

## The Hand Through the Fence: Pablo Neruda on What a Childhood Encounter Taught Him About Writing and Why We Make Art

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Since our cave-dwelling days, the question of why we make art and why we enjoy it has haunted us as a perennial specter of the human experience. For Leo Tolstoy, it was about the transference of “emotional infectiousness”; for Jeanette Winterson, about “active surrender”; for Oscar Wilde, about cultivating a “temperament of receptivity.”

That question is what beloved Chilean poet and Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda (July 12, 1904–September 23, 1973) answers with unparalleled elegance in a short essay from the early 1950s titled “Childhood and Poetry,” found in the altogether enchanting collection *Neruda and Vallejo*.

Neruda relays an anecdote from his childhood that profoundly influenced not only his poetry but also his understanding of art and of life itself:

One time, investigating in the backyard of our house in Temuco the tiny objects and minuscule beings of my world, I came upon a hole in one of the boards of the fence. I looked through the hole and saw a landscape like that behind our house, uncared for, and wild. I moved back a few steps, because I sensed vaguely that something was about to happen. All of a sudden a hand appeared — a tiny hand of a boy about my own age. By the time I came close again, the hand was gone, and in its place there was a marvelous white sheep.

The sheep's wool was faded. Its wheels had escaped. All of this only made it more authentic. I had never seen such a wonderful sheep. I looked back through the hole, but the boy had disappeared. I went into the house and brought out a treasure of my own: a pinecone, opened, full of odor and resin, which I adored. I set it down in the same spot and went off with the sheep.

He never saw the hand nor the boy it belonged to again. The lamb toy perished in a fire years later. But that boyhood encounter, with the simplicity of its symbolism, impressed upon him a lifelong learning — the second he grasped that faded-wool lamb he grasped a deep truth about the longing for mutuality that impels us to make art:

To feel the intimacy of brothers is a marvelous thing in life. To feel the love of people whom we love is a fire that feeds our life. But to feel the affection that comes from those whom we do not know, from those unknown to us, who are watching over our sleep and solitude, over our dangers and our weaknesses — that is something still greater and more beautiful because it widens out the boundaries of our being, and unites all living things.

That exchange brought home to me for the first time a precious idea: that all of humanity is somehow together...

It won't surprise you then that I attempted to give something resinous, earthlike, and fragrant in exchange for human brotherhood. Just as I once left the pinecone by the fence, I have since left my words on the door of so many people who were unknown to me, people in prison, or hunted, or alone.

Also included in the volume is a 1966 interview by Bly under the title "The Lamb and the Pine Cone," in which Neruda revisits the formative incident and how it shaped his understanding of the creative experience:

This exchange of gifts — mysterious — settled deep inside me like a sedimentary deposit.