The Coronela was a stout, red-haired woman in her early thirties who, in spite of her bellicose inclinations, sometimes liked to dress up in black satin, although always with a shining sword at her side. Her husband is said to have been killed while he was an officer during the first (Madero's) revolution, and to have left her a gold mine, with the proceeds of which she raised a regiment and took to the field.

Yet, such cases as that of the "Blonde Colonel" are more or less unusual. The real epic figure of this class of self-sacrificing women is, outwardly, far from glamorous. Miserable living conditions, malnutrition, excessive child-bearing, and a general superabundance of the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" soon combine to prematurely age the young, dark-eyed, smooth ebony-haired soldadera from some Indian village or the poorer districts of the few large cities. Before long she is a wrinkled, barefooted, bedraggled woman surrounded by undernourished children who soon form part of the sordid army life around them. She can always be seen on her knees before the metate stone, grinding corn to make tortillas for her "man."

Due to the constant transfers, her children are denied the possibility of any schooling. No more heartrending picture could be imagined than a trainload of soldiers and their families filling the interiors of the boxcars and sprawled over the coach tops. Villa was the first man who—for military purposes, however—made inroads on this system of communal life among the soldiers. He often ordered swift, forced marches of bodies of cavalry, leaving the women behind.

Although practically all of the soldaderas come from the Indian and the poor mestizo classes, incidents occurring during the 1926 Catholic rebellions in the states of Jalisco and Michoacán in which a number of fanatically religious women of the upper classes participated, would seem to indicate that the heroism and abnegation of which the Mexican woman has given the world such good examples may be racial as well as social class traits.

7. The Soldier Woman as Poet

Salvadorean revolutionaries of the 1970s and 1980s expressed their reasons for fighting and their visions of the future in verse. They are even more anonymous than the Mexican soldadera because the tasks they performed as

health and literacy agents are less dramatic, heroic, and exciting and therefore less memorable. If it were not for these short verses, their participation in the revolution might be overlooked.

To You

Hey, compa.
Yes, I’m talking to you
to you who don’t know how to read and write.
I invite you to open with me
the door that for so many years
has been closed to you
and move out of that room
of ignorance and blindness
to learn and teach your reality.

You’ve walked a long road, I know,
but if you learn to read and write
you’ll have walked the longest part of the road
because the more you learn
the greater will be the enemy’s defeat.
No, don’t feel sorry or ashamed.
On the contrary, feel proud
to free yourself and win out
against illiteracy
in the process of the
popular revolutionary war.

—Carmela, literacy teacher of the FMLN

To Alphabetize

We taught the alphabet with our requisitioned boots and our rifles
and thus we learned the word “enemy.”

We taught the alphabet with revolutionary togetherness
sharing everything when there was nothing
and thus we learned the word “companion.”

Images of Women

We learned the alphabet with silent stubborn teachers
and with errors
through rivulets, pathways, roads, and trails
and thus we learned the word “Guinda.”*

Today, August 14, 1984, we teach the alphabet
for the first time with pencil and paper
and we will learn all the words
we have thus far carried in our hearts:
“Victory,” “Love.”

—Karla, health worker and literacy teacher

Birthday

It’s not easy to live 35 years
when death has become so cheap.
Outside, the informer on your trail
assembles your data: age, color of skin,
height, family relations.
Here at the front
an instant of combat
a hard-luck bomb
a rocket
may await you any minute.
Sometimes it’s not easy
to pick your way through inner storms
separated from your affections
harmonizing the interests of all
with petty individual interests.
It’s not easy to keep on
to love lovingly all corners of all rooms
all the evenings,
but sometimes it is
sometimes when you know you share a huge sun
with all the universe
an irresistible force that demolishes borders
that unites voices in a single hymn,
sometimes it’s as easy as can be.

—Lety, political educator

*Guinda: the massive withdrawal of the civilian population in the face of an army “search and destroy” operation.