

## POETRY

### *Pablo Neruda*

*Selected and introduced by Edward Hirsch*

**P**ablo Neruda was born Neftalí Ricardo Reyes y Basualto in 1904 in Parral, central Chile, and he died in 1973, shortly after the coup that ousted Salvador Allende. He took the pseudonym “Pablo Neruda” as a teenager to conceal the publication of his first poems from his disapproving father, and he later adopted the name legally. He never knew his mother, who died one month after he was born.

And that's where I'm from, that  
Parral of the trembling earth,  
a land laden with grapes  
which came to life  
out of my dead mother.  
(“The Birth”)

Neruda always linked womanhood to the regeneration of earth and the cyclical processes of nature. It was one of his most emotionally motivated, earnestly held associations.

Neruda grew up in the frontier town of Temuco in southern Chile. He was shaped by the deep solitude, luxuriant nature, and endless rain of his childhood. “My father is buried in one of the rainiest cemeteries in the world,” he wrote. He adored his stepmother, whom he called *la mamadre* (the more-mother), and wrote his first poem for her. At 14, he brought his poems to Gabriela Mistral, who said, “I am sure that here there is indeed a true poet.”

Neruda's professional life began early. He moved to the capital city of Santiago and published his first collection, *Book of Twilights* (1923), and then, astoundingly, *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924), which instantly catapulted him to fame and is still loved throughout Latin America. It is the first authentic poetry in Spanish that unabashedly celebrates erotic love in sensuous, earthly terms. He explained it by saying, “Love poems were breaking out all over my body.”

Neruda benefited from a tradition among Latin American governments of subsidizing authors through appointments to the foreign service. In Burma, his first post, he began to write the harsh, ferociously surreal poems that would bloom into the three disconsolate volumes of *Residence on Earth*. Robert Bly has called them “the greatest surrealist poems yet written in a Western language.” Neruda served in various consular positions in Ceylon, Java, and Singapore, in Buenos Aires, where he first became friends with Federico García Lorca, then in Barcelona and Madrid, where he also became friends with Raphael Alberti and Miguel de Hernández. This remarkable poetic fraternity was blown apart by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

Neruda was deeply marked by the war—he wrote fiery poems denouncing the fascists and directed any number of political and cultural organizations to aid the Republican cause in Spain.

Neruda had a vision of unalienated man, of justice and equality. On the night of his father's death in 1938 he began *Canto general* (*General Song*), which by the time it was published in 1950 had grown into 340 poems arranged in 15 sections. The heart of the epic is “The Heights of Macchu Picchu,” his meditation on the Inca fortress hidden for centuries in the Andes Mountains. He vowed to make the stones speak on behalf of those who had built and labored on it. What started out as a poem about Chile eventually grew into a poem that delineated the full geological, biological, and political history of South America. It became a comprehensive song, a general chant, a Whitmanian epic of the New World, a mythification of America.

**N**eruda was a communist and over the years wrote a lot of weak, didactic poems denouncing Western imperialism. In his *Memoirs*, completed just a few days before his death, he called himself “an anarchist,” and that seems closer to the truth. “I do whatever I like,” he said. Nonetheless, his social and political commitments were crucial to his work, part of his vision of humanity.

Neruda was elected senator for the Communist Party in Chile in the mid-1940s. He campaigned for Gabriel González Videla, who became president in 1946 and whom Neruda later denounced. He was accused of disloyalty, and a warrant for his arrest was issued. He went into hiding in Chile, then fled to Argentina, and finally traveled to Italy, France, the Soviet Union, and Asia. Throughout this period he was writing love poems—*The Captain's Verses*, *100 Love Sonnets*—for Matilde Urrutia, who became his third wife.

Neruda returned to Chile in the mid-1950s, and his productivity continued unabated until the end of his life. He published three books of elemental odes, joyously celebrating daily life. He became a faculty member at the University of Chile, worked intensively on the 1970 presidential campaign for Allende, and later became the Chilean ambassador to France. He received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1971.

Ill with cancer, Neruda retired to his beloved house in Isla Negra, Chile, where he wrote *Isla Negra, A Notebook*, a kind of autobiography in verse that explores his landscape, his roots, his deepest experiences. This is supplemented by his splendid *Memoirs*, as well as by eight books of poems published posthumously.

Neruda remains an immense presence in poetry. His work contained multitudes, like that of his great predecessor Walt Whitman, and sometimes, like Whitman, he contradicted himself. But his overall achievement is stunning. He was destined to become a wondrous love poet, the singer of an endlessly proliferating nature, an important poet of political conscience. He was a great Chilean poet, a great Latin American writer, and, finally, a great poet of the Americas.

## *Body of a Woman*

Body of a woman, white hills, white thighs,  
you look like a world, lying in surrender.  
My rough peasant's body digs in you  
and makes the son leap from the depth of the earth.

I was alone like a tunnel. The birds fled from me,  
and night swamped me with its crushing invasion.  
To survive myself I forged you like a weapon,  
like an arrow in my bow, a stone in my sling.

But the hour of vengeance falls, and I love you.  
Body of skin, of moss, of eager and firm milk.  
Oh the goblets of the breast! Oh the eyes of absence!  
Oh the roses of the pubis! Oh your voice, slow and  
sad!

Body of my woman, I will persist in your grace.  
My thirst, my boundless desire, my shifting road!  
Dark river-beds where the eternal thirst flows  
and weariness follows, and the infinite ache.

*Translated by W. S. Merwin*

## *From 100 Love Sonnets*

Maybe nothingness is to be without your presence,  
without you moving, slicing the noon  
like a blue flower, without you walking  
later through the fog and the cobbles,

without the light you carry in your hand,  
golden, which maybe others will not see,  
which maybe no one knew was growing  
like the red beginnings of a rose.

In short, without your presence: without your coming  
suddenly, incitingly, to know my life,  
gust of a rosebush, wheat of wind:

since then I am because you are,  
since then you are, I am, we are,  
and through love I will be, you will be, we'll be.

*Translated by Stephen Tapscott*

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## *Nothing but Death*

There are cemeteries that are lonely,  
graves full of bones that do not make a sound,  
the heart moving through a tunnel,  
in it darkness, darkness, darkness,  
like a shipwreck we die going into ourselves,  
as though we were drowning inside our hearts,  
as though we lived falling out of the skin into the soul.

And there are corpses,  
feet made of cold and sticky clay,  
death is inside the bones,  
like a barking where there are no dogs,  
coming out from bells somewhere, from graves somewhere,  
growing in the damp air like tears or rain.

Sometimes I see alone  
coffins under sail,  
embarking with the pale dead, with women that have dead  
hair,  
with bakers who are as white as angels,  
and pensive young girls married to notary publics,  
caskets sailing up the vertical river of the dead,  
the river of dark purple,  
moving upstream with sails filled out by the sound of  
death,  
filled by the sound of death which is silence.

Death arrives among all that sound  
like a shoe with no foot in it, like a suit with no man in it,  
comes and knocks, using a ring with no stone in it, with no  
finger in it,  
comes and shouts with no mouth, with no tongue, with no  
throat.  
Nevertheless its steps can be heard  
and its clothing makes a hushed sound, like a tree.

I'm not sure, I understand only a little, I can hardly see,  
but it seems to me that its singing has the color of damp  
violets,  
of violets that are at home in the earth,  
because the face of death is green,  
and the look death gives is green,  
with the penetrating dampness of a violet leaf  
and the somber color of embittered winter.

But death also goes through the world dressed as a broom,  
lapping the floor, looking for dead bodies,  
death is inside the broom,  
the broom is the tongue of death looking for corpses,  
it is the needle of death looking for thread.

Death is inside the folding cots:  
it spends its life sleeping on the slow mattresses,  
in the black blankets, and suddenly breathes out:  
it blows out a mournful sound that swells the sheets,  
and the beds go sailing toward a port  
where death is waiting, dressed like an admiral.

*Translated by Robert Bly*

## From *Canto general*

### XII

Rise up to be born with me, my brother.

Give me your hand from the deep  
zone of your disseminated sorrow.  
You'll not return from the bottom of the rocks.  
You'll not return from subterranean time.  
Your stiff voice will not return.  
Your drilled eyes will not return.  
Behold me from the depths of the earth,  
laborer, weaver, silent herdsman:  
tamer of the tutelary guanacos:  
mason of the defied scaffold:  
bearer of the Andean tears:  
jeweler with your fingers crushed:  
tiller trembling in the seed:  
potter spilt in your clay:  
bring to the cup of this new life, brothers,  
all your timeless buried sorrows.  
Show me your blood and your furrow,  
tell me: I was punished here,  
because the jewel did not shine or the earth  
did not surrender the gemstone or kernel on time:  
show me the stone on which you fell  
and the wood on which you were crucified,  
strike the old flintstones,  
the old lamps, the whips sticking  
throughout the centuries to your wounds  
and the war clubs glistening red.  
I've come to speak through your dead mouths.  
Throughout the earth join all  
the silent scattered lips  
and from the depths speak to me all night long,  
as if I were anchored with you,  
tell me everything, chain by chain,  
link by link, and step by step,  
sharpen the knives that you've kept,  
put them in my breast and in my hand,  
like a river of yellow lightning,  
like a river of buried jaguars,  
and let me weep hours, days, years,  
blind ages, stellar centuries.

Give me silence, water, hope.

Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.

Cling to my body like magnets.

Hasten to my veins and to my mouth.

Speak through my words and my blood.

*Translated by Jack Schmitt*

## *Ode to My Socks*

Maru Mori brought me  
a pair  
of socks  
knitted with her own  
shepherd's hands,  
two socks soft  
as rabbits.  
I slipped  
my feet into them  
as if  
into  
jewel cases  
woven  
with threads of  
dusk  
and sheep's wool.

Audacious socks,  
my feet became  
two woolen  
fish,  
two long sharks  
of lapis blue  
shot  
with a golden thread,  
two mammoth blackbirds,  
two cannons,  
thus honored  
were  
my feet  
by  
these  
celestial  
socks.

They were  
so beautiful  
that for the first time  
my feet seemed  
unacceptable to me,  
two tired old  
fire fighters  
not worthy  
of the woven  
fire  
of those luminous  
socks.

Nonetheless,  
I resisted  
the strong temptation  
to save them  
the way schoolboys  
bottle  
fireflies,

the way scholars  
hoard  
sacred documents.  
I resisted  
the wild impulse  
to place them  
in a cage  
of gold  
and daily feed them  
birdseed  
and rosy melon flesh.  
Like explorers  
who in the forest  
surrender a rare  
and tender deer  
to the spit  
and eat it  
with remorse,  
I stuck out  
my feet  
and pulled on  
the  
handsome  
socks,  
and  
then my shoes.

So this is  
the moral of my ode:  
twice beautiful  
is beauty  
and what is good doubly  
good  
when it is a case of two  
woolen socks  
in wintertime.

*Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden*