

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.