

Translation by Seán Dwyer (original at end of document)

Tonight I can write the saddest verses.

Write, for example: "It's a starry night,
and the stars shiver, blue, in the distance."

The night wind swirls in the sky and sings.

I can write the saddest verses tonight.
I wanted her, and sometimes she wanted me as well.

On nights like this one I held her in my arms.
I kissed her so many times beneath the infinite sky.

She wanted me, at times I also loved her.
How could I not have loved her great steady eyes.

I can write the saddest verses on this night.
Thinking that I don't have her. Lamenting that I have lost her.

Hearing the immense night, more immense without her.
And the verse settles on my soul as dew on the grass.

What does it matter that my love could not hold her?
The night is starry, and she is not with me.

That is all. In the distance someone is singing. In the distance.
My soul will not accept having lost her.

As if to pull her close my gaze seeks her.
My heart seeks her, and she is not with me.

The same night that bleaches the same trees.
We, those of that time, are no longer the same.

I no longer love her, it's true, but oh, how I loved her.
My voice sought the wind to touch her ear.

Someone else. She must belong to someone else. As before my kisses.
Her voice, her pale body. Her infinite eyes.

I no longer love her, it's true, but perhaps I love her.
Love is so brief, and forgetting is so long.

Because on nights like this one I held her in my arms,
my soul will not accept having lost her.

Though this may be the last pain she causes me,
and these may be the last verses I write to her.

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

Write, for example, «The night is shattered,
and the blue stars shiver in the distance».

The night wind revolves in the sky and sings.

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.

Through nights like this one I held her in my arms.
I kissed her again and again under the endless sky.

She loved me, and sometimes I loved her too.
How could one not have loved her great still eyes?

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.

To hear the immense night, still more immense without her,
And the verse falls to the snow like dew to the pasture.

What does it matter that my love could not keep her.
That night is shattered and she is not with me.

This is all. In the distance someone is singing. In the distance.
My soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.

My sight searches for her as though to go to her.
My heart looks for her, and she is not with me.

The same night whitening the same trees.
We, of that time, are no longer the same.

I no longer love her, that is certain, but how I loved her.
My voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing.

Another's. She will be another's. Like my kisses before.
Her voice. Her bright body. Her infinite eyes,

I no longer love her, that is certain, but maybe I love her.
Love is so short, forgetting is so long.

Because through nights like this one I held her in my arms
my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.

Though this be the last pain that she makes me suffer,
and these the last verses that I write for her.

Line 14:

And the verse settles on my soul as dew on the grass.

Y el verso cae al alma como al pasto el rocío.

In a poem laden with insightful images, none strikes me more as being the essence of genius than this juxtaposition of the verse and the evening dew. While Neruda has spent time telling us about the night, then about his lover, then about his reaction to her absence, he has not yet given us a glimpse into what poetry does for him, either as an artist or as a scorned lover. Line 14 takes care of that task.

First, I want to examine the nature of dew. When air cools in the evening, the amount of water vapor it can hold decreases. The water then drops and collects on convenient surfaces as dew. Grass, of course, is where you notice dew most frequently. Remember that the water molecules that condense into droplets of dew were once invisible in the air; it is not until they join forces on the ground that you see them.

If you ever lie on a beach far into the night, or sleep under the stars, there is a good chance that, at some point in the night, you will notice that dew has settled on you. You don't notice each water molecule as it falls; you notice the cumulative effect of millions of droplets gathering together on your skin. The falling of dew is one of Nature's most subtle and slow-moving effects, yet when the dew is well-established, it is pervasive and obvious. How wet do your feet get when you walk through a dewy lawn?

For Neruda, this subtle, sneaky effect comes from two places. While the dew is falling on the grass of the field, it is surely falling on him as well. At some point he notices the moisture on his face. At the same time that the dew envelops his body, the invisible process repeats itself internally when he falls under the entrancing effect of the poem that is trying to write itself in his mind.

Picture the young poet, lying on his back, looking at the stars, mourning the loss of a woman he loved. Since he has been a published poet for about six years, it is natural for him to

assume that the scenario will lead eventually to a poem. Will tonight be the night? He declares it possible, because he *can* write the saddest verses tonight.

He may think, of course, that tonight is an exercise in soaking up the feelings and the images for later use. Then, suddenly, he notices that all of the little molecules of invisible poetry have condensed and splashed onto his soul. As subtly as the dew, the form and sound of the verses have made themselves plain to him. The first signs of the poem came when he recognized the night as a propitious one for creating verses, especially sad verses. Now, with all the memories and external stimuli swirling around him, he notices at last that a flood of poetic inspiration has come upon his soul.

Surely this knowledge energizes him, even if it means he will be contemplating his pain and loss until the poem is out of his system and onto the page. For a lifelong poet like Pablo Neruda, the prospect is a welcome one; the condensation of poetic droplets into a poem is as natural a process for him as the formation of dew is for the rest of us.

Neruda's line refers to the verse falling on "the" soul. In English, the use of the definite article would distance the poet from the soul he mentioned, making the process a general, if not universal, one. Spanish, however, treats one aspect of the line differently from the English way of handling it.

If, for example, you have a headache, in Spanish you say, "The head hurts me." Body parts that hurt, or that you injure, are described with articles, rather than possessives, because it is considered obvious that the only head whose ache you can feel is your own. Therefore, Neruda is not being as universal as in some other aspects of the poem up to this point. He is stating specifically that it is *his* soul on which the verse is settling like dew.

One other word stands out in this verse, though you may not have noticed it. The word is "and." In this close reading, we need to decide if the word matters.

From a structural point of view, "and" is completely unnecessary. The rules for counting syllables in Spanish poetry say that diphthongs count as one syllable, and the combination "Y

el” forms a diphthong. Thus, “*El verso cae al alma como al pasto el rocío*” would have the requisite fourteen syllables without the addition of “and” at the beginning of the line.

Since we know Neruda to be a careful poet, we can be confident that he wanted “and” there for a reason. I am going to state now that the “and” in this line is the pivotal word of the poem.

Prior to line 14, Neruda says he was thinking about the woman’s absence, feeling sorrow at her loss, and hearing the night sounds. The word “and” shows the sequential and consequential nature of these actions: thinking leads to sorrow, which leads to the torture of hearing her absence, “and” the very specific result is the settling of the verse(s) upon his soul.

Neruda is saying that these three actions opened him up to notice the poem that was trying to make itself felt, but they performed their work as subtly as the falling of the dew. On the way to writing the verses, he documents for us the moment his Muse gave him the poem. This is the moment of awakening, of becoming aware that this lost love is now a work of art. He still has to write down his thoughts, but now he is not only capable of writing the saddest verses, he is composing them in his mind.

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.

Escribir, por ejemplo: "La noche está estrellada,
y tiritan, azules, los astros, a lo lejos."

El viento de la noche gira en el cielo y canta.

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.
Yo la quise, y a veces ella también me quiso.

En las noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos.
La besé tantas veces bajo el cielo infinito.

Ella me quiso, a veces yo también la quería.
Cómo no haber amado sus grandes ojos fijos.

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.
Pensar que no la tengo. Sentir que la he perdido.

Oír la noche inmensa, más inmensa sin ella.
Y el verso cae al alma como al pasto el rocío.

Qué importa que mi amor no pudiera guardarla.
La noche está estrellada y ella no está conmigo.

Eso es todo. A lo lejos alguien canta. A lo lejos.
Mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

Como para acercarla mi mirada la busca.
Mi corazón la busca, y ella no está conmigo.

La misma noche que hace blanquear los mismos árboles.
Nosotros, los de entonces, ya no somos los mismos.

Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero cuánto la quise.
Mi voz buscaba el viento para tocar su oído.

De otro. Será de otro. Como antes de mis besos.
Su voz, su cuerpo claro. Sus ojos infinitos.

Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero tal vez la quiero.
Es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido.

Porque en noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos,
mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

Aunque éste sea el último dolor que ella me causa,
y éstos sean los últimos versos que yo le escribo.