

Gabriela Mistral



Gabriela Mistral was the first Hispanic writer to win the Nobel Prize in literature. She was awarded this honor primarily for her poetry, though she also wrote children's fables and a great deal of prose. When she won this award in 1945 at the age of 56, her poetry had become known throughout the world. It was poetry of tremendous emotional breadth written for both children and adults, poetry she often wrote to spawn social change.

Gabriela was of Basque ancestry from her father, Indian (or Mestizo) ancestry from her mother and maternal grandfather, and Jewish ancestry from her paternal grandmother. She was born and raised in the very small village of Monte Grande located deep in the heart of the Andes Mountains in Chile. Even today, her hometown reflects much of the simple tranquility in which she grew up. The majestic mountains seem to reach for the heavens as the vineyards of the valley spread out far below. There is only one paved road, sheep and goats wander at will; it a simple, idyllic and almost mystical environment. Always a somewhat introspective child, Gabriela's deeply religious and socialistic sensibility was nurtured here and found its expression in both prose and poetry. She loved books, which were scarce and most precious, and through the tutelage of her stepsister Emelina, Gabriela realized at a very young age both the comforting and very powerful force of words.

She always considered herself first and foremost a teacher. In fact she taught for many years, securing her first job when she was 15. She continued teaching for the next 18 years and essentially achieved the position of what we would call superintendent. She was also invited to Mexico to lead the reform of the public school and library system there. Gabriela eventually traveled all over the world as an international representative for her country. Her concern for the less fortunate led to her involvement in the formation of UNICEF, and she represented Chile in the General Assembly of the United Nations.

POEMS BY GABRIELA

The Wild Strawberry

The wild strawberry, set apart
in a leafy tent,
gives off fragrance before she is picked.
Untouched by birds,
it is heaven's dew
that moistens the wild strawberry.

Do not bruise the earth;
do not squeeze the sweet one.
For her love, lower yourself,
inhale her, and give her your mouth.

Night

Mountain ranges dissolve,
cattle wander astray,
the sun returns to its forge,
all the world slips away.

Orchard and garden are fading,
the farmhouse already immersed.
My mountains submerge their crests
and their living cry.

All creatures are sliding aslant
down toward forgetfulness and sleep.
You and I, also, my baby,
tumble down toward night's keep.

Am Not Alone

The night, it is deserted
from the mountains to the sea.
But I, the one who rocks you,
I am not alone!

The sky, it is deserted
for the moon falls to the sea.
But I, the one who holds you,
I am not alone!

The world, it is deserted.
All flesh is sad you see.
But I, the one who hugs you,
I am not alone!

The Sea

Take me, adopt me, give me
your salt, your dance, your rhythm,
and dispel from me all harbors.
My father the sea receives me
with his all-embracing foam.
May he give me the wisdom
of his law and his echo
and may his music follow me
and give shape to my second body.

The Sad Mother

Sleep, sleep, my beloved,
without worry, without fear,
although my soul does not sleep,
although I do not rest.

Sleep, sleep, and in the night
may your whispers be softer
than a leaf of grass,
or the silken fleece of lambs.

May my flesh slumber in you,
my worry, my trembling.
In you, may my eyes close
and my heart sleep

Pine Forest

Let us go now into the forest.
Trees will pass by your face,
and I will stop and offer you to them,
but they cannot bend down.
The night watches over its creatures,
except for the pine trees that never
change:
the old wounded springs that spring
blessed gum, eternal afternoons.
If they could, the trees would lift you
and carry you from valley to valley,
and you would pass from arm to arm,
a child running
from father to father.