

# The Story of the Air and the Night: Insurgentas! La Mar in March



On International Women's Day, March 8, 2000, several thousand Zapatista women demanding rights for the indigenous and women, occupied the XERA radio station in San Cristóbal de las Casas for over 40 minutes. In their honor, Marcos speaks of the critical contributions of women to the Zapatista struggle. His comments include a personal tribute to La Mar, from whom he has drifted apart. Durito's advice on lovesickness leads Marcos to share with her the memory of Old Antonio's "Story of the Air and the Night."

---

First published in *La Jornada*, March 11, 2000. Originally translated by irlandesa.

INSURGENTAS!  
(LA MAR IN MARCH)  
Letter 6e, Mexico, March 2000

To those who fell,  
To those who follow,  
To those who shall come

There goes my warm letter,  
a dove forged in the fire,  
its two wings folded down  
and the address in the center.  
A bird that only wants  
your body, your hands, your eyes  
and the space around your breath  
—Miguel Hernández<sup>1</sup>

The letters are late and they are not enough  
to say what one wants.  
—Jaime Gil de Biedma<sup>2</sup>

Juggling its nocturnal hat, the March hare is indecisive. It still does not know whether to rain, or to be content with leaving the sky stained with black ink. February has stayed behind, and with it its own disruptions of wind, sun and rain. It is now the women's March, from the 8th to the 21st, that of Zapatista women, of the *insurgentas*.

I have spoken before of the insurgent women, the *insurgentas*, of our being beside them, of their small and large acts of heroism. Every March 8th, we male insurgents face these women and give them a military salute. A small fiesta usually follows, with the meager resources of our mountain camps. The women have been in the mountains of the Mexican southeast from the beginnings of the EZLN. As time passed, more were to join that small delirious group, which the world would later know as the "Zapatista Army of National Liberation."

There are small, daily things that form part of guerrilla life, and they are like small dues that the mountain imposes on those who dare to be part of it. I know each and every one of those difficulties, and I know well that, for women, they

---

1 Spanish poet and dramatist Miguel Hernández fought on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War until his capture by the fascists. He died in prison. This stanza comes from a poem titled "Letter." See Hernández, *Selected Poems*, Timothy Baland, ed., Timothy Baland, et. al., trans. (Buffalo: White Pine Press, 1989), 67.

2 Politically engaged, gay Spanish poet and essayist, Jaime Gil de Biedma was born in Barcelona in 1929 and died there of AIDS in 1990. The two lines open his poem "En Una Despedida," which was dedicated to "Jimmy Baldwin."

are double. Not because we impose them in that way, but rather because of things that come from other places and other times.

If one admires the fact that a person abandons their history and, as we say, “rises up,” choosing the profession of insurgent soldier, they should stop and look at those who make that choice as women. Their admiration would be double. In addition to confronting a particularly harsh environment, the *insurgentas* must also confront a cultural code that, beyond the *mestizo*-indigenous division, designates spaces that are not for women (I mean attitudes, places, duties, work, responsibilities and the multiple etceteras added by a society built on exclusion). If an *insurgenta* thinks she has too much work with carrying, walking, training, fighting, studying and working along with the men, she is wrong. It could always be worse. And, in our case, it is worse to be in command.

Primarily indigenous, the EZLN carries with it not just the hope of something better for everyone; it also drags along the world’s troubles and blindness that we want to leave aside. If, in the indigenous communities and in the cities, women must confront a world where being male is a privilege that excludes those who are different (women and homosexuals), in the mountain and as troop commanders, they must confront the resistance of the majority of the insurgents to take orders from a woman. If this resistance seemed to be substantially reduced during the 1994 combat, this does not mean that it has completely disappeared. The male will invariably think that he can do it better than his commander, if it is a woman. Something similar takes place in the villages, but I will limit myself now to speaking of the regular troops, of the insurgents . . . and of the *insurgentas*.

In the past, there had been just one merit promotion in the EZLN, that is, a promotion in military rank. An *insurgenta*, Maribel, rose from First Captain to Major of the Infantry. Now a major, Maribel is still short and dark, and she is still a woman. The only thing that has changed is that now she commands an entire regiment. To the problems that she faces in her new status as zone commander must be added those that correspond to being a woman.

Like her, other *compañeras*, with or without command, at arms and service, rigorously fulfill paying their dues of commitment and sacrifice, the same as all combatants. But, if the part least exposed to the glare of outside searchlights is that of the insurgent troops, the *insurgentas* add one more shadow to that of the ski-masks they wear: they are women.

And, I should say, they also add a superior level of heroism to ours, the men. We might not understand it (in spite of regulations and statutes, of the Revolutionary Law of Women, of talks and declarations), but we never stop appreciating it.

And alongside Maribel are other officers: in what we call “Health Services,” there are the *insurgenta* Captains Oli-Ale (the woman with the most active years within the EZLN) and Mónica, and *insurgenta* Lieutenant Aurora.

There are more, officers and troops. Some, I have already mentioned, years ago, on an occasion like this one. Before them, there was Alicia, from the first

group that founded the EZLN in 1983, and the first woman with troop command (the first in the mountains facing the problem of being a woman and commanding men). Soon after, Lucía arrived, the *insurgenta* author of the words to the Zapatista Hymn (and of many of the songs that are heard today at night in the mountains of the Mexican southeast).<sup>3</sup> And even before, there were Murcia (the first woman in the Zapatista guerrilla to fall in combat in 1974), Dení Prieto S. (fallen in combat in 1974), Soledad (fallen in combat in 1974), Julieta Glockner (fallen in combat in 1975) and Ruth (fallen in combat in 1983; she taught me how to shoot).

Through all of them, and with them, is Lucha, whom we call “the stainless steel *insurgenta*.” More than 30 clandestine years cause Lucha’s ski mask to shine among us in a special way. Today, in spite of the cancer that she hardly lets bother her, Lucha continues to be the first among our guerrilla women, and the best memory.

This March 8th, saluting our current *insurgentas*, we are saluting all those who preceded them and us, and who, in more than one sense, transcend us.

I shall tell you something about the name “*insurgentas*.” The anecdote can be situated at any time and in any place in that unknown monotony of life in the mountains.

I found myself leading military training operations. Between exercise and tactical exercise, the guerrilla column was trotting to the rhythm of more-or-less obvious chants. I would shout, for example, “Who Goes There?” and the troops would respond in unison, “The Homeland!” That’s how it was done and is done. In one of the chants of combat march the commander asks, “What are we?” and everyone responds, “*Insurgentes!*”

On that day that I am now recounting to you, half the column was made up of women. When I shouted “What are we?” I clearly heard, while the men were responding, “*Insurgentes!*” the women overcoming the men’s voices with their shout of “*Insurgentas!*” I remained silent. I gave the men the order to “fall out.” Then, facing just the women, I repeated, “What are we?” They responded strongly and firmly, without any interference, “*Insurgentas!*” I kept looking at them, disconcerted, and I noted a slight smile on their faces. I went back to the “What are we?” and they repeated, “*Insurgentas!*” I lit my pipe and smoked slowly, not looking at anything in particular.

I called them all to formation and told them, in so many words, “Today we learned that we are going to win. Any questions?” Silence. In a strong voice I ordered, “Attention! *Insurgentes!*” I turned around to look at the *compañeras*, and I added, “And *Insurgentas!* Fall out! Now!” The sound of the boots was, indeed, uniform. Thank goodness, I muttered to myself. They all went to the headquarters . . . men and women. I remained smoking, seeing how the afternoon, feminine as it is, was dressed as sea and lilacs, as *insurgentas*.

---

3 The Zapatista Hymn is based on the traditional *corrido* or ballad, “Carabina 30-30,” made popular by Zapatistas during the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

The Zapatista *insurgentas* . . .

This time, I want to speak more about one of them. I can say this woman is one more of us, but for me she is not just one more, she is unique. La Mar is not a literary character—she is a woman, and she is a Zapatista. She was the architect of last year’s national and international *consulta* (and an important part of each and every one of the peace initiatives these last six years). As frequently happens with the Zapatistas, her anonymity is double because she is a woman. Now, given that it is March 8th, I wish to make it clear that although most of the time it’s my duty to be the public figure, many initiatives are authored, in their design and realization, by other *compañeros* and *compañeras*. In the case of the *consulta*, it was a Zapatista woman: La Mar. Just after March 21st, she picked up her pack and joined the unit . . .

One must also remember that the mobilization of women (in Mexico and in the world) was the backbone in that *consulta*: in the contact office (national and international), in the brigades, among the coordinators, on the voting tables, in the actions. Women—of all sizes, origins, status, colors, and ages—were the majority. And so, in order to salute the women who are fighting and, above all, those who are fighting and who are not seen, in many ways, the *insurgentas* appear in these lines. In order to celebrate them I have asked an old indigenous wise man to join me: Old Antonio, and the most intrepid and gallant knight these worlds have ever seen: Durito (alias Nebuchadnezzar, alias Don Durito de la Lacandona, alias Black Shield, alias Sherlock Holmes, alias Heavy Metal Durito, alias whatever else occurs to him). Well then, best wishes to the rebel women, to those without a face, to the *insurgentas* . . .

## Love sickness

Below me again is March, its first three letters reiterating in these eyes that read in the golden light. Fito Páez accompanies me, giving a gift of a dress and my love, and on the little tape player he makes me move on with “There’s nothing more I can say.”<sup>4</sup> I take advantage of a gust of wind and I reach Don Durito, who is painstakingly sawing and nailing who-knows-what onto his sardine can. I know, I just said that it was a pirate ship. In fact, Durito just turned around and looked at me with sharpened daggers in his eyes when I wrote “sardine can,” but I’ve only done so to remind the reader that Durito is now Black Shield (*Escudo Negro*), the famous pirate who shall inherit a truly difficult task from the deceased Barbarossa. Durito—excuse me, I mean Black Shield—arrived on a vessel that’s called, for reasons still unknown to me, “Learn from the Mistakes of Others.” Previously, Durito has proposed that I accompany him on a treasure hunt, but I’ve already recounted all that in another letter, so I shall not go on about it here. Now the thing is that, in this March of the sea, I’ve made my way to where Durito is working to see what he’s up to and to ask him for guidance and advice.

---

4 Fito Páez is a singer and filmmaker from Argentina.

Durito is giving the last blows to what I suppose is a mast with a makeshift sail, and when I clear my throat to announce my presence, he says:

“Good, there it is. And now, with you in the bow, there will be no surprises to hinder us.”

I give a melancholy smile and look at the vessel with indifference. Durito reproaches me: “It is not just any ship. It is a galley, a classic vessel destined for war around the 16th century. The galley can be propelled by sails or by the oars used by those ‘condemned to the galleys.’”

He pauses and continues: “And, speaking of sails, might one know why sadness covers your face?”

I make a gesture to say, “It’s not important.”

Durito interprets it and says: “Ah! Love sickness.”

He slowly puts the hammer and saw aside, disembarks, and taking out his little pipe, sits down next to me.

“I suppose, my future bowman, that what has you sad and distressed is in fact nothing other than a feminine being, a female, a woman.

I sigh.

Durito continues: “Look, my dear bathtub sailor, if the one who keeps thee sleepless is a woman, a particular one, then thy sickness is serious but a remedy possible.”

I confessed: “It so happens that, yes, it is a woman, a particular one. She who is La Mar for many more reasons than the “Mariana” that names her. One unlucky day I drifted away from her and now I can’t find the way or means to take refuge again in her moistness, to forget bad storms, well, to have her forgive me.”

Durito takes a long puff and passes judgment:

“Great and serious are your faults and losses, but I can give you some counsel if you promise to follow my directions to the letter.”

I said “yes” with an enthusiasm that made Durito jump with fright. He readjusts his eye patch as best he can and says: “It is necessary to resort to a spell. In love, the world is, as always, a puzzle, but it so happens that, if a particular male piece comes across another particular female piece, the pieces fit and take shape, and the puzzle spreads and teases faces, arms and legs.

“And breasts,” I say, wringing the anguish I am feeling in mine.

“Good. What I am driving at is that the spell will only have an effect if she, La Mar in your case, is willing to submit to it. Otherwise, all will be futile. I mean, the spell will not work if the object of the spell is not aware that she is being charmed.”

“A strange spell, this one.”

Durito continues without paying me any mind: “Bring her a good memory, one of those that are good for seeing far ahead, one that shall make her lift her gaze and send it long and deep. Tell her to look ahead, not to the following day, not to next week, nor the coming year. Further ahead, beyond that. Do not ask

her what she sees. Only look at her looking ahead. If you see that her gaze smiles with tenderness, then you will be forgiven, and there shall be wheat and sand and sea and wind, and you will be able to sail once again, and that, and nothing else, is what love is.”

Durito picks up his gear once again and continues fixing the galley. The destination of the trip is still unknown to me, but Durito remains silent, letting me know that I should go and carry out what he has told me.

I wander through the dawn a bit more. I seek to find La Mar in bed. I know that you are thinking that I am speaking of just a bed, but here a bed is any bed or table or ground or chair or air, every time our shadow is copied in the other, never one, always two, but so close together. If it's not like that, then it's not a *vale*, you need two to talk about a bed. I think that if La Mar is sleeping, it would be a mistake to wake her up with this absurd story of the spell. Then it occurs to me that I should address the issue indirectly, approaching her while whistling some tune, commenting on the weather . . . or trying out a love poem.

But the problem, I intuit, is that a love poem holds a lock, an ultimate secret, that only a few, a very few, almost no one, is able to open, to discover, to free. One is left with the impression that what one feels for someone has already found its perfect, brilliant, complete formulation in someone else's words. And one crumples up the paper (or, in cybernetic times, decides to delete the file in question) with the commonplace in which feeling is made word. I don't know much about love poetry, but I know enough so that when my fingers turn to something like it, it seems more like a strawberry shake than a love sonnet. In short, poetry, and more specifically, love poetry, is for anyone, but not everyone has the key that opens its highest flight. That's why, when I can, I call on poets, both friends and enemies, and in La Mar's ear, I renew the plagiarisms that, barely stammered, seem to be mine. I suspect that she knows, in any case she does not let me know, and she closes her eyes and lets my fingers comb through her hair and her dreams.

I draw near and I think and I feel and I tell myself that such desires to return to the beginning, to start again, to return to the first stroke of the first letter, the “A” of the long alphabet of the company, to return to the first sketch that makes the two of us together and to begin to grow again, and, again, to sharpen the point of hope. There she is. She sleeps. I draw near and . . .

( . . . )

And all of this is to the point, or to the account, because, in this sea of March, everything seems to smell of desolation, of impasse, of incurable fall, of frustration. Because I am sure that it would seem strange to all of you that today I dare to prophesize the return of flags of all colors, populating, from below, fields, streets and windows. And I dare to do so because I look at this Zapatista woman, her tender insistence, her hard love, her dream. I look at her, and through her, and above all with her. I promise her and I promise myself, new air for those sister flags, banners, flyers, that disturb and keep the rich and poor awake, although for

different reasons. I promise her and I promise myself, right in the middle of the most tedious night, another tomorrow; not the best, but definitely better. For this woman who, in the mornings and in front of me, pricks up her ears and puts on her pistol while telling me “here comes the helicopter” as if she were saying “they are knocking at the door.” For this Zapatista, for this woman, and for many like her, who shoulder this so that the little good that remains does not fall, and in order to finally begin to build with that material that which today seems so far away: tomorrow.

*Vale. Salud* to all, and for her, a flower.

From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast  
Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos

P.S. that fulfills the duplicity.

I am attaching here the memory that I gave to La Mar. This is how this Letter 6e achieves its double wing and undertakes the flight necessary for every letter. Over and out.

## **Story for a Night of Anguish**

I tell La Mar that, for some reason that I can't manage to understand, Old Antonio might have read some of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Instead of becoming impassioned with xenophobia, Old Antonio took from the world everything good that the world made available, without regard for the land where it was born. Referring to good people from other nations, Old Antonio used the term “internationals,” and he used the word “foreigners” only for those indifferent to the heart; it didn't matter that they were of his color, language and race. “Sometimes, even in the same blood there are foreigners,” Old Antonio would say, in order to explain to me the absurd nonsense of passports.

But, I tell La Mar, the history of nationalities is another history. What I remember now refers to the night and its paths.

It was one of those dawns March uses to affirm its delirious vocation. A day with a sun like a seven-tailed whip was followed by an afternoon of gray storm clouds. By night, a cold wind was already gathering black clouds above a faded and timid moon.

Old Antonio had passed the morning and afternoon with the same calmness he was now using to light his cigarette. A bat fluttered about us for an instant, surely disturbed by the light which gave life to Old Antonio's cigarette. And like the bat, it appeared suddenly, in the middle of the night . . .



## The Story of the Air of the Night

When the greatest gods, those who birthed the world, the very first ones, thought about how and why they were going to do what they were going to do, they made an assembly where each one took out his word in order to know it and so that the others would know of it. Each one of the very first gods would take out a word and throw it into the center of the assembly, and there it bounced and reached other gods who grabbed it and threw it again, and so like a ball the word would go from one side to the other until everyone finally understood it. And then they made their agreement, the greatest gods who were those that birthed all things we call worlds. One of the agreements they found when they took out their words was that each path has its traveler and each traveler his path. And then they went about making things complete, or rather, each one with a partner.

That is how the air and the birds were born. There was not air first and then birds to travel it; nor were birds made first, and then air so that they could fly in it. They did the same with water and the fish that swim in it, the land and animals who walk it, the path and the feet that travel it.

But speaking of birds, there was one that protested much against the air. This bird said that it would fly better and more quickly if the air did not oppose it. It grumbled because, even though its flight was agile and swift, it always wanted to be more and better, and, if it could not be so, it said it was because the air became an obstacle. The gods became annoyed at how much he would fuss, this bird who flew in the air and complained of it.

And so, as punishment, the first gods took away its feathers and the light from its eyes. Naked, they sent him out into the cold of the night to fly blindly. Then his flight, once graceful and light, became disordered and clumsy.

But after many blows and mishaps, this bird managed to see with its ears. By speaking to things, this bird, or the bat, guides its path and knows the world that answers him in a language only he knows how to listen to. Without feathers to dress him, blind, and with a nervous and hurried flight, the bat rules the mountain night and no animal travels the dark air better than he.

From this bird, the *tzotz*, the bat, true men and women learned to grant great and powerful value to the spoken word, to the sound of thought. They also learned that night contains many worlds and one must know how to listen to them in order for them to come forth and flourish. The worlds of the night are born with words. Through sounds, they are made light, and there are so many they do not fit on the land, and many end up adapting themselves to the sky. That is why they say stars are born on the ground.

The greatest gods also bore men and women, not so that one would be the path of the other, but so that they would be, at the same time, the other's path and traveler. They were made different in order to be together. The greatest gods made men and women so that they would love each other. That is why the night air is the best for flying, for thinking, for speaking and for loving.

Old Antonio ends his story in that March. In this March, here, La Mar sails a dream where the word and bodies disrobe, they travel worlds without colliding, and love can take flight without anguish. Up there a star discovers an empty space on the ground and quickly lowers itself, leaving a momentary scratch in the window of this dawn. On the little tape player, Mario Benedetti, a Uruguayan of the entire world, says, “You all can go, I am staying.”<sup>5</sup>

Another P.S. Did La Mar accept the spell? It is, as I know not who said, a mystery.

*Vale* once again. *Salud*, and March is, as usual, coming in very *loco*.

The Sup, waiting as always, that is, smoking.

\* \* \*

---

5 This is the closing line to Benedetti's poem "A la izquierda del roble." Mario Benedetti, *Noción de patria. Próximo Prójimo* (Madrid: Visor Libros, S.L., 1998).