



Pablo Neruda

Chilean poet 1904–1973

Born in Parral in the Maule region of Chile, the only child of a railway worker and teacher, Neruda lost his mother to tuberculosis two months after his birth. Poverty forced him to pursue a political career alongside writing. He became known as a poet when he was only 10 years old. Deeply romantic, by the age of 19 *Veinte poemas de amor (Twenty Love Poems)* and *una canción desesperada (a Song of Despair)* had made him a household name in Latin America.

In 1936, the Spanish Civil War began. Neruda openly and actively supported the Republicans fighting fascism and in his '*España en el corazón*' (Spain in our hearts) he wrote about Franco's atrocities, including the execution of his friend and fellow writer, the dramatist and poet Federico García Lorca. Accolades include the International Peace Prize in 1950, the Lenin Peace Prize, the Stalin Peace Prize in 1953, the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971. His death in 1973 was officially attributed to illness but posthumous evidence has led to allegations that the poet was poisoned; he died soon after Pinochet overthrew the socialist government and ruled Chile from 1974 to 1990 as a military dictator. Millions of Pinochet's opponents were tortured and others 'disappeared'. Neruda was a supporter of Pinochet's deposed predecessor Salvador Allende - a relation of the writer Isabel Allende.

El Mar/ The Sea

Landlocked and locked down, I miss the sea. I grew up in Bristol where the sea is never far away. Neruda's poem perfectly encapsulates the paradox of constancy and renewal; always in motion and yet unchanging – the cycle of seven waves (have you ever noticed the seventh is often bigger than all the rest?) and the tidal patterns repeat, yet never feel repetitive or monotonous – instead, perfectly patterned and ever constant. A majestic wonder of the natural world, the sea puts the flotsam and jetsam of day-to-day life into perspective – it affords a long view - freeing the mind from personal cares and concerns as the individual self merges with something much bigger – sky and sea blend on the horizon and past, present and future fuse somehow in the timelessness of the great watery expanse that ebbs and flows – our unconscious tuning into the beat of its rhythmic pulse.

Often early childhood memories are anchored in seaside holidays – mine certainly are – swimming off the Dorset coast, nearly drowning in Brittany at the age of 6, and the enchanting discovery of the Mediterranean (an unspoiled corner of rural Menorca) at the age of 7. The sound of the sea has an incantatory quality – a lullaby, a chant or a roar. Sea swimming is, for me, a cathartic experience. The grain of sand – the lens through which insights are glimpsed (something universal? Infinity?) - is replaced by a grain of salt (second stanza). Whether in Chile or Clevedon (North Somerset), the 'university of waves' (first stanza last line) is magical, elemental ('the air, wind water and sand' of the third stanza) – and allows a 'commitment to pure movement' (last line) – liberating the self and body from the constraints of our land locked existence – our heavy tread upon the earth is released as, weightless and free, we float in the sea of dreams.

Lisa Carr

Readings of the poem

With no subtitles:

[Poema "El mar" de Pablo Neruda - YouTube](#)

With Spanish subtitles:

[Poema "El mar" de Pablo Neruda - YouTube](#)

With English subtitles:

[Poema "El mar" de Pablo Neruda - YouTube](#)

El Mar

Necesito del mar porque me enseña:
no sé si aprendo música o conciencia:
no sé si es ola sola o ser profundo
o sólo ronca voz o deslumbrante
suposición de peces y navios.
El hecho es que hasta cuando estoy dormido
de algún modo magnético circulo
en la universidad del oleaje.

No son sólo las conchas trituradas
como si algún planeta tembloroso
participara paulatina muerte,
no, del fragmento reconstruyo el día,
de una racha de sal la estalactita
y de una cucharada el dios inmenso.

Lo que antes me enseñó lo guardo! Es aire,
incesante viento, agua y arena.

Parece poco para el hombre joven
que aquí llegó a vivir con sus incendios,
y sin embargo el pulso que subía
y bajaba a su abismo,
el frío del azul que crepitaba,
el desmoronamiento de la estrella,
el tierno desplegarse de la ola
despilfarrando nieve con la espuma,
el poder quieto, allí, determinado
como un trono de piedra en lo profundo,
substituyó el recinto en que crecían
tristeza terca, amontonando olvido,
y cambió bruscamente mi existencia:
di mi adhesión al puro movimiento.

The Sea

I need the sea because it teaches me:
I don't know if I learn music or consciousness:
I don't know if it's a single wave or deep depth
or a hoarse voice or a shining
suggestion of ships and fish.
The fact is that even when I'm asleep
in some magnetic mode I move
in the university of waves.

It's not only the crushed shells
like some shivering planet
participating in a gradual death,
no, from the fragment I reconstruct the day,
from one grain of salt the stalactite
and from one spoon the immense god.

What it taught me before I keep! It's air,
incessant wind, water and sand.

It seems insignificant to a young man
that came here to live with his own fire
yet the pulse that rose
then fell into its abyss,
the sputtering blue cold,
the gradual fading of a star,
the gentle unfolding of the wave
wasting snow with its foam,
the still power, out there, resolute
like a stone shrine in the depths,
replaced my territory in which was growing
hardening sorrow, mounds of oblivion
and my life changed suddenly:
I gave my commitment to pure movement.