

My Favorite Pablo Neruda, selected by Jason Espada.

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Poetry

And it was at that age . . . poetry arrived
in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where
it came from, from winter or a river.
I don't know how or when,
no, they were not voices, they were not
words, not silence,
but from a street it called me,
from the branches of night,
abruptly from the others,
among raging fires
or returning alone,
there it was, without a face,
and it touched me.
I didn't know what to say, my mouth
had no way
with names,
my eyes were blind.
Something knocked in my soul,
fever or forgotten wings,
and I made my own way,
deciphering
that fire,
and I wrote the first, faint line,
faint, without substance, pure
nonsense,
pure wisdom
of someone who knows nothing;
and suddenly I saw
the heavens
unfastened
and open,
planets,
palpitating plantations,
the darkness perforated,
riddled

with arrows, fire, and flowers,
the overpowering night, the universe.

And I, tiny being,
drunk with the great starry
void,
likeness, image of
mystery,
felt myself a pure part
of the abyss.
I wheeled with the stars.
My heart broke loose with the wind.

taken from Isla Negra, a notebook

Tonight I Can Write ...

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, 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 soul like dew to the pasture.

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

That 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's 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's 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
and 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.

Ode To The Thread

This is the thread
of poetry.
Events, like sheep,
wear woolly
coats of
black
or white.
Call, and wondrous
flocks will come,
heroes and minerals,
the rose of love,
the voice of fire,
all will come to your side.
You have at your call
a mountain.
If you set out
to cross it on horseback
your beard will grow,
you will know hunger,
and on the mountain
all will be shadow.
You can't do it that way.
You must spin it,
fly a thread
and climb it.
Infinite and pure,
it comes from many sources,
from snow,
from man;
it is strong because
it was made from ores;
it is fragile because it was
traced by trembling smoke;
the thread of poetry
is like that.
You don't have to

tangle it again,
to return it
to time and the earth.
On the contrary,
it is your cord,
string it on your zither
and you will speak with the mouth
of mighty mountains,
braid it,
and it will be the rigging
of a ship,
unwind it,
hang it with messages,
electrify it,
expose it
to wind and weather,
so that, straight again,
in one long line it will wind
around the world,
or thread it,
fine, oh so fine,
remembering the fairies'
gowns.

We need blankets
to warm us through the winter.
Here come people
from the farms,
they are bringing
a hen
for the poet, one
small hen.
And what will you give them,
you, what will you give?
Now!
Now,
the thread,
the thread
that will become cloth

for those who have
only rags,
nets
for fishermen,
brilliant
scarlet
shirts
for stokers,
and a flag
for each and every one.
Through men,
through their pain
heavy as stone,
through their victories
winged like bees,
goes the thread,
through the middle
of everything that's happening
and all that is to come,
below the earth,
through coal;
above,
through misery,
with men,
with you,
with your people,
the thread,
the thread of poetry.
This isn't a matter
for deliberation:
it's an order,
I order you,
with your zither under your arm,
come with me.
Many ears
are waiting,
an awesome
heart
lies buried,

it is our
family, our people.
The thread!
The thread!
Draw it
from the dark mountain!
To transmit lightning!
To compose the flag!
That is the thread
of poetry,
simple, sacred, electric,
fragrant and necessary,
and it doesn't end in our humble hands:
it is revived by the light of each new day.

Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden

Ode to things, by Pablo Neruda

I have a crazy,
crazy love of things.
I like pliers,
and scissors.
I love
cups,
rings,
and bowls –
not to speak, or course,
of hats.
I love
all things,
not just
the grandest,
also
the
infinite-
ly
small –
thimbles,
spurs,
plates,
and flower vases.

Oh yes,
the planet
is sublime!
It's full of pipes
weaving
hand-held
through tobacco smoke,
and keys
and salt shakers –
everything,
I mean,
that is made

by the hand of man, every little thing:
shapely shoes,
and fabric,
and each new
bloodless birth
of gold,
eyeglasses
carpenter's nails,
brushes,
clocks, compasses,
coins, and the so-soft
softness of chairs.

Mankind has
built
oh so many
perfect
things!
Built them of wool
and of wood,
of glass and
of rope:
remarkable
tables,
ships, and stairways.

I love
all
things,
not because they are
passionate
or sweet-smelling
but because,
I don't know,
because
this ocean is yours,
and mine;
these buttons
and wheels

and little
forgotten
treasures,
fans upon
whose feathers
love has scattered
its blossoms,
glasses, knives and
scissors –
all bear
the trace
of someone's fingers
on their handle or surface,
the trace of a distant hand
lost
in the depths of forgetfulness.

I pause in houses,
streets and
elevators
touching things,
identifying objects
that I secretly covet;
this one because it rings,
that one because
it's as soft
as the softness of a woman's hip,
that one there for its deep-sea color,
and that one for its velvet feel.

O irrevocable
river
of things:
no one can say
that I loved
only
fish,
or the plants of the jungle and the field,
that I loved
only

those things that leap and climb, desire, and survive.

It's not true:

many things conspired

to tell me the whole story.

Not only did they touch me,

or my hand touched them:

they were

so close

that they were a part

of my being,

they were so alive with me

that they lived half my life

and will die half my death.

Ode to the spoon

Spoon,
scoop
formed
by man's
most ancient hand,
in your design
of metal or of wood
we still see
the shape
of the first
palm
to which
water
imparted
coolness
and savage
blood,
the throb
of bonfires and the hunt.

Little
spoon
in an
infant's
tiny hand,

you raise
to his mouth
the earth's
most
ancient
kiss,
silent heritage
of the first water to sing
on lips that later lay
buried beneath the sand.

To this hollow space,
detached from the palm of our hand,
someone
added
a make-believe wooden
arm,
and spoons
started turning up
all over the world
in ever
more
perfect
form,
spoons made for
moving
between bowl and ruby-red lips
or flying
from thin soups
to hungry men's careless mouths.

Yes,
spoon:
at mankind's side
you have climbed
mountains,
swept down rivers,
populated
ships and cities,
castles and kitchens:
but
the hard part
of your life's journey
is to plunge
into the poor man's plate,
and into his mouth.

And so the coming
of the new life that,
fighting and singing,

we preach,
will be a coming of soup bowls,
a perfect panoply
of spoons.
An ocean of steam rising from pots
in a world
without hunger,
and a total mobilization of spoons,
will shed light where once was darkness
shining on plates spread all over the table
like contented flowers.

Ode to Salt

This salt
in the salt cellar
I once saw in the salt mines.
I know
you won't
believe me
but
it sings
salt sings, the skin
of the salt mines
sings
with a mouth smothered
by the earth.
I shivered in those
solitudes
when I heard
the voice
of
the salt
in the desert.
Near Antofagasta
the nitrous
pampa
resounds:
a
broken
voice,
a mournful
song.

In its caves
the salt moans, mountain
of buried light,
translucent cathedral,

crystal of the sea, oblivion
of the waves.
And then on every table
in the world,
salt,
we see your piquant
powder
sprinkling
vital light
upon
our food.
Preserver
of the ancient
holds of ships,
discoverer
on
the high seas,
earliest
sailor
of the unknown, shifting
byways of the foam.
Dust of the sea, in you
the tongue receives a kiss
from ocean night:
taste imparts to every seasoned
dish your ocean essence;
the smallest,
miniature
wave from the saltcellar
reveals to us
more than domestic whiteness;
in it, we taste finitude.

Ode to the Dictionary

Back like an ox, beast of
burden, orderly
thick book:
as a youth
I ignored you,
wrapped in my smugness,
I though I knew it all,
and as puffed up as a
melancholy toad
I proclaimed: "I receive
my words
in a loud, clear voice
directly from Mt. Sinai.
I shall convert
forms to alchemy.
I am the Magus"
The Great Magus said nothing.
The Dictionary,
old and heavy in its scruffy
leather jacket
sat in silence,
its resources unrevealed
But one day,
after I'd used it
and abused it,
after
I'd called it
useless, an anachronistic camel,
when for months, without protest
it had served me as a chair
and a pillow,
it rebelled and planting its feet
firmly in my doorway,
expanded, shook its leaves
and nests,
and spread its foliage:

it was
a tree,
a natural,
bountiful
apple blossom, apple orchard, apple tree,
and words
glittered in its infinite branches,
opaque or sonorous,
fertile in the fronds of language,
charged with truth and sound.

I
turn
its
pages
caporal,
capote,
what a marvel
to pronounce these plosive
syllables,
and further on,
capsule
unfilled, awaiting ambrosia or oil
and others,
capsicum, caption, capture,
comparison, capricorn,
words
as slippery as smooth grapes,
words exploding in the light
like dormant seeds waiting
in the vaults of vocabulary,
alive again, and giving life:
once again the heart distills them.
Dictionary, you are not a
tomb, sepulcher, grave,
tumulus, mausoleum,
but guard and keeper,
hidden fire,
groves of rubies,

living eternity
of essence,
depository of language.
How wonderful
to read in your columns
ancestral
words,
the severe and
long-forgotten
maxim,
daughter of Spain,
petrified
as a plow blade,
as limited in use
as an antiquated tool,
but preserved
in the precise beauty and
immutability of a medallion.
Or another
word
we find hiding
between the lines
that suddenly seems
as delicious and smooth on the tongue
as an almond
or tender as a fig.
Dictionary, let one hand
of your thousand hands, one
of your thousand emeralds,
a
single
drop
of your virginal springs,
one grain
from
your
magnanimous granaries,
fall

at the perfect moment
upon my lips,
onto the tip of my pen,
into my inkwell.
From the depths of your
dense and reverberating jungle
grant me,
at the moment it is needed,
a single birdsong, the luxury
of one bee,
one splinter
of your ancient wood perfumed
by an eternity of jasmine,
one
syllable,
one tremor, one sound,
one seed:
I am of the earth and with words I sing.

Ode to the chair

One chair, alone in the jungle.
 In the vines' tight grip
 a sacred tree groans.
 Other vines spiral skyward,
 bloodspattered creatures
 howl deep within the shadows,
 giant leaves drop from the green sky.
 A snake shakes
 the dry rattles on its tail,
 a bird flashes through the foliage
 like an arrow aimed at a flag
 while the branches shoulder their violins.
 Squatting on their flowers,
 insects
 pray without stirring.

Our feet sink
 in
 the black weeds
 of the jungle sea,
 in clouds fallen from the forest canopy,
 and all I ask
 for the foreigner,
 for the despairing scout,
 is a seat
 in the sitting-tree,
 a throne
 of unkempt velvet,
 the plush of an overstuffed chair
 torn up by the snaking vines -
 for the man who goes on foot,
 a chair
 that embraces everything,
 the sound
 ground and
 supreme

dignity
of repose!

Get behind me, thirsty tigers
and swarms of bloodsucking flies –
behind me, black morass
of ghostly fronds,
greasy waters,
leaves the color of rust,
deathless snakes.
Bring me a chair
in the midst of
thunder,
a chair for me
and for everyone
not only
to relieve
an exhausted body but
for
every purpose
and for every person,
for squandered strength
and for meditation.

War is as vast as the shadowy jungle.
A single chair
is
the first sign
of
peace.

Ode to Sadness

Sadness, scarab
with seven crippled feet,
spiderweb egg,
scramble-brained rat,
bitch's skeleton:
No entry here.
Don't come in.
Go away.
Go back
south with your umbrella,
go back
north with your serpent's teeth.
A poet lives here.
No sadness may
cross this threshold.
Through these windows
comes the breath of the world,
fresh red roses,
flags embroidered with
the victories of the people.
No.
No entry.
Flap
your bat's wings,
I will trample the feathers
that fall from your mantle,
I will sweep the bits and pieces
of your carcass to
the four corners of the wind,
I will wring your neck,
I will stitch your eyelids shut,
I will sew your shroud,
sadness, and bury your rodent bones
beneath the springtime of an apple tree.

Ode to wood

Oh, of all I know
and know well,
of all things,
wood
is my best friend.
I wear through the world
on my body, in my clothing,
the scent
of the sawmill,
the odor of red wood.
My heart, my senses,
were saturated
in my childhood
with the smell of trees
that fell in great forests
filled with future building.
I heard when they scourged
the gigantic
larch,
the forty-meter laurel.
The ax and the wedge
of the tiny woodsman begin to bite into
the haughty column;
man conquers and the
aromatic column falls,
the earth trembles, mute
thunder, a black sob
of roots, and then
a wave
of forest odors
flooded my senses.
It was in my childhood, on
distant, damp earth
in the forests of the south,
in fragrant green
archipelagoes;

I saw
roof beams born,
railroad ties
dense as iron,
slim and resonant boards.
The saw squealed,
singing
of its steely love,
the keen band whined,
the metallic lament
of the saw cutting
the loaf of the forest,
a mother in birth throes
giving birth in the midst
of the light,
of the woods,
ripping open the womb
of nature,
producing
castles of wood,
houses for man,
schools, coffins,
tables and ax handles.
Everything
in the forest
lies sleeping
beneath moist leaves,
then
a man
begins
driving in the wedge
and hefting the ax
to hack at the pure
solemnity of the tree,
and the tree
falls,
thunder and fragrance fall
so that from them will be born
structures, forms,

buildings,
from the hands of the man.
I know you, I love you,
I saw you born, wood.
That's why
when I touch you
you respond
like a lover,
you show me
your eyes and your grain,
your knots, your blemishes,
your veins
like frozen rivers.
I know
the song
they sang
on the voice of the wind,
I hear
a stormy night,
the galloping
of a horse through deep woods,
I touch you and you open
like a faded rose
that revives for me alone,
offering
an aroma and fire
that had seemed dead.
Beneath
sordid paint
I divine your pores,
choked, you call to me
and I hear you,
I feel
the shuddering
of trees that shaded
and amazed my childhood,
I see
emerge from you
like a soaring wave

or dove
wings of books,
tomorrow s
paper
for man,
pure paper for the pure man
who will live tomorrow
and who today is being born
to the sound of a saw,
to a tearing
of light, sound, and blood.
In the sawmill
of time
dark forests fall,
dark
is born
man,
black leaves fall,
and thunder threatens,
death and life
speak at once
and like a violin rises
the song, the lament,
of the saw in the forest,
and so wood is born
and begins to travel the
world,
until becoming a silent builder
cut and pierced by steel,
until it suffers and protects,
building
the dwelling
where every day
man, wife, and life
will come together.

Ode To Cats

There was something wrong with the animals:
their tails were too long and they had
unfortunate heads.

Then they started coming together,
little by little
fitting together to make a landscape,
developing birthmarks, grace, pep.

But the cat,
only the cat
turned out finished,
and proud:
born in a state of total completion,
it sticks to itself and knows
exactly what it wants.

We Are Many

Of the many men whom I am, whom we are,
I cannot settle on a single one.
They are lost to me under the cover of clothing
They have departed for another city.

When everything seems to be set
to show me off as a man of intelligence,
the fool I keep concealed on my person
takes over my talk and occupies my mouth.

On other occasions, I am dozing in the midst
of people of some distinction,
and when I summon my courageous self,
a coward completely unknown to me
swaddles my poor skeleton
in a thousand tiny reservations.

When a stately home bursts into flames,
instead of the fireman I summon,
an arsonist bursts on the scene,
and he is I. There is nothing I can do.
What must I do to distinguish myself?
How can I put myself together?

All the books I read
lionize dazzling hero figures,
brimming with self-assurance.
I die with envy of them;
and, in films where bullets fly on the wind,
I am left in envy of the cowboys,
left admiring even the horses.

But when I call upon my DASHING BEING,
out comes the same OLD LAZY SELF,

and so I never know just WHO I AM,
nor how many I am, nor WHO WE WILL BE BEING.
I would like to be able to touch a bell
and call up my real self, the truly me,
because if I really need my proper self,
I must not allow myself to disappear.

While I am writing, I am far away;
and when I come back, I have already left.
I should like to see if the same thing happens
to other people as it does to me,
to see if as many people are as I am,
and if they seem the same way to themselves.
When this problem has been thoroughly explored,
I am going to school myself so well in things
that, when I try to explain my problems,
I shall speak, not of self, but of geography.

Poet's Obligation

To whoever is not listening to the sea
this Friday morning, to whoever is cooped up
in house or office, factory or woman
or street or mine or harsh prison cell;
to him I come, and, without speaking or looking,
I arrive and open the door of his prison,
and a vibration starts up, vague and insistent,
a great fragment of thunder sets in motion
the rumble of the planet and the foam,
the raucous rivers of the ocean flood,
the star vibrates swiftly in its corona,
and the sea is beating, dying and continuing.

So, drawn on by my destiny,
I ceaselessly must listen to and keep
the sea's lamenting in my awareness,
I must feel the crash of the hard water
and gather it up in a perpetual cup
so that, wherever those in prison may be,
wherever they suffer the autumn's castigation,
I may be there with an errant wave,
I may move, passing through windows,
and hearing me, eyes will glance upward
saying "How can I reach the sea?"
And I shall broadcast, saying nothing,
the starry echoes of the wave,
a breaking up of foam and quicksand,
a rustling of salt withdrawing,
the grey cry of the sea-birds on the coast.

So, through me, freedom and the sea
will make their answer to the shuttered heart.

Keeping Quiet

And now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth
let's not speak in any language,
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines,
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fisherman in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would not look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas,
wars with fire,
victory with no survivors, would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
(Life is what it is about,
I want no truck with death.)

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing, perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.

Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve,
and you keep quiet and I will go.