

On the “luminous side of life”

by Marjorie Evasco

(For Francisco Ruiz Udiel & Freedom Nyamubaya)

July 3, Thursday: Bienvenidos

It was almost boarding time for American Airlines flight 1623 from Miami to Medellin when the cable TV monitors at our gate flashed the news that Ingrid Betancourt, who ran as presidential candidate of Colombia in the 2002 elections, and who had been held captive by the rebel group FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) for six years, had just been freed together with 14 other hostages by the Colombian military's Operation Jaque. The news literally stopped us in our tracks and our 4:15 p.m. flight suffered a delay of two hours, giving me time to re-read my travel book on Colombia to quell the fear of traveling to a country that was known for violence, kidnapping and drug-related crimes. In fact, when I told National Artist for Literature Francisco Sionil Jose of my journey a few weeks before my departure for Medellin to participate in the 2008 international poetry festival, he said I should take good care of myself because when he last visited the city in the early 90s, “bullets were whizzing in the air” during sporadic gunfights between the military and the henchmen of notorious drug lord-congressman Pablo Escobar.

Escobar had been killed in an encounter with the military in 1993, and Colombia was now slowly but steadfastly healing itself. The October 23, 2007 letter of invitation from festival director Fernando Rendón, who co-founded the international poetry festival in Medellin in 1991, affirmed that the festival “has become a symbol of the spiritual resistance of the Colombian people against war, promoting the struggle for peace in Colombia, the development of freedom of conscience and the communion of poetry traditions of the

world.” By 2007, the Philippines had become one of the 142 countries and around 800 poets all over the world that had taken part in the festival.

I wanted to be part of this movement for peace through poetry, which had been presented in the Swedish Parliament the 2006 Alternative Nobel Prize, the “Right Livelihood Award” established by Jacob von Uexhull to recognize initiatives that solve problems of human rights violations, environmental pollution and nuclear threat. I was in solidarity with the vision and purpose of the festival, as I imagined all the poets who were converging in Medellin for the July 5-12, 2008 festival were also united in poetry in this work for peace and harmony between and among different kinds of people in Colombia and the rest of the world.

Fernando Rendón knew from hard experience that the struggle for peace is always a protracted one, and that life is ever fraught with peril. But poets must have faith in the power of poetry at its most practical level. He said: “At its foundation, we thought — we had the illusion— that we could contain terror with poetry. Today we know that poetry cannot save mankind, but it can help.” Thus in 2008 around 60 of us invited poets from various parts of the world, together with our Colombian counterparts, came to Medellin, not to play heroic saviors of humankind, but as individual bearers of our own cultural traditions of peace and community solidarity, offering our poetry to those who would listen to us read, sing or dance in many languages.

Arriving with me on the same flight were Roberta Hill and Ajimah of the Oneida Nation, U.S.A., Frank Chipasula of Malawi, and Julie Okot Bitek of Kenya. It was already 11:00 in the evening when León herded us into the waiting bus outside Terminal 1 of the José Maria Cordová international airport in Rionegro, 45 minutes away from the city of Medellin. We clattered our way in fog and colder clime on the Andean heights of Colombia’s northwest Antioquia province to the Aburrá valley. We arrived nearing midnight to the warm reception in Hotel Nutibara where poet and festival program

coordinator Luis Eduardo Rendón welcomed us to the “Ciudad de Verano Eterno,” Medellín’s poetic name referring to its year-round summer weather and its annual August flower festival. Luis Eduardo also gave me copies of *Prometeo*, the poetry journal he edited. The journal’s special “Memorias” issue published the poems of the poets invited to the festival in their original languages and Spanish translations. For the duration of the festival I was given Habitación 602, a large family suite with three beds and window views of the Gothic Revival spire of the Rafael Uribe Uribe Palace of Culture, the Museo de Antioquia and Plaza Botero. I also got the festival name tag in yellow, the color theme of the festival that year, and under my name was a title that thrilled me no end: “Poeta.”

July 4, Friday: Víspera

I had a whole day to myself before the festival began, to spend slowly to recover from the long-distance travel from Manila to Medellín. At the dining room, the charming waiter insisted that I take with my premium Colombian coffee *tamales antioqueños*, my introduction to Antioquia’s traditional cuisine. Replenished by a hefty breakfast, I took the best way of knowing a new place by walking around the immediate vicinity of the hotel: the Plazoleta de las Esculturas where 23 of Botero’s bronze sculptures stood, like the voluptuous figures of the *Mujer reclinada* and *Mujer con espejo*; the Uribe palace of culture; the Antioquia museum on the long pedestrian lane called Carrera Carabobo; and the colorful *frutas y verduras frescas* in Mercado Tejelo. Later, I went to the festival bookshop in Salón Nutaba on the second floor of the hotel to give copies of my books to Andrés Felipe Díaz. On the display tables and stands were Latin American poetry books, as well as those from other parts of the world brought by the authors themselves. I was also delighted to see at the lobby old friends Nguyen Bao Chan of Vietnam and Freedom Nyamubaya of Zimbabwe, who I had met in the Philippine Literary Arts Council (PLAC) conference on indigenous and contemporary poetry in Manila, and in the International

Writers' Program (IWP) of the University of Iowa in 2002, respectively. That afternoon, I gave Fernando and Luis Eduardo some gifts from the Philippines, one of which came from Alfred "Krip" Yuson, who had been the first Philippine poet-participant in 2007, and who had recommended my participation in the festival to Fernando Rendón.

July 5, Saturday: Por una paz mas activa que todas las guerras

The first day of the festival started in the morning with a press conference at the hotel's Salón Quimbaya. Perhaps because we were from the farthest corner of the world, Chan and I were asked to sit as part of the panel with festival organizers Fernando Rendón, Gloria Chvatal, Gabriel Jaime Franco, Álvaro Marín of Colombia, Yolande Mukagasana of Rwanda, and Bernard Noel of France. The press conference discussed the grave allegation of a columnist in *El Mundo* that the poetry festival was in alliance with FARC. Bernard Noel read an elegant satire he wrote in response to the column, while Yolande Mukagasana of Rwanda read an impassioned appeal to the newspaper to exercise journalistic ethics by printing only the truth, foregrounding her right and power to speak on a deeply traumatic experience of losing her whole family in the ruthless genocide in her country. Francisco Ruiz Udiel of Nicaragua suggested that the poets 'fight' the festival's detractors with our best spiritual weapons of graciousness, generosity and friendship. He said that the face one shows to one's 'enemy' is important in setting the parameters of the struggle. Roberta Hill also shared that her people of the Oneida Nation believe that a leader's skin must be seven hides thick so that whatever attacks can bounce off and keep the people protected. She stressed the importance of preserving and guarding the space of freedom in poetry that Fernando Rendon and thousands of young people of Medellin have built for 18 years with poets all over the world.

The writers soon came to the resolution that the festival director and poets representing the nations of the five continents go to the editorial offices of *El Mundo* and

invite the columnist and other journalists to the opening of the festival and to the various poetry readings in the city, so they would see for themselves that the festival is working for peace through poetry and the arts. The yellow streamer at the press conference bravely stated the festival's vision "*Por una paz mas activa que todas las guerras.*"

After the press conference, Director Rendón asked me to read in the first set of poets in the inauguration rites at the Teatro Carlos Vieco in Cerro Nutibara. It was an honor that I happily accepted even if it was not in my original program of readings. The poets reading with me were Alex Fleites of Cuba, Armin Senser of Switzerland, Obi Nwakanma of Nigeria and Mamta Sagar of India. By the time I read my poems the amphitheater had an audience of over three thousand-strong. I read my poems 'Elemental' and 'Origami' in Cebuano and in English, and actor-visual artist Marcela Ramirez rendered it in Spanish, to the delight of the audience. The audience was generously vocal in their appreciation of the poets they liked, shouting "Otra, otra!" or "Una vez mas!" In fact, after Nguyen Bao Chan sang her poem about her father in Vietnamese, one man stood up in front of the audience shouting fervently to the poet "Te amo!" to the amusement of his wife!

But the numinous part of the four hours' long poetry reading was when it began to rain. The poets were astounded to see that no one in the audience scampered away. The good Colombianos calmly opened their bags and backpacks, took out their waterproof *capotes* and colorful umbrellas, and stayed put to listen to more poetry! This gesture made Manuel Garcia Verdecia of Holguin, Cuba come up to the microphone to ask the poets to stand up and thank the audience's gift of strong listening. All the poets on stage stood up applauding the audience, and the audience stood up in response, the sound of thousands of hands clapping their hands in unison, bringing that sweet lump to the throat and warm tears to the eyes. We all knew then and there that this city of eternal spring is truly Poetry's home.

July 6, Sunday: Los pendientes perdidos de Luna

Sunday afternoon was spent in the Plazoleta de los pies descalzos where people strolled around on bare feet to enjoy the water in the low-lying pools of the Zen-inspired park. Six of us read to the audience gathered around an elevated platform of our reading tent: Frank Chipasula, Álvaro Marin, Mamta Sagar, Morela Maneiro of the Kari'ña Nation of Venezuela, and Andrei Khadanovich of Belarus. Gloria Chvatal was our presenter, with Carolina as our Spanish interpreter.

I read 'Luna's Lost Earrings' in memory of Ana Maria Escalante Neri, a young poet-friend whose death anniversary was two days away. And whether it was serendipity or a whimsical synchronous accident, a big brown butterfly suddenly floated above the heads of the audience and surprised the cameramen documenting the reading. Elsewhere in Manila and Cebu City, friends were also reading poetry to remember her brief and passionate life.

The audience in the plazoleta was as enthusiastic as the ones in Teatro Vieco and the Jardín Botánico Joaquín Antonio Uribe, where the African poets read that morning. Many Colombianos, with program in hand, went from one reading to the next following their favorite poets. They sought the poets' autographs on their copies of the *Memorias*. One of the teenagers told me I was her favorite because we had the same name, except that she spelled her name with a 'y.' Marjory Daniela Rojas told me that the festival taught her to love listening to poetry and that she was beginning to write her own poems.

July 7, Monday: Libros contra balas

My reading for Monday was scheduled in the evening at the Parque Biblioteca León de Grieff (La Ladera), so Chan and I had the leisure to visit the Museo de Antioquia with

Henrik Nielsson of Sweden. The museum had 92 bronze sculptures of Fernando Botero, which he gave to the people of Medellin; the mural triptych above the grand staircase of Pedro Nel Gomez, and works by modern international artists including Diego Rivera's "El despertar del indio a la civilización." Cuban poets Manuel and Alex were also at the museum and before they left, Manuel took me aside to tell me that he loved my poems, and that 'Elemental' in its Spanish translation had "a fine eroticism." Later at the museum café, Chan, my Spanish reader Marcela, her sister Elsa and Dutch poet Arjen Duinker enjoyed my treat for a late Italian lunch.

At 5:00 p.m. the van was at the hotel entrance to bring four of us to the venue: Chan, Erik Spinoy of Belgium, Dianamar Carvajal of Colombia. Biblioteca León de Grieff (also known as La Ladera Parque Biblioteca) is on a hilly site that used to be a late 19th century monastery which was turned into a penitentiary that held 1,000 prisoners. The space was repurposed into a park and public library with an auditorium. Symbolic of its transformation as a new cultural center were the children's library tables, which were painted in brilliant primary colors and shaped like seeds of hardwood trees. The transformation of La Ladera jail into a library and auditorium complex was part of Medellin's brave call in favor of books against bullets. "*Libros contra balas*" was more than a slogan; it was a people's exercise of their power to choose the kind of life they wanted to have every day in their city.

Again, after the reading we were engulfed by members of the audience. Marjory came to listen once again and gave me an Antioqueño pastry made by her mother out of sugar, milk and raisins delicately placed inside a nutshell. Later, when the poets had dinner together at the hotel Erik asked how I came to write my ekphrastic Magritte poem 'La Condition Humaine.' He then said that in Brussels, the new building of the Musée Royaux was dedicated to Magritte's paintings. Erik admired Magritte's humor; the surrealist painter was known for playing practical jokes on his friends.

July 8, Tuesday: Las mujeres en el Carcel de Buen Pastor

The loud music from the two disco joints in front of the hotel ended early so I slept well and woke up more refreshed and eager to go up the hills of the Aburrá to the prison for women in the Carcel el Buen Pastor. The only poet with me was Jorge Iván Grisales of Colombia. Our guide, presenter and interpreter was Jiráh, who picked us up at 10:00 a.m. and told us that the poetry reading at the prison for women would entail a long and complicated security check, and that we should not be intimidated by the experience. At least, we were not visiting the maximum security prison!

At the metal gate of the prison we were asked to show our passports and to surrender our bags. We were not to carry anything inside, not even our mobile phones. We went through the electronic check and then registered on the visitors' log book, with our fingerprint on it, too. The permit to enter was stamped in violet indelible ink on the inside of my left arm. Margarita, one of the teachers of the school for prisoners met us at the gate and I felt great admiration for her and the other women who worked in this panopticon to help the women get an education and be better equipped for life after they had served time in prison.

Margarita led us through several locked doors, then across the prison courtyard to the school's second floor where the library was located. Poetry books were on the shelves and on the table covered by a white, delicate lace *mantel de mesa* strewn with yellow chrysanthemums. The place looked warm and inviting, making me forget my jitters upon entering the *carcel*. I read after Jorge finished his set of poems. I spoke first to the women that I chose poems on our lives as mothers, daughters and sisters. They were enthusiastic. But when I said that I'd be reading in English, they became uneasy. Jiráh had to assure them that Marcela would read every poem in Spanish translation. *A la niña contortionista* got the warmest response.

As expected, some of the women offered to read to us their own work. One of them, a middle-aged woman named Ofir, asked Marcela to read her work. And while Marcela read, she stood in a far corner of the room, crying. Another one spoke out that the writers in prison would also like to participate in the festival and asked us to suggest this to Fernando. Afterwards, we signed their writing notebooks and thanked them for their kindness. Back at the hotel after our intense experience with the women prisoners, Jorge and I sat quietly over lunch. Jorge had been working without break with the festival since its establishment in 1991 and spoke of his commitment to continue to do so for as long as his work is useful. And because he taught drama and directed plays, our conversation eventually came to Pirandello's 'Six Characters in Search of An Author.' In the light of our experience at the *carcel de mujeres*, it seemed to us that the profoundly absurd search for reality in the play is as it is found in life.

July 9, Wednesday: III Tunja Festival de las Artes

I woke up early for our 6:00 a.m. trip to the Olaya Herrera domestic airport for our flight to Bogotá, the capital city. I gave my room key to Carolina so that she and Pamela would have a place to rest in-between their tasks as volunteers of the festival. Pamela Opsina, who had a rock band and who headed the pool of young university student-volunteers who were our interpreters and guides exclaimed "You Rock!" when I offered them use of my room while I was away.

At the hotel lobby I met my fellow pilgrim-poets: Francisco Ruiz Udiel, Alex Fleites and Erik Spinoy. Having read their work in the *Memorias* and liked their poems, I knew I was in very good and gallant company. Our flight to Bogotá was short. We were met at the airport by Noé. Two Colombian poets, Juan Antonio Malaver Rodriguez and Mery Yolanda Sanchez, joined us for the three-hour road trip on the eastern range of the Colombian Andes. The capital of Central Boyacá province, Tunja is an old historic town nestled 2,862

meters above sea level. We were housed in the Ignatian hostel run by nuns. After checking in and getting Rm. 108 facing the hostel's back garden, I went with our group to Colorado restaurant to warm our stomachs with hot soup against the cold of Tunja. I had not been warned about the weather and had to buy a pair of knitted gloves for my freezing hands.

The first poetry reading event was in the afternoon at the Barrio de Asis Boyacense with Francisco and Juan Antonio. Olga, the secretary of the Corporación de la Cultura Popular, met us in the barrio's *salón social*. The community was mostly from the working class, and the people came, old and young alike, to listen to us read our poems. After the readings, people asked questions and I felt good that I was able to respond and be understood in my poor halting Spanish, with the help of Nohora, a university student who volunteered at the festival to be my Spanish reader.

Our after-dinner *paseo* was in the town square named after the South American liberator Simón Bolívar, whose ubiquitous equestrian statue stood in the center of the plaza. From there we walked to the Auditorio San Alberto Magno of the Universidad Santo Tomás for the inaugural evening poetry reading of the 3rd Annual Festival of Arts in Tunja. It was a very cold venue; Olga explained to me that except for the hotels, all of Tunja's public places and homes did not have centralized heating. The readers that night were Erik, Alex, Mery Yolanda, and Alvaro Neil Franco of Colombia. After the reading we ate dinner at a greasy chicken house. When we went back to the hostel late in the evening, I made a joke to Olga that after two days with the nuns, I could transform into a *monja* and the male poets into *monjes*. We even had a midnight curfew that was strictly imposed!

July 10, Thursday: Cultura popular

I have never read poetry early on a cold rainy morning. But there's always a first time. After breakfast at 7:00 a.m. our host Winston Parras brought Erik, Mery Yolanda and me in a car to the administration building of the Empresa de Energía de Boyacá on

Avenida Norte, to read to the workers on their first hours of work from 8:00-10:00 a.m. We read to a small group of 20 male and female workers for almost an hour, with Nohora reading our translated poems in Spanish. Some of the workers engaged us with their questions on poetry after the reading.

After a hearty lunch with hot soup at Colorado, we were brought to the basketball court of the Polideportivo Barrio el Carmen. A group of high school boys and girls were already seated in the bleachers facing our tent. Reading with me were Erik and Santiago Guevara of Colombia. And because Nohora wasn't with us, Santiago interpreted in Spanish for us during the open forum. What warmed our hearts was that when we read our poems, the windows of all the houses around the basketball court were thrown open and the barrio residents listened to the loudspeakers. Afterwards, the village head Señor Tovar brought us to his home and offered us a hot drink of *aguapanela* with *arepas* or corn hotcakes typical of Tunja. His wife and son Juan Felipe enjoyed speaking in English with me. When we left, Señor Tovar gave me a copy of their left wing newspaper, *Polo*.

Olga brought us higher up the town to the Casa de la Cultura Popular near Parque Santander for the afternoon children's puppet show. The Grupo Compañía Teatral Origen staged Federico Garcia Lorca's '*Amor de Don Perlimplín*' to a responsive audience of grade schoolers. On the second floor of Casa de la Cultura Popular I found a framed copy of the historic *Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos*, the universal declaration of human rights adopted by the United Nations. On another wall was a framed portrait of Vladimir Lenin.

The last poetry reading of our stint in Tunja was at 6:30 p.m. in the Auditorio Gustavo Mendieta-Comfabyo. It was a huge, cold venue. Reading poetry with me were Salvador, Juan Antonio, Francisco and Erik. I read '*Despedida*' in English and Spanish. But afterwards, Señor Montañez came to ask me to read to him one poem in Cebuano. I chose '*Origami*' and after a moment of silence, he gently remarked that I should also have

read to the public in Cebuano to let them hear the music of my mother tongue. After all, he said, poetry is about people, for people. I thanked him for his advice and said that in both our cultures, poetry was not separate from how people in the villages lived, and how they used language to connect their daily lives and their dreams.

To celebrate our last evening in Tunja, Winston brought us all to a bar called La Torralba for *la rumba de los salseros*. We enjoyed the night listening and dancing to live salsa music.

July 11, Friday: Soy incapaz de imaginar un mundo sin libros

It was good to be back in Medellin after two very cold days of rain in Tunja. I had a brief afternoon rest before the evening reading at Barrio Aures with Lina Zeron of Mexico and Armando Orozco of Colombia. Our interpreter was MaFe, a law student who wanted to specialize on defending women's rights. Actor Lina Marcela Manrique was our presenter. My Spanish reader Marcela, who was celebrating her birthday on that day, decided to come for the love of poetry. I was touched by her gesture and dedicated my reading to her, to the delight of the audience.

Barrio Aures is on a highland area of the city and it was proud to have a very good library, which was our venue for the reading. When we arrived, the librarians showed us around and what struck me was the marble marker of the Biblioteca Fernando Gomez Martinez which memorialized the words of Argentinian writer-librarian Jorge Luis Borges: "*Soy incapaz de imaginar un mundo sin libros.*" The library also had a big portrait of Colombian writer Gabriel "Gabo" Garcia Marquez, whose novel "One Hundred Years of Solitude" won for him the Nobel prize for Literature and signaled the burgeoning of Latin American literature on an unprecedented global scale. There was also a large poster at the entrance of the venue with prints of our photos, a brief literary biography and samples of

our poems downloaded from the internet. The venue itself had the graceful touches of the librarians: poetry books displayed on stands with vases of *cartuchos* or white calla lilies, lighted floating tea candles and incense wafting their fragrance around the room, and samples of our poems in bookmark giveaways for the audience, plus bowls of candies and cookies. What a difference it made when women took care of things!

Lina was a lovely revelation to me that evening. She reached out to the audience, especially the women, and regaled them with stories and poems that made them laugh and cry. She was around when an *abuela* came to hold my hand to thank me for coming to their barrio, saying “*Muchas gracias. Muy linda!*” Lina and I connected strongly with our feminist poems, and by the end of the reading she said she had included me in her wish-list of poets to be invited to the poetry festival in Granada, Nicaragua. It was a happy prospect because in the early 80s I had read the book “Sandino’s Daughters,” and deeply admired the fine women who were with Nicaragua’s liberation army fighting against the Somoza dictatorship, and were also writing poetry on the experiences and hopes of their people.

July 12, Saturday: Despedida

I was up early again and decided to take it slow until my big reading at the Teatro Lido in the morning, and the reading in the closing program at Teatro Carlos Vieco. Reading with me that morning were Joe Woods of Ireland, Eduardo Pitta of Portugal, and Eduardo Gomez of Colombia. Lina Zeron took the place of the Kenyan poet who did not arrive. Earlier, Lina had learned from me that I would be reading my prose poem for Frida Kahlo and dedicate it to her, so she had asked Fernando and Luis Eduardo for the opportunity to read in Teatro Lido. In Mexico, she lived in the district of Coyoacan, a stone’s throw away from Frida Kahlo’s Casa Azul, now the Museo Frida Kahlo. I wore to the reading the orange Mexican traditional woven *serape* that Lina had given me when I

gave her a set of Philippine freshwater pearl earrings and a canister of valda pastilles for her sore throat.

After my reading of “Two Fragments from *Diario Intimo*,” which Marcela read in Spanish, an old man in the audience raised his right hand to catch my attention and pointed to his eyes and his heart. An old lady also came to me when the reading was over, to say that she felt ‘*muy triste*’ with my poem. An enthusiastic mother brought to me her four year-old son, whose auburn curly hair made him look like an angel. We had our photo together just before Carolina came with the radio station interviewer who asked a few questions. Sarah Woods, Joe’s partner, also greeted me and said she had lived in the Philippines for a year to work with an NGO in Davao. She asked which island of the archipelago I called home. And when I said Bohol, her eyes crinkled in a big smile to say she had been there to visit with friends. What a small world it was when she said her friends from Bohol were my cousins, Yvette and Lina Reyes!

The last big reading was back at the amphitheater of Cerro Nutibara. Everyone, especially the women, dressed up for the finale: Juliane looked stunning in her Kenyan outfit and head dress; Mamta wore her Indian silk kurta; Chiqui Vicioso of the Dominican Republic was in her elegant chiffon ensemble; and Tale Næss of Norway wore her Egyptian shawl. I was in my ecru tunic, black slim pants and a pair of stilettos, and Chan’s fuchsia ao dai made her the most fashionable poet. Manuel and Alex sat with me during the closing program. Alex told Manuel that while we were in Tunja together, we could hardly talk since his English was very bad and my Spanish was limited. However, he believed that we liked each other’s poems and didn’t need other words to let us know this.

All the poets read during the *clausura* and everyone felt the need to say thank you to Fernando and Gloria, Luis Eduardo and the entire festival staff, thus going beyond the three minute-limit given each poet by the organizers. I read ‘Despedida,’ my homage to Beat poet Ted Berrigan and the great Modernist poet of Andalucía, Federico Garcia Lorca.

After a dozen days of the festival, the poets had become good friends and many of us exchanged our poetry books, promised to read or translate each other, keep our correspondence by email and continue the spirit of the Medellin poetry festival in our own lives and art, and in service of our communities.

After all, we all know that the home of poetry in Medellin has many windows which are kept wide open throughout its eternal summer. These windows are always filled with light.