

People's Poet: Pablo

"You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep spring from coming." :- Pablo Neruda
Neftali Ricardo Reyes Basoalto - Pablo Neruda was one of the greatest poets of 20th century and perhaps the most important Latin-American poets. Born in Chile on 12th July 1904. Neruda was a precocious boy who began to publish his poetic work at the age of 12.

He says...

‘And it was at that age...Poetry arrived
in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where
it came from, from winter or a river.
I don't know how or when,
no, they were not voices, they were not
words, nor silence,
but from a street I was summoned,
from the branches of night,
abruptly from the others,
among violent fires
or returning alone,
there I was without a face
and it touched me.’

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And something started in my soul,
fever or forgotten wings,
and I made my own way,
deciphering that fire
and I wrote the first faint line,
faint, without substance, pure
nonsense,
pure wisdom
of someone who knows nothing,

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And I, infinitesimal being,
drunk with the great starry
void,
likeness, image of
mystery,
I felt myself a pure part
of the abyss,

I wheeled with the stars,
my heart broke free on the open sky.

His family disagreed with his intention of making writing a career. In order to avoid conflicts with his family he adopted the pseudonym 'Pablo Neruda'.

At the age of 21 he published 'Twenty Love Poems and one Song of Despair', which made a celebrity of Neruda. The Twenty Love Poems is vigorous, poignant and direct, yet subtle and very original in its imagery and metaphors. The poem expresses, young passionate unhappy love perhaps better than most of the books on poetry in the long Romantic tradition.

I can write the saddest poem of all tonight.
Write, for instance: "The night is full of stars,
and the stars, blue, shiver in the distance."
The night wind whirls in the sky and sings.
I can write the saddest poem of all tonight.
I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.

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She loved me, sometimes I loved her.
How could I not have loved her large, still eyes?
I can write the saddest poem of all tonight.
To think I don't have her. To feel that I've lost her.
To hear the immense night, more immense without her.
And the poem falls to the soul as dew to grass.

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I no longer love her, true, but perhaps I love her.
Love is so short and oblivion so long.
Although this may be the last pain she causes me,
and this may be the last poem I write for her.

Soon after, Neruda moved to Asia (Burma, Cylone, Jakarta, Indonesia) as a consul, where he increasingly came to identify with the South Asian masses, who were heirs to ancient cultures but were downtrodden by poverty, colonial rule, and political oppression. His collection of poems 'Residence on Earth' manifests his cognitive sensitivity.

'It so happens I'm tired of being a man
The smell of a hairdresser's has me crying and wailing.
I only want to avoid becoming a stone or wool.
I only want not to see gardens and businesses,
merchandise, spectacles and lifts.

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It so happens I'm tired of my feet and toenails,
my hair and my shadow.
It so happens I'm tired of being a man.

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And it drives me to certain street corners, damp houses,
towards hospitals where skeletons leap from the window,
to cobbler's shops stinking of vinegar,
to alleys awful as abysses.
I pass by calmly, with eyes and shoes,
with anger and oblivion,
pass by, cross through offices, orthopedic stores,
and yards where clothes hang down from wires:
underpants, towels, and shirts, that cry
slow guilty tears.'

In this work Neruda moves beyond the lucid, conventional lyricism of *Twenty Love Poems*, abandoning normal syntax, rhyme, and stanzaic organization to create a highly personalized poetic technique. His personal and collective anguish gives rise to nightmarish visions of disintegration, chaos, decay, and death that he recorded in a cryptic, difficult style inspired by surrealism.

In 1933 Neruda was appointed as Consul in Buenos Aires in Argentina, where he had a close friendship with the great Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, who became an enthusiastic defender of Neruda's poetry.

There starts the crystallization of his humanitarian concerns. With his friends like Rafael Alberti and Miguel Hernandez he shared similar radical political ideas, particularly Marxist ideologies.

Next year he took up an appointment as consul in Barcelona and later in Madrid in Spain.

He revisited his 'Residence on Earth', another beautiful collection of poems adopting a more extroverted outlook and a clearer, more accessible style in order to better communicate his new social concerns to the reader.

The Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936. The social situation disturbed and upset him. The nationalists killed Garcia Lorca. Neruda traveled in and out of Spain to gather money and mobilize support for the Republicans and continued his anti-fascist activities. He returned to Chile, his home country, and supported the centre-left government in Chile and also became a member of the Communist Party. He was elected as a senator. During this time one of his finest poems, 'Heights of Macchu Picchu' took birth, following a trip to Peru. This book has been described as a "poetic testament" to Neruda's support of a Marxist view of the world and a poet's commitment to the society. Here he depicts his strong emotions aroused by the sight of ruin of pre-Columbian civilization in the mountain of Macchu Picchu.

Arise to birth with me, my brother.
Give me your hand out of the depths sown by your sorrows.
tiller of fields, weaver, reticent shepherd,

groom of totemic guanacos,
 mason high on your treacherous scaffolding,
 iceman of Andean tears,
 jeweler with crushed fingers,
 farmer anxious among his seedlings,
 potter wasted among his clays—
 bring to the cup of this new life
 your ancient buried sorrows.
 Show me your blood and your furrow;
 say to me: here I was scourged
 because a gem was dull or because the earth
 failed to give up in time its tithe of corn or stone.
 Point out to me the rock on which you stumbled,
 the wood they used to crucify your body.

Again turmoil in Chile; in the interest of the US government to pressurise and eliminate communism in Latin America the CIA spurred the conservatives in the Chilean Congress. Poets, artists, intellectuals were either eliminated or they went underground. The centre-left government turned around, imposed a state of siege and banned the communist party.

Neruda was expelled from the senate and he went into hiding and then to exile. He spent about two years underground in his own country.

He wrote his masterpiece Canto General, The ‘General Song’. Two-thirds of Canto General were written when he was hiding.

Ocean, if you were to give, a measure, a ferment, a fruit
 of your gifts and destructions, into my hand,
 I would choose your far-off repose, your contour of steel,
 your vigilant spaces of air and darkness,
 and the power of your white tongue,
 that shatters and overthrows columns,
 breaking them down to your proper purity.

Here is a section from another poem ‘The sand betrayed’ in Canto General:

Nobody knows where the assassins
 buried these bodies,
 but they’ll rise from the earth
 to redeem the fallen blood
 in the resurrection of the people.
 In the middle of the Plaza this crime was committed.
 The thornscrub didn’t hide the people’s
 pure blood, nor was it swallowed by the pampa’s sand.
 Nobody hid this crime.
 This crime was committed in the middle of the Plaza.

In 1952 the political situation in Chile once again became favourable, and Neruda was able to return home. He built a house on Isla Negra, facing the Pacific Ocean. He embarked

upon a period of incessant writing. One of his major works was 'Elemental Odes'. Its verse was written in a new poetic style: simple, direct, precise, and humorous, and it contained descriptions of everyday objects, situations, and beings—e.g., "Ode to the Onion" and "Ode to the Cat." Many of the poems in Elementary Odes have been widely anthologized. Here is one.

Onion,
luminous flask,
your beauty formed
petal by petal,
crystal scales expanded you
and in the secrecy of the dark earth
your belly grew round with dew.
Under the earth
the miracle happened
and when your clumsy
green stem appeared,
and your leaves were born
like swords in the garden,
the earth heaped up her power
showing your naked transparency,
and as the remote sea
in lifting the breasts of Aphrodite
duplicating the magnolia,
so did the earth
make you,
onion
clear as a planet
and destined to shine,
constant constellation,
round rose of water,
upon the table
of the poor.
You make us cry without hurting us.
I have praised everything that exists
, but to me, onion, you are
more beautiful than a bird
of dazzling feathers,
heavenly globe, platinum goblet,
unmoving dance
of the snowy anemone
and the fragrance of the earth lives
in your crystalline nature.

That was Neruda...A poet with the red colored human blood in his veins, who could write equally well about the human sufferings and the simple beauty of the nature.

In 1969 Neruda was chosen to be the leftist candidate for presidential elections in Chile. He declined his candidature for his friend Salvador Allende for whom he later campaigned. Allende became president of Chile. While already ill with cancer, Neruda in 1971 learned that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. After traveling to Stockholm to receive his prize, he returned to Chile bedridden. In the presentation speech of Nobel prize it was said " No great writer gains lustre from a Nobel Prize. It is the Nobel Prize that gains lustre from the recipient. The spirit of Alfred Nobel tells us, the contribution must be one which will benefit mankind. Pablo Neruda; His work benefits mankind precisely because of its direction."

After receiving the Nobel Prize he was terminally ill for about two years. He died a few days after the right-wing military coup orchestrated by CIA, in which his friend President Salvador Allende was killed. Memorial services took place at the General Cemetery in Santiago, where mourners were carefully watched and controlled by the military.

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