

Where some have found their paradise
Others just come to harm

— Jani Mitchell, Amelia

LEARNING TO challenge contradictions is an art not easily perfected. Our age bombards us with a complex mix of event and circumstance, issue and context, forcing us to choose constantly between shrugging things off or saying "No, this I cannot accept." A fine line separates one mental domain from its counterpart. Nothing in this landscape is fixed, but I now know that my sanity rests on some faithful inner mechanism that tells me I've shrugged once, twice, or several times too often. I silence the bells of warning. I walk past the signs of danger, as we all do, at my own peril. What happened this past weekend in Toronto I was about to dismiss with a shrug when, quietly but insistently, my internal alarm system made it clear that the contradictions I had encountered must somehow be dealt with.

The cause of all this was an article that appeared in the travel section of last Saturday's *Globe and Mail*. Although a friend had told me about the article, the day it appeared, not until Sunday morning did I actually read it. In the home of friends, I chose a comfortable armchair. As soon as I glanced at the headline, I knew immediately that something quite disagreeable was about to happen. The headline read: Guatemala In Style For A Mere \$5 A Day. After numerous readings, I am still unsure if the person who wrote the piece, Margaret Piton, has actually ever visited Guatemala. She provides the prospective tourist with a list of enticements, apparently culled from Paul Glassman's *Guatemala Guide*, that portrays the country as cheap, romantic, and not to be missed by anyone interested in an exotic experience "easily reached in a day's travel." For 16 excruciating column inches, Ms Piton sings rapturously of the glories of Guatemala. Then, in her penultimate paragraph, she extends to her audience the following reflection:

There is no such thing as a perfect travel destination and Guatemala, like every country, has problems. Poverty is widespread and petty theft is common in some areas — especially markets. Political violence flares up from time to time, although the situation seems to have improved with the present civilian government.

The shrug I had been cultivating in the course of reading vanished at this juncture, replaced by the need to remain sane by saying "No, Ma. garet Piton, No, no, no."

Perhaps I would have shrugged, left Jacob to wrestle with the Angel on his own, if I had not spent a good part of Saturday evening in the company of a remarkable young woman called Rigoberta Menchú. A Maya Indian from Guatemala, she was in Toronto to attend and address a Central America solidarity conference. Hers is a tragic but courageous story, one that concerns a Guatemala far removed from the "low prices," "beautiful beaches," and "tasty, filling meals" that Margaret Piton writes of. The Guatemala that Rigoberta spoke of on Saturday in the Church of the Holy Trinity bears little resemblance to the Guatemala that readers of *The Globe and Mail* were presented with that same



Rigoberta Menchú: 'Not even animals act like that, like those savages in the army'

day. Rigoberta's message — that we live in an ignorant world, and one that forgets too quickly — could not have been more timely.

The details of Rigoberta's life have been recounted by her in a compelling oral history given shape, structure and the permanency of print by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, a Venezuelan social scientist who pieced together the story from taped interviews conducted in Paris six years ago. Since then, Rigoberta has allowed her experiences to form the centrepiece of a somewhat uneven documentary film called *When The Mountains Tremble* and has travelled all over Europe and North America giving talks about her beloved but tormented Guatemala.

In her book, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the protagonist speaks first about her father, her mother, her many brothers and sisters, and growing up not only in the small highland village where she was born but also on plantations on the Pacific coast of Guatemala where, like most Indian families, hers spent part of each year cutting sugar cane and picking cotton or coffee in order to survive. She then tells of her experience, at age 12, working in Guatemala city as a maid for a wealthy family, in whose servile employ she began slowly to master Spanish, the language of the conqueror. Gaining a rudimentary command of Spanish marked a turning point in Rigoberta's life, for it enabled her to follow her father's example and join, in 1977, a peasant organization aimed at raising the political consciousness of rural workers. By this time, as civil war between revolutionary insurgents and the national armed forces began to take a

heavy toll, Rigoberta had cast her lot decisively with the former. Since then she has remained committed to revolution in Guatemala as the only realistic means whereby poor people may achieve legitimate demands for human rights and social justice.

As I listened to Rigoberta speak — she was seated among fellow Guatemalan exiles in an austere church basement, joking as well as consoling and sharing information with them, dressed in a colorful, wraparound skirt and a sleeveless Indian blouse that defied the Canadian winter — I was once again struck by the enormity of Maya cultural resistance, of the ability of people to suffer, endure, and come through. As with so many in Guatemala, the horrors of counter-insurgency have scarred Rigoberta's life forever, yet still she keeps on. Along with her parents she was forced to stand and watch as Guatemalan soldiers, on September 23, 1979, in the Ixil town of San Gaspar Chajul, tortured and burned alive her sixteen-year-old brother and several others accused of being "mixed up in Communism." Four months after this incident her father was also burned alive, trapped in a blaze that gutted the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City when it was fired upon by government security forces ordered to end a peaceful occupation by Indian leaders protesting against repression in the countryside. Her mother, in April 1980, was abducted by the army, beaten and raped, and then left to die after being dumped on a hillside. Her body was defiled by humans before being devoured by foraging animals. Rigoberta recalls:

When my mother died, the soldiers

stood over her and urinated in her mouth, even after she was dead. Then they left a sentry to guard her body so that no one could take it away, not even what was left of it. The soldiers were there right by her body, and they could smell my mother when she started to smell very strongly. They were there right by her. They ate near her and, if the animals will excuse me, I believe not even animals act like that, like those savages in the army. After that my mother was eaten by animals — by dogs, by vultures. The soldiers stayed for four months until they saw that not a bit of my mother was left, not even her bones, and then they went away.

Rigoberta's testimony, her memory of life in a country she dare not return to, must at least be contemplated (even if not fully accepted) by any foreign tourist thinking of travelling to Guatemala. The rewards of Guatemala are myriad, but they are gained by outsiders, and subsidized by locals, far in excess of the "proverbial \$5 (U.S.) a day." Life itself, not the price of a hotel room or a three-course meal, is what comes cheapest of all in Guatemala. Furthermore, what Margaret Piton and her ilk need to recognize is that the wave of state terror responsible for the deaths of Rigoberta's mother, father and brother, along with the slaughter of thousands of others, has lapsed only momentarily. As Rigoberta reminded her audience on Saturday night, the apparatus of repression in Guatemala has simply been put on hold. Even the perception of a strong popular movement that might challenge structures of racial, political and economic inequality in place for centuries will unleash another cycle of violence. Because it considers itself triumphant in the fight against "communism" — a scareword in Guatemala, employed at will to label anything that runs counter to the status quo — the army has released its grip on formal political office and has permitted a civilian to assume the presidency. But Vinicio Cerezo, by his own admission, commands but a fraction of power. Especially in the countryside it is quite apparent, by their physical, surrogate and symbolic presence, that the military still reigns supreme in Guatemala.

I have always imagined that Guatemala is not so much a country as a confusing state of mind. The choice, last weekend, over which Guatemala to believe in prompted me to think, as Ash Wednesday draws near, how important Eliot's prayer really is:

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood

Teach us to care and not to care

Teach us to sit still

Even among these rocks,

Our peace in this will

And even among these rocks

Sister, mother

And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,

Suffer me not to be separated

This is an age of bleak paradox. Contradictions abound, claw at us, haunt our lives in ways that make the successful negotiation of a normal day nothing short of miraculous. □

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Rigoberta's story

By W. GEORGE LOVELL

Which is the real Guatemala? The one portrayed as a tourist destination in The Globe and Mail last Saturday, or the one portrayed in all its horror on the same day by Rigoberta Menchú?