

A Concert for an Absent Audience

by JB Polk

In memory of Victor Jara, folk singer (09.32 – 09.73), on the 50th anniversary of his execution by the Chilean Military Regime at the Estadio Chile Arena.

He woke up to the convulsive rattling of the windowpanes and the roar of low-flying jets. Stretching until his bones cracked, he got out of bed and pushed the window open. The air was dense with fumes. The planes, sinister birds of prey gleaming silver against the cobalt September sky, swooped towards the rooftops, their gray bellies nearly slicing down chimneys, then leaped up again, smoke billowing like rain clouds. He watched as they spiraled away, getting smaller and smaller until they were no more than flea bites on the flawless skin of the sky.

He walked briskly to the kitchen, filled the kettle with water, and then heaped coffee into a cup. He sipped the scalding coffee while standing, waiting for the silver dragonfly planes to return, fully aware of their portentous meaning.

He turned on the radio. Military marches blared from the speakers. The music evoked visions of a Prussian parade: an even clatter of polished boots, weapons raised, uniforms buttoned up, helmets in place, and the Kaiser's frown eased by approval. He searched all the wavelengths but found nothing else.

The music faded abruptly. A syrupy voice oozed out of the transistor.

"Fellow citizens, compatriots, brothers, and sisters, stay calm. The military government guarantees your safety. Do not leave your homes. At midday, the President of the Junta will address the nation and..."

He slammed the cup down on the counter and switched off the radio. So it happened. He had known all along it was not a question of if but of when.

He returned to his bedroom and dialed a number he kept for emergencies. There was a brief pause, followed by static crackling and the brassy, mechanical click of equipment set in motion.

"Hello?"

He replaced the receiver. In that single word, he had caught the arrogant tones of a professional soldier.

He disregarded the prior announcement and left the radio off for the rest of the day. Trying to seek relief from anxiety in the tranquilizing effect of work, he made the bed, took a shower, opened a can of tuna, spread it on a slice of rye, added some mayonnaise, but after the first bite, the sandwich refused to pass through his throat.

He wandered aimlessly around the flat, finding his guitar on the top shelf of the wardrobe in his bedroom. He sat on the bed, flexed his hands, patted the chords, and began playing.

At first, gentle notes dripped from his fingertips like droplets on a spider web. Sweet sounds of love, of dreams, denied the chance to bloom. The music became faster, more urgent. The strings vibrated, and a thunderstorm fractured the web's threads—he played songs of resistance, of rage, of loss. He played a one-man concert for an absent audience.

The sun began to set, casting slanted rays into the room. Darkness slowly smothered the city, blotting out shapes and forms, wrapping it in a cloak of false tranquility, a glaze of cautious calm before a storm, occasionally interrupted by whining sirens and the thunderclap of gunfire.

The bell came alive with a persistent buzz, drowning out the sounds of the guitar: long, short, long, long. He carefully placed the instrument on the bed, tossed a cigarette from a pack on the bedside table, and lit it. The bell - insistent, self-inviting, impossible to ignore - kept ringing an ugly note.

There were three of them, clad in khaki uniforms with splotches the color of dried blood, their faces unrecognizable under a mask of greasy paint and rifles wrapped across their shoulders.

Full of prepossessing confidence, they rushed by him, searching the rooms and cupboards, leafing through the pages of books and albums, emptying cans of coffee, pasta, and sugar directly onto the kitchen floor. They looked behind photos, rummaged through the trash, and even opened his uneaten sandwich, which had become soggy by this point. Instructed in the art of intimidation, they moved with great efficiency, broken glass and wooden picture frames crunching under their feet.

Betraying no emotions, he watched them smoking one cigarette after another.

"Where is your weapon?" one of them inquired.

He inhaled, filling his lungs with smoke, before slowly releasing a circle that levitated to the ceiling like a silver wedding band.

"Your weapon, where is it?"

His shoulders rose in an indifferent shrug.

"My weapon? Do you mean my guitar?"

A fist smashed into his mouth. The cigarette fell, spilling ruby sparks. He rocked a loose tooth with his tongue.

"Where's the gun?" The question gathered urgency, the voice impatience.

"He's lying," the soldier's eyes appeared to say, "buying time. But time is both dear and painful."

"What...gun..." His lips were red with blood.

The fist lashed out once more. He heard a snap; it was his nose. Surprisingly, it didn't hurt.

Barely a tingle, a spreading numbness, as if anesthesia had been pumped into his veins.

They moved towards him, grabbed his arms, twisted them to the back, and dragged him to the door.

"My guitar," he croaked.

He could hardly recognize his voice; it sounded like he was speaking through cotton swaths crammed into his mouth.

The tallest soldier, with a look of authority and rank in his eyes as hard and impenetrable as an armor plate, appeared to ponder.

"Get it," he barked.

They let him go. He stumbled, no longer feeling their support.

The bedroom was chaotic, with photos scattered among splinters of glass, sheets, and blankets on the floor. The guitar was next to the bed. He picked it up and ran his fingers along the chords, pressing a few frets.

They led him to a waiting car and made him sit at the back, flanked on both sides. The faint twinkle of stars and the thin crescent of the moon watched as the vehicle careened along the echoing streets.

There was no sound in the city—no people, no traffic, the shuttered shop windows black rectangles in the unbroken silence. The night stripped objects of their shapes and colors, reducing them to mere silhouettes.

Breaks squealed without warning, and his body heaved sharply forward. They hustled him out. The door slammed shut, and the car, like an implacable hunter, departed in search of another victim.

Two silent figures met them at the entrance. More soldiers. They moved along dim corridors, the resonance of their footfalls vibrating like a xylophone. There was another sound, faint and weak—the whisper of rippling surf—ebbing and flowing, louder and quieter. It came again before he could gather his thoughts. No, not surf, but people. Hushed but not silent.

His eyes swiveled from left to right and right to left as he grew accustomed to the semi-darkness. He knew the place—a basketball arena where he had played before sold-out crowds to standing ovations. There were rows and rows of people sitting and waiting. It was as if he'd stumbled onto a surrealist painting with forms, shapes, and colors open to interpretation.

They shoved him into the crowd.

"Welcome to hell," murmured a voice behind him.

He spun around. The man's mouth and nose were bloody, the lips swollen to the size of sausages. The speaker's eyes flashed with recognition. He nodded slightly, confirming, yes, yes, it is me.

"I know you. I know your songs," the man whispered, squeezing his puffy lips in an attempt to smile.

Erratic shafts of light weaved towards them, now slower, now faster, as if possessed of a will and a life of their own. Whenever they paused, sounds froze, like in a silent movie.

When the lights moved, the whispers resumed with fresh vigor.

"The Bard is here!"

"The Bard!"

The words traveled from man to man, from row to row, circling the arena, turning into a rebellious chant.

"Thebardthebardthebard!"

The caked blood on his lips cracked as he tried to say something, and the skin on his fractured nose spread over the crushed bones. He wondered at the absence of pain.

The voices grew louder and bolder, daring the lights, which now darted around the pitch, poking, searching, accusing.

A hand seized his collar, tensing and ripping the fabric of his shirt. Someone dragged him down the aisle to the light-flooded square below, where a volleyball net hung from a recent match. He clutched the guitar, his left arm embracing its curves.

The spotlights had deserted the rows, focusing solely on him.

A figure clad in a baggy uniform as if stripped from a GI Joe descended from the darkness above, his walk a contemptuous swagger.

"I told you we'd meet again," the soldier said with sinister politeness.

His face looked familiar, but the memory slid in and out of the reach of his perception.

"And when we met, you'd play the tune I ordered. You took a long time. I've nearly given up hope."

Beyond the circle of light, he could hear his name.

"Play!" The soldier's expression was triumphant.

His mind was empty. Music was gone, and words washed over him without registering.

"Did you hear me?"

He fingered the chords. Messages from the brain to his hands were slow and unreliable.

The cacophonous guitar rumble made him grit his teeth, wiggling freely in his gums.

"You will play! You will play what I say for as long as I say!" Saliva dribbled down the soldier's chin, his face a contorted mask, the muzzle of a rabid dog with yellow fangs.

Impervious to the orders, the singer stood still, every muscle, every tendon of his body rigid, like a wooden block placed on raging waters. He tried to say something, but just like music, words eluded him.

"Play!"

The soldier grabbed one of his hands and squeezed hard.

A vice clamped the singer's fingers. The pressure increased; his nails lacerated the flesh of his palms, but when the snap came, he felt nothing—it was not his bone but a leafless and sapless branch. The branches shattered one by one—an outside sensation, not in his hand.

One arm still clutched the guitar; the other dangled uselessly at his side. He was aware of the silence. No one stirred. The light was blinding now, but he knew they were there—his audience, watching.

The soldier's rage was growing. Under the high sweep of bushy brows, his eyes were owl-like and strangely surprised. He felt he'd mastered intimidation. But this time, for reasons he could not comprehend, it failed to work, and he conceded defeat with ill grace. He yanked the instrument from the singer's grasp and tossed it to the ground.

Its moan and tuneless croak roused the men around—a rustle of bodies as they rose, clapped, called his name, and sang the songs he had forgotten. Its moan and tuneless croak roused the men surrounding him—a rustle of bodies as they rose, clapped, called his name, and sang the songs he had forgotten. Their throats were raspy from thirst and fear as they sang in a chorus of uneven, out-of-tune voices.

The numbness began to fade. Sap dripped into the dead twigs, drop by drop. He could feel the fractured bones individually and all of them at once. But he relished the pain since it reminded him of his songs. It brought back his life with all it meant—gentle pleasure and

intense suffering. It gave a whole new meaning to the words he'd heard many times before—the futility and meaninglessness of hatred and violence for the sake of violence.

The soldier fumbled with his holster, quivering with rage. The pistol stubbornly refused to budge. He unbuckled his belt, drew out the gun, and, stepping back, took aim.

"I told you to play!" His eyes clouded with loathing.

The singer remembered somebody saying that a dying man's life flashed before his eyes in the final seconds. Nothing came—there was no fear, no flashbacks, no thoughts. His mind was blank.

The bullet shattered the guitar's wooden frame, leaving the singer's body untouched.

Splinters sprung up; the instrument leaped, and the strings snailed into short, broken notes, playing a one-string concert for a packed audience.