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The dearly departed

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

Pablo Neruda, the poet and Chile's Nobel laureate for literature in 1971, died shortly after General Augusto Pinochet toppled the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973. Neruda was loved around the world for his tender, lyrical poetry, and the poems he wrote immediately after Pinochet's coup and just before his own death were indeed about love, but his beloved in this case was Chile.

"I assume the duties of a poet" he wrote, "armed with a terrorist's sonnet". His pen did not only hold the General and dictator extraordinaire Pinochet accountable for the murder of Allende, he held Washington culpable too. Responding to Henry Kissinger's infamous statement ("I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people") Neruda warned Nixon's government of the price they would pay for meddling in his home, "It is necessary to judge those hands stained by the dead he killed with his terror; the dead from under the earth are rising up like seeds of sorrow...the rodent is gnawing at Chile, not knowing that Chileans of little importance are going to give him a lesson in honour". He actually names the rodent Nixon, not shying away from the man he blamed for arming Chile's military and creating the conditions necessary to bring a man like Pinochet into power.

Those who knew him said Pablo Neruda died from a broken heart. During his funeral march to the Cementerio General in Santiago, amidst the intimidating presence of armed soldiers sent to ensure order, a man deep in the swarm of mourners called out "Compañero Pablo Neruda". Not letting a second go by, hundreds of people raised their voices and called back "Presente!" The army could not, dared not stop them. As the mood and size of the crowd swelled, the mourners began to call out to another dearly departed. "Compañero Salvador Allende" they would shout, "Presente!" the crowds roared back.

Victor Hara was born a peasant in a southern suburb of Santiago and later made his mark as a political activist, educator, poet and most notably as a singer/songwriter. He was actively involved in the revival of Latin American folk music; what Victor had to say, he said through his songs. He wrote passionate music about social justice and the integral role of the people in making for themselves a better, more just world; he wrote about love and sang about national

integrity and freedom. The world Victor Hara inhabited was beautiful because it contained amazing possibilities for change -- through art and through political activism.

Victor was only 38-years-old when he was killed. He was picked up by Pinochet's soldiers on the morning of the coup and taken to a sports complex called the Estadio Chile where thousands of Allende supporters and left leaning artists and writers were being tortured by the scions of the new regime. They kept Victor there for four days; they broke his hands -- the hands he brought music to life with -- and his wrists, they beat him and they electrocuted him. Before they killed him, before he was in fact machine gunned to death, Victor Hara wrote one last song which was smuggled out of the stadium after his death.

"How hard it is to sing" he wrote, "when I must sing of horror. Horror which I am living, horror which I am dying. To see myself among so much and so many moments of infinity in which silence and screams are the end of my song. What I see, I have never seen what I have felt and what I feel will give birth to the moment."

The poem stops there. It is when they came to take him. Victor was one of the five thousand men and women held at the Estadio Chile on General Pinochet's orders and just one of his many, many innocent victims.

In the spring of 1970 a White House committee headed by Henry Kissinger met to prevent Salvador Allende from becoming Chile's -- and the world's -- first democratically elected Marxist president. Kissinger approved \$125,000 in funds to ensure Allende's loss in the elections (that would be approximately \$650,000 in today's dollars). Imagine the fear in Washington. In September of 1970 President Nixon instructed the CIA that they were to play a direct role in fomenting a military coup should Allende ascend to the presidency, he simply would not be tolerated alive. The spooks at Langley didn't call this 'the plan for a premeditated and undemocratic assassination' -- they just called it 'Track II'. How benign.

In October of that same year Allende was endorsed as President by the Chilean Congress: 153 votes to 35. Chile's journey down a new path of socialism had begun and was remarkable -- Allende froze prices, but raised salaries; initiated a programme guaranteeing free milk to all infants around the country; education and health care were made a public right, no longer a privileged luxury; and most importantly of all the country's key copper industry was nationalised. Allende's attempt to democratize wealth inevitably signed his invisible death warrant.

Once pictured standing obsequiously next to his Commander in Chief, General Pinochet led the armed forces in a bloody coup against President Allende. The presidential palace, La Moneda, was bombarded and shelled in the early hours of September 11, 1973. President Allende was inside and the last known photograph of him was taken as he stood with troops and cabinet members loyal to him, wearing a helmet and personally defending the palace and the presidency. Pinochet's voice on radio transmissions, now declassified, are heard announcing the murder of Allende. Let's put him in a box and throw it somewhere far out where it will never be found, he says, his crackly voice enthusiastically suggesting the army inaugurate Allende as their first disappeared. But there were other things heard on the radio that day.

Just before Radio Magallanes was silenced by the army Salvador Allende addressed his people for the last time. His voice was clear and resolute, "In the name of the most sacred interests of the people, in the name of the homeland, I call to you to tell you keep faith. Neither criminality nor repression can hold back history...it is possible they will smash us, but tomorrow belongs to the people, the workers". He addressed the women of his country, the youth, and the peasants. Sensing that his transmission was about to be cut Allende said his goodbyes, "Radio Magallanes will surely soon be silenced, and the calm metal of my voice will no longer reach you. It does not matter. You shall continue to hear me. I shall always be at your side."

It is for these men we mourn, when we mourn for Chile. These men and thousands more men and women like them. Not for Pinochet, dead from heart failure, a 91-year-old man who suffered only the hospital food in his elegant, cushy, private hospital bed. How can you mourn the death of a man who has been dead for so very long?