



Creative Intervention

“Say It Beautifully”: Three Encounters with Love, Death and Poetry

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Introduction

A few years ago, I encountered “Live Poetry,” a method of street poetry created in Latin America, and I personally experienced the depth of the beauty and healing this journey can bring.¹ My journey with Live Poetry was marked by three encounters.

Encounter 1 – The Transfiguration

The first occurs in Cali, Colombia, in a vast set of working-class neighbourhoods called Distrito de Agua Blanca. This area is dominated by drug trafficking and invisible borders between rival gangs. Teenagers experience a daily life of violence and neglect.

In this neighbourhood, I meet Luis Enrique Amaya,² poet and social activist from Lima, Peru. Today, Luis will lead a poetry workshop with teenagers in the neighbourhood. It is based on a community poetry method he created years before with his collaborators. The workshop today will have two phases.

¹This article is the English translation of Miramonti, A. (2020). Decirlo bonito, tres encuentros de amor, muerte y poesía. In L. E. Amaya (Ed.), *Escribiendo mi primer poema* (pp. 55-64). Ediciones Prometeo Desencadenado. Translated by the author.

²The persons cited or portrayed in this article consent to having their stories and images published for research purposes. In some cases, the names have been changed to protect the person’s privacy. The research presented in this article is part of the “Arts for Reconciliation” research programme (Miramonti, 2019) of Bellas Artes, Institución Universitaria del Valle (Cali, Colombia) and conforms to the research ethics requirements of this institution.

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Figure 1. Urban neighbourhoods, Cali, Colombia (photo: Angelo Miramonti)

In the first phase, the poet interviews a passer-by, a member of the community, and asks them to talk about someone important to her or him (a family member, a friend, a lover). In the second phase, the poet asks the interviewee to wait for few minutes. Then the poet sits alone for about 10 minutes and composes a poem dedicated to the person chosen by the interviewee. When she has finished, the poet gives the poem to the interviewee as a gift saying, “after listening to you, I composed this poem and I give it to you as a gift. But beware: it is not for you. It is to invite you to give it as a gift to the person you told me about.”

During the workshop, Andrés, a 13-year-old boy, raises his hand and asks:

Professor, but... if, for example, a boy from here, from our neighbourhood, stops by and asks me to write a poem for a friend of his, a boy he used to play with when he was little, but who has now joined another gang, a boy who is no longer his friend. If he tells me that, if they meet tomorrow, they might fight and even stab each other, what do I do?

Luis calmly answers:

You will write a poem for the person the interviewee has chosen. During the interview, the interviewee can tell his former friend everything he feels, good and bad. In your poem, you will write the same things he said, but my dear, be careful: you have to say it beautifully; you have to look for metaphors, expressing exactly what he told you, but putting it in another light.

“Say the same thing” – even anger, insult, disappointment – but “say it beautifully [*hay que decirlo bonito*].” This part of Luis’ response strikes me.

It seems to me that this guidance captures the deep essence of Live Poetry: not inventing anything, deeply listening to the other, and respecting their contradictory experiences and feelings without judging them, but encountering and transfiguring them through beauty.

As Luis speaks, I think to myself: if I were a 13-year-old boy, born in this neighbourhood, how would I feel if an unknown poet asked me to talk to him about someone important to me, and I chose a peer who has recently joined with a rival gang? He and I grew up together, but now we are on opposite sides of an invisible trench. Enemies, without understanding why. How would I feel if this poet returned my words of resentment, frustration and bitterness towards my former playmate, but expressed them with unprecedented beauty, showing me that my feelings were unconditionally welcomed, and are so worthy, so important, that they inspired the creation of a piece of art?

I feel that when a poet gives me back my inextricable knot of pain and affection – without judging it but encountering and transfiguring it through beauty – something in me changes.

In those foreign words, I encounter myself, my inner struggle and deep sadness, and I see them all in a different light. I see myself reflected in that mirror of profound listening. I wonder what I often miss that gives me back the dignity that inhabits every sincere story of life, even those of pain and defeat.

I begin to understand that this process is not to embellish the daily violence of so many young people, but to awaken deep listening and imagination. It is to learn to look at all human feelings through a lens where everyone can re-encounter each other and find other meanings, buried under the everyday prosaic life we are living. Words of dignity, sorrow, hope and despair. All human experience across all ages and cultures.

Encounter 2 – The Concubine

A few weeks later, my second encounter comes. I take part in a workshop with Luis Enrique, in Cali, where I learn to interview passers-by and write a poem using what the person reveals to me about someone important to her or him.

We go to one of the busiest pedestrian areas of the city, near a park. Some participants play the role of the “recruiters.” They stop the passers-by and tell them, “if you give us 20 minutes of your time, we will give you a poem as a gift.” I and five others play the role of “poets.” We sit and wait for the recruiters to bring us someone who wants a poem.



Figure 2. Park in the city centre, Cali, Colombia (photo: Angelo Miramonti)

I am restless because Spanish is not my native language and I have little trust in my poetic talent, but I accept the challenge. The two participants I am sent are young men. Both ask for a poem dedicated to the woman they love and with whom they have a tormented relationship.

The first is Carlos, a young soldier in the Colombian Army, who has just returned to Cali after a few months of training in the wild. Carlos tells me that he is in love with Daniela, a young woman who earns her living as a “webcam girl”: she entertains clients from all over the world via the internet in exchange for tips they give with credit cards. Carlos met Daniela in real life and wants to have a relationship with her, but she doesn’t seem interested. She doesn’t trust men and the last time they met she told him, “we can’t be together, I’m a *bandida* [bandit], and you’re like me too, and ‘*bandida no se mete con bandido*’ [a bandit doesn’t hang out with another bandit].”

This sentence strikes me: in the next 10 minutes I will write a poem dedicated to Daniela, the bandit.

Alma bandida

*Daniela,
en tus ojos, veo cráteres.
Profundidades.*

*En tu cuerpo visito
planetas desconocidos.*

*Tu energía bacana me revela
esquinas escondidas de mi ser.*

*Mientras tu cuerpo juega
con ojos lejanos,*

yo me amarro a tu espíritu,

Bandit soul

*Daniela,
In your eyes, I see craters.
Depths.*

*In your body I visit
unknown planets.*

*Your cool energy reveals to me
hidden corners of my being.*

*While your body plays
with distant eyes,*

I tie myself to your spirit,

<i>como fantasma de una vida antepasada.</i>	<i>as a ghost of a past life.</i>
<i>Eres espíritu errante, inestable, alma bandida, que no se mete con bandito.</i>	<i>You are a wandering spirit, unstable, bandit soul, who does not mess with another bandit.</i>
<i>Luisa, para mi eres llama oscura. Contigo vivo en el instante. ¿Qué esconde tu cuerpo extrovertido?</i>	<i>Luisa, for me you are dark flame. With you I live in the moment. What is hiding in your extroverted body?</i>
<i>Yo lo sé: si juego con tu llama me quemaré.</i>	<i>I know: if I play with your flame I will burn.</i>
<i>Pero quiero perseguir tu alma bandida Quiero encontrar en tu piel una brecha, para penetrarte en tus secretos más escondidos.</i>	<i>But I want to chase your bandit soul I want to find a gap in your skin, to penetrate you into your most hidden secrets.</i>

After 10 minutes I give Carlos the poem and say, “here’s your poem Carlos. It’s not for you, it’s for her, you can give it to her the next time you meet.” Carlos lights up: now he has an unexpected excuse to surprise his disenchanted lover. He will give her a poem dedicated to her, handwritten on a piece of paper by an unknown foreign poet. Carlos thanks me, leaves me his WhatsApp contact and says goodbye. While I save his number, I catch a glimpse of his profile photo: Carlos in uniform, in the jungle, holding a gun. But I don’t pay much attention to it, and I continue to write poems for other passers-by.

Three days later, scrolling through my contacts, my eye focuses on Carlos’ profile photo. He had changed it.

Now Carlos is in civilian clothes, with a girl by his side. I scrutinize the girl’s face. It seems to correspond to Carlos’ description of the bandida: pale, fiery red hair and light, half-closed eyes, lost in the distance.

I didn’t want to write to Carlos. I didn’t want to ask him if something had changed between him and the bandida after he gave her the poem. But during the day I kept thinking about it. Did he give her the poem? Maybe some of my words touched the disillusioned heart of the sensual webcam concubine? Maybe the unconfessed love of this Colombian Aries for his fugitive Venus was reciprocated when the two crossed their paths of eros and war? Perhaps on the rough edges of my foreign words, the soul of the priestess of mercenary love met the warrior’s wounded heart? Perhaps on the slippery edge of one of my verses the evanescent seller of broken promises met the sad resignation of the veteran soldier?

Perhaps reading those words together, Daniela and Carlos dropped their masks of cynical mercenaries of other people’s loves and wars? Does poetry transform people’s lives? Does the girl in the photo match the description of

the bandida? Or does the poet stumble into his illusions and confuse his or her desires with reality?

Unanswered questions.

Questions I carry inside of me, while I look at Carlo’s photo, who smiles happily at the side of a young girl with eyes of sea and hair of fire, with her gaze lost in the distance...

Encounter 3 – The Cherub

A year later came my third encounter with Live Poetry. This time, I took part in Luis Enrique’s workshop at a secondary school in Lima.

We go to the neighbourhood market, a large grey concrete building, and the students distribute themselves among the stalls, offering poems to sellers and passers-by. I accompany the young poets, who offer poems to fruit, fish and clothes sellers. Some passers-by interrupt their shopping to ask for a poem.

As I watch, a humbly dressed man passes me. He earns his living by pulling a wooden cart full of market goods. He looks around and asks me, “hermano, [brother] what’s going on?”

I say to him, “we give a poem as a gift to those who give us 20 minutes of their time.”

He strikes me with his reply. “Oh... you give poems to people? I have a poem for you, too,” and he recited by heart an entire poem by García Lorca. He had memorized it in primary school. Then he pulls away his cart, full of boxes.



Figure 3. “Come and ask for a poem”: Secondary school students during a Live Poetry session in a street market, Lima, Peru (photo: Angelo Miramonti)

The young poets immerse themselves in the interviews. More than an hour passes, and we have to get ready to go back to school. Luis asks me to go around the building and ask all the students to finish their poems and meet at the entrance.



Figure 4. Secondary school students interviewing a passer-by and a vegetable seller, and writing a poem for them. Street market, Lima, Peru. (photos: Angelo Miramonti)

I go around the market. I pass through the areas of fruit, meat, fish, and clothes, looking for students bent over their sheets. None.

I pass by an altar of the Virgin of Mercy, surrounded by flowers and thank-you cards for the graces received. Still no students.

I arrive at the end of the market, where the restrooms are, and finally I see a student. He is bent over a small table, writing. In front of him is the lady who manages the restrooms; she collects the coins and places small rolls of toilet paper on the table. The student is writing in front of her, in silence, as if he had no connection with the lady and the people who come in and out of the restrooms.

He is probably the last student left; I will wait for him.

Time goes by.

The boy keeps writing, without saying a word. After 15 minutes, he hands the poem to the lady, who reads it, very seriously.

She doesn't seem happy, she shows no emotion, but thanks him. The student and I say goodbye and leave quickly. We walk towards the school, side by side, in silence.

After two minutes I ask him, "well... what took you so long? Was it difficult for you to write a poem? Maybe it was the first time you did it?"

"No", he answered seriously:

It wasn't difficult for me to write, it was difficult for me to listen, and then write what I had heard. A month ago, the lady lost her nephew, who was two years old. The baby was born after only five months of pregnancy, had a lung problem from birth and died at the age of two. During the interview, she did not want to talk to me about her nephew's illness or his death, but only about how she wanted to remember him, cheerful and playful as he always was, until the end. I stayed to listen to her for a long time, because I felt she needed to talk to someone about how she felt and how nice it

had been to live with this child for two years. In the end, I didn’t have much time left to write the poem. That’s why it took me so long.

We arrive at school in silence and my thoughts return to the lady of the restrooms and that irreverent cherub who has just crossed his threshold.



Figure 5. Student writing a poem for a woman at the market’s restrooms, Lima, Peru (photo: Angelo Miramonti)

Three Encounters

It was these three encounters with love, death and beauty that marked my journey with Live Poetry and its magic.

It was a compendium of passions, crossed by the transcendence of another word. A word made sacred by the emotions that get mirrored through those dialogues between strangers.

On this journey, I met a gallery of characters from working-class neighbourhoods and suburban markets, a procession of the living and the dead, and dozens of extraordinary poets from “difficult” schools of the most marginal neighbourhoods in Latin America.

It was a descent into the throbbing, turbulent heart of the suburbs and the depths of the souls; it was to gently touch the skin and penetrate the heart. It was a journey into the sorrows and loves of women and men I did not know, and that I will never see again.

Along this road, I saw the knots of the soul melt into tears, kisses and words. I have listened to stories of unrequited love, pride and shame, unbridled carnal

desires and delicate, unconfessable passions. Two strangers talk about their loved ones, dead, and much more, between the sale of carrots, the purchase of a chicken and a visit to the market restrooms.

This for me is Live Poetry, the beauty created and given in the prosaic spaces of everyday life, far from the exclusive sanctuaries of elitist literature, immersed in the strong, deep and vibrant words of people who seek a worthy life, intersected by their struggle and their ineffable yearning for love and redemption.

Sensual caresses of lovers, desperate tears of mourning and whispers of sad farewell, ephemeral sensuality and eternal reconnection with the souls of the departed: all this I found in the poems written by 15-year-olds from the outskirts of Lima or in my limp verses of a foreign poet.

All this is Live Poetry, a journey into the souls of two strangers who meet for a few minutes. They give each other a precious splinter of themselves, and then say goodbye, forever. The poet and their inspirer will almost always never see each other again.

But beware, because it – the poem – doesn't stop.

The poem continues its work under the radar, healing hidden wounds and weaving new spaces for dialogue. The poem, once freed by its author, advances on its own, opening up previously impossible times and spaces to meet between lovers, relatives, friends. And enemies.

Once written and delivered, the poem, like a medicine, disappears into the body and heals the evils we carry buried within us: not to speak to each other, not to meet, not to honour the wounds and gifts we all have.

When the poet offers it, the poem travels, it is given – physically and symbolically – to its recipient. It ends up hanging with magnets on a grandmother's refrigerator or is placed on the cold marble of a tomb, slipped into bunches of dried flowers and accompanied by tears of farewell.

The poem opens up new times and spaces, where another word sees the light; the poem becomes a pretext to say the unspeakable and reveal truths previously inaccessible to speech.

Its beauty becomes the key that forces the locks jammed by so many silences and opens a breach in the doors barred by pain, pride and shame.

Poetry accompanies difficult conversations and painful reunifications.

Perhaps the poem that the student gave to the lady is now on the grave of that playful little angel, and it is certainly engraved in the soul of his aunt, who, while working in the restrooms of the market, within herself, meets her nephew and plays with him again.

Perhaps the poem dedicated to the bandida today finds itself bent and a little crumpled in one of her fashionable bags, stuck between a perfume and a mascara. Maybe from time to time, hiding even from herself, the bandida pulls it out, and unconsciously breaking her own interdictions, reads it. Perhaps at that moment her disillusioned soul, fleeing behind those eyes as clear as the Cauca's hills and beneath those eyelashes as dark as the nights in the forest,

realizes something. And perhaps, in that furtive instant, the bandida’s heart begins to doubt her own disillusionment...

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