

parting words

Parting Words



By Marjorie Agosín

Translated from the Spanish by Jennifer Rowell

Pablo Neruda
Planet Earth

Dear Pablo:

Many times I have thought of the best way to celebrate your voice and presence. I wondered whether it was by sending you gifts and invisible secrets, ancient travel books of nonexistent places or a map of the Milky Way with the name of your favorite imaginary star, because I know many times you would say that your vocation was that of a stargazer. Was this so that after inspecting the stars you could give them names too? Going beyond this planet that you have already named? Pablo, I am writing this letter to chat with you not from the holy lands of distant Academia, but from the poetic space that unveils before us in its quotidian and eternal purpose. I write to you to tell you what you already intuitively know: This year our vertiginous and violent planet celebrates your birthday. You are remembered in Barcelona, Madrid, Jerusalem, Lebanon, the Philippines and in the country you love most, Chile, because even from the distance and from the glaciers you could name the earth in its entirety.

Pablo, celebrating your birthday leaves a splendid and voluptuous feeling that allows us to let loose in order to dream and experience joy. We go all-out and celebrate with streamers and wildflowers, all in the presence of your voice. It is a voice that seems to speak in the crevices between rocks, a voice that joins private conversations between lovers while you sleep with the vicissitudes of love and a voice that climbs and rises from the soil and water of the earth you have never left, where day and night you are always walking and smelling of jasmine or the sea. Your voice appears in the songs of Liberty and is heard in the most marginalized places on the planet. Your voice can be heard among the harmonic melodies of the rain that falls in unison on the houses of the rich and the poor.

In all of the precincts, in the amphitheaters or in the modest homes made of adobe brick, where the rain falls together melodically above the roofs made of zinc, your poetry appears on the tables of the poor after contemplating the powerful warrior's ferocity of the artichokes in "Ode to the Artichoke" when you say, "The artichoke/with a tender heart/dressed as a warrior,/standing at attention, it built/a small helmet/under its scales/it remained/impenetrable,/at its side/the crazy vegetables" or the nobility of the tomato when you say in "Ode to the Tomato": "The street fills with tomatoes, in the middle of the day, in the summer, the

sunlight splits the tomato in half, the juice runs through the streets." Your odes taught us to see the invisible and to contemplate and celebrate the marvels of the earth. They also reflect on the privilege of having nourishment when in your poem "The Grand Tablecloth" you say:

To be hungry is to be tenacious
it is how the crabs bite
it is a burning, it burns and yet there is no fire
hunger is a cold fire.
We sit down quickly to eat
with all who have not eaten
we set down long overflowing tablecloths
salt from the lakes of the world
bakeries, planetariums
with strawberries in the snow.
And a plate like a moon
where we all eat lunch.

For now I do not ask for more
than the justice to have lunch.

Through your poetry, the right to nourishment becomes the voice for social justice and the chance of being nourished, having the dignity of a tablecloth and experiencing a showering of food.

Pablo, you have always been one to enjoy shared beauty, but at the same time you have denounced poverty and the injustices big and small that were always necessary for you to recount and sing for the world. Perhaps this is why we still miss you even now during the years of your centennial, when violence attacks the dispossessed and women more than anyone else. Therefore, your verses are a refuge, a place not only to believe in peace, but also to have peace. For example, in your exemplary poem "I Explain a Few Things," you tell us of a Madrid in flames and you make us see, feel, and relive the way blood ran through the streets.

And one morning everything was burning
one morning the bonfires jettied from the earth
devouring human beings
and from then on fire
smoke from then on
and from then on blood.
Jackals that the jackal would repudiate,
stones that the desiccated thistle would bite and

spit out
 vipers the vipers would loathe!
 I have seen Spain's blood before us
 the single rising wave
 drowning us
 in pride and knives!

Pablo, dear Pablo in the obscurities of the cells, in the jails after the torture on Dawson Island where political prisoners were taken to live along the slopes of glaciers. It was during these nights when you gave shelter to your miseries and helped them open your heart. Perhaps this is what some of your verses repeated: "Thinking, romping shadows in a profound solitude/You are also far away/Ah farther away than anyone/Thinking, letting go of birds, vanishing images, burying lamps."

Pablo, my friend,

You knew how to arrive at the most profound depth of each one of us, to a shared humanity and conscience that affirms life and all its rights; from the identity of a continent to the identity that concedes the right to happiness for its people. So many times in your verses you said that you had come to build hope, but in addition you have taught us something essential; to love poetry, to learn and heed its voice, which comes in the most intense moments of solitude where the South comprehends its empty solitude, its presence, history and myth of love as the most contemplated and universal of feelings. Therefore, you chose yourself, a poet of love, and you knew how to sing to us about love from the poems you wrote as a young adolescent. Your poems defined an entire time period and allowed us during the nights beside the ocean, desiring the summer's advent, to "write the saddest verses of the night."


Pablo, a companion of love and the memory of love, I often think that you have never left and wonder if through your voice we could erase your death because your voice has quieted us while everything else is to the contrary. Your voice continues to teach us how to gaze at the ocean, the stars, the mistral winds, and the gloomy suit of the tyrant while it brings an understanding to the vertiginous path of the storms.

Everything from your heart can be read out loud and in low melodies, in its clarities and in its obscurities. Pablo, today is your birthday and I will dress myself in violets, I will go to the beach and like you, I will make myself wigs of algae in my hair, I will keep agates and sea stars and all that is wonderful, nautical, and earthly. I will learn to make poems in order to understand that happiness lives in the present and in the Hallelujah of this instant.

My Dear Pablo,

Today the children of Isla Negra throw rose petals into the ocean and at your grave and Matilde's. The birds return as they always do and in the distance is the voice of poetry among the rains' interstices, Matilde returning from the market singing "Ode to the Tomato," and all of us holding one of your books, always open and celestially surrounded by all

of the tutelary spirits of poetry. Your death coincided with the most tenebrous history of Chile, with a dictatorship that lasted 17 years and closed your house, burned your books, and censored voices. But your death also led a country to combat its solitude and its people, the young, the old, the widows, and the mothers of the disappeared, read to you. No one could silence your verse, an everlasting spring of fortitude and tenacity, in order to believe in the hope of words. Pablo, sometimes I think every day that passes should be your birthday, because your verses are the best gift you have left us for each day.

Congratulations, Pablo, and Thank You. 

Marjorie Agosin is a professor of Spanish at Wellesley College and the author or editor of several dozen collections of poetry, essays, biography, and memoir. A review of Gabriela Mistral: The Audacious Traveler, which she edited, appears on p. 81 of this issue.

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