE MARCOS

EDITED BY JUANA PONCE de LEÓN

FOREWORD BY JOSÉ SARAMAGO

AFTERWORD BY ANA CARRIGAN

TIMELINE BY TOM HANSEN AND ENLACE CIVIL

SEVEN STORIES PRESS

New York • London • Sydney • Toronto

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This book is dedicated to Aureliana and La Realidad, for helping us learn to see, and to Nico and Ana, that they may be touched by so much understanding.



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Juana Ponce de León

Forgive me,

friend, for making you a madman, by persuading you to believe, as I did myself, that there have been formerly, and are now, knights-errant in the world.

—Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, II.74

The word

*Was born in the blood,
Grew in the dark body, beating,
And took flight through the lips and mouth.*

*Farther away and nearer
Still, still it came
From dead fathers and from wandering races,
From lands which had turned to stone,
Lands weary of their poor tribes,
For when grief took to the roads
The people set out and arrived
And married new land and water
To grow their words again.
And so this is the inheritance;
This is the wavelength which connects us
With dead men and the dawning
Of new beings not yet come to light.*

—Pablo Neruda, from “The Word,” *Fully Empowered*

Poem in Two Beats and a Subversive Ending

FIRST BEAT

I
slid
down
the smile
of
a word,
drilled.
That is my origin...
But,
I
don't remember
if
I
was expelled
or
if
I took my things
and
slid
down
thinking...

SECOND BEAT

It was
words
that
created
us.

They
shaped us,
and spread
their lines
to control
us.

A SUBVERSIVE ENDING

But
I
know
that
a few men
gather
inside caverns
in SILENCE

Never again will the Zapatistas be alone...

—Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos

Prologue

Chiapas, a Name of Pain and Hope

JOSÉ SARAMAGO

IN 1721, with a feigned innocence that couldn't conceal his tart sarcasm, Charles-Louis de Secondat asked, "Persians? But how is it possible for someone to be Persian?" It's been almost three hundred years now since the Baron de Montesquieu wrote his famous *Lettres Persanes*, and even today we haven't succeeded in putting together an intelligent answer to this most essential of all questions on the historical agenda of human relationships. As a matter of fact, we still can't understand how it was ever possible for someone to have been a "Persian," and furthermore, as if such a peculiarity were not out of the question, to persist in being one today when the world seeks to convince us that the only desirable and profitable thing to be is what in very broad and artificially conciliatory terms is customarily called "Western" (in mentality, fashions, tastes, habits, interests, manias, ideas)-or, in the all too frequent case of not succeeding in reaching such sublime heights, to be "Westernized" in some bastard way at least, whether through force of persuasion or in a more radical way, if persuasion should fail.

To be "Persian" is to be someone strange, someone different-in simple terms to be the "other." The very existence of the Persian has been enough to disturb, confuse, disrupt, and perturb the workings of institutions; the Persian can even reach the inadmissible extreme of upsetting what all governments in the world are most jealous of: the sovereign tranquillity of their power.

The indigenous were and still are Persians in Brazil (where the landless now represent another type of Persians). The indigenous in the United States once were but have almost ceased to be Persians. In their time Incas, Mayas, and Aztecs were Persians, as were and still are their descendants, wherever they have lived and still live.

There are Persians in Guatemala, Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru. There is also an overabundance of Persians in that painful land of Mexico, where Sebastiao Salgado's inquiring, rigorous camera drew shudders from us with the challenging figures facing us. They ask: How can it be that you "Westerners" and "Westernized" people to the north, south, east, and west, so cultured, so civilized, so perfect, lack that modicum of intelligence and sensibility necessary to understand us, the "Persians" of Chiapas?

It is really only a matter of understanding-understanding the expression in those looks, their solemnity, the simplicity of their grouping, feeling and thinking together, weeping the same tears in common, smiling the same smile; understanding the hands of the sole survivor of a slaughter, held like protective wings over the head of her daughter; understanding this endless stream of living and dead, this lost blood, this acquired hope, this silence of one who has borne centuries of demanding respect and justice, this suppressed anger of one who has finally wearied of hoping.

Six years ago, changes were introduced in the Mexican Constitution in obedience to the neoliberal “economic revolution” directed from without, and were mercilessly applied by the government to bring agrarian reform and redistribution to an end. This reduced to nothing the possibility for landless peasants to have a parcel of land to cultivate. The indigenous thought they could defend their historic rights (or simply their common-law ones, in case it was assumed that indigenous communities had no place in the history of Mexico) by organizing into civic societies that were characterized, and still are, by their singular insistence on renouncing any kind of violence, starting with the one that was their due.

These societies had the support of the Catholic Church from the beginning, but that protection was of little use to them. Their leaders and representatives were jailed repeatedly; the systematic, implacable, and brutal persecution by the powers of the state and the large landowners increased in conjunction with and under the shadow of the interests and privileges of both. These persecutors violently expelled the indigenous from their ancestral lands, and the mountains and jungle, many times over, became the last refuge of the people displaced. There in the dense mists of the heights and the valleys, the seeds of rebellion would germinate.

The indigenous of Chiapas aren't the only humiliated and offended people in this world. In all places and at all times, regardless of race, color, customs, culture, and religious belief, the human creature we are so proud to be has always known how to humiliate and offend those whom, with sad irony, he continues to call his fellows. We have invented things that don't exist in nature: cruelty, torture, and disdain. By a perverse use of race, we've come to divide humanity into irreducible categories: rich and poor, master and slave, powerful and weak, wise and ignorant. And incessantly in each of these divisions we've made subdivisions so as to vary and freely multiply reasons for disdain, humiliation, and offense.

In recent years Chiapas has been the place where the most disdained, most humiliated, and most offended people of Mexico were able to recover intact a dignity and an honor that had never been completely lost, a place where the heavy tombstone of an oppression that has gone on for centuries has been shattered to allow the passage of a procession of new and different living people ahead of an endless procession of murders. These men, women, and children of the present are only demanding respect for their rights, not just as human beings and as part of this humanity but also as the indigenous who want to continue being indigenous. They've risen up most especially with a moral strength that only honor and dignity themselves are capable of bringing to birth and nursing in the spirit, even while the body suffers from hunger and the usual miseries.

On the other side of the heights of Chiapas lies not only the government of Mexico but the whole world. No matter how much of an attempt has been made to reduce the question of Chiapas to merely a local conflict, whose solution should be found within the strict confines of an application of national law-hypocritically malleable and adjustable, as has been seen once again, according to the strategies and tactics of economic and political power to which they are surrogate-what is being played out in the Chiapas mountains and the Lacandon Jungle reaches beyond the borders of Mexico to the heart of that portion of humanity that has not renounced and never will renounce dreams and hopes, the simple imperative of equal justice for all.

As that figure, exceptional and exemplary for many reasons, whom we know by the name of the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos has written, it is “a world where there is room for many worlds, a world that can be one and diverse,” a world, I might add myself, that for all people and all time declares untouchable the right of everyone to be a “Persian” any time he or she wants to and without obeying anything but one’s own roots.

The mountainous highlands of Chiapas are without a doubt one of the most amazing landscapes my eyes have ever seen, but they are also a place where violence and protected crime thrive. Thousands of the indigenous, driven from their homes and their lands for the “unpardonable crime” of being silent or open sympathizers with the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), are crammed into camps of improvised huts, where there is not enough food, where the little water available is almost always contaminated, where illnesses like tuberculosis, cholera, measles, tetanus, pneumonia, typhus, and malaria are decimating adults and children. All this is happening in full view of the indifferent authorities and official medical administration.

Some sixty thousand soldiers-no more nor less than a third of the permanent strength of the Mexican army at present-occupy the state of Chiapas under the pretext of defending and assuring public order.

The factual reality, however, gives the lie to this justification. The Mexican army is protecting one part of the indigenous population; it is not only protecting it but at the same time teaching, training, and arming these indigenous who are generally dependent upon and subordinate to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which for sixty years has been exercising uninterrupted and practically absolute power. These indigenous are-not by any extraordinary coincidence-the ones who make up the various paramilitary groups organized with the sole objective of undertaking the dirtiest work of suppression: the attack, rape, and murder of their own brothers and sisters.

Acteal was one more episode in the terrible tragedy that began in 1492 with invasion and conquest. All through the five hundred years the indigenous of Ibero-America (and I use this term intentionally so as not to let escape judgment of the Portuguese and later on the Brazilians, who continued the genocidal process that reduced the 3 or 4 million Indians existent in Brazil during the period of discovery to little more than 200,000 in 1980) were passed, in a manner of speaking, from hand to hand. They were handed from the soldier who killed them to the master who exploited them, while in between there was the hand of the Catholic Church, which made them