

Pablo Neruda

HEIGHTS OF MACCHU PICCHU

translated by John Felstiner

First published in *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*, John Felstiner, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980.

I

From the air to the air, like an empty net,
I went on through streets and thin air, arriving and
 leaving behind,
at autumn's advent, the coin handed out
in the leaves, and between spring and ripe grain,
the fullness that love, as in a glove's
fall, gives over to us like a long-drawn moon.

(Days of live brilliance in the storm
of bodies: steels transmuted
into silent acid:
nights raveled out to the final flour:
battered stamens of the nuptial land.)

Someone expecting me among violins
met with a world like a buried tower
sinking its spiral deeper than all
the leaves the color of rough sulfur:
and deeper yet, in geologic gold,
like a sword sheathed in meteors
I plunged my turbulent and gentle hand
into the genital quick of the earth.

I bent my head into the deepest waves,
dropped down through sulfurous calm
and went back, as if blind, to the jasmine
of the exhausted human spring.

II

While flower to flower gives up the high seed
 and rock keeps its flower sown
 in a beaten coat of diamond and sand,
 man crumples the peal of light he picks
 in the deep-set springs of the sea
 and drills the pulsing metal in his hands.
 And soon, among clothes and smoke, on the broken table,
 like a shuffled pack, there sits the soul:
 quartz and sleeplessness, tears in the ocean
 like pools of cold: yet still
 man kills and tortures it with paper and with hate,
 stuffs it each day under rugs, rends it
 on the hostile trappings of the wire.

No: in corridors, air, sea, or roads,
 who (like crimson poppy) keeps
 no dagger to guard his blood? Anger has drained
 the tradesman's dreary trafficking in lives,
 while in the height of the plum tree the dew
 leaves its clear mark a thousand years
 on the same waiting branch, oh heart, oh face ground down
 among deep pits in autumn.

How many times in the city's winter streets or in
 a bus or a boat at dusk, or in the densest
 solitude, that of night festivity, under the sound
 of shadows and bells, in the very cave of human pleasure,
 have I wanted to stop and seek the timeless fathomless vein
 I touched in a stone once or in the lightning a kiss released.

(Whatever in grain like a yellow history
 of small swelling breasts keeps repeating its number
 ceaselessly tender in the germinal shells,
 and identical always, what strips to ivory,
 and what is clear native land welling up, a bell

from remotest snows to the blood-sown waves.)

I could grasp only a clump of faces or masks
thrown down like rings of hollow gold,
like scattered clothes, daughters of a rabid autumn
that shook the fearful races' cheerless tree.

I had no place to rest my hand,
none running like linked springwater
or firm as a chunk of anthracite or crystal
to give back the warmth or cold of my outstretched hand.
What was man? Where in his simple talk
amid shops and whistles, in which of his metallic motions
lived the indestructible, the imperishable—life?

III

Lives like maize were threshed in the bottomless
granary of wasted deeds, of shabby
incidents, from one to sevenfold, even to eight,
and not one death but many deaths came each man's way:
each day a petty death, dust, worm, a lamp
snuffed out in suburban mud, a petty fat-winged
death
entered each one like a short spear
and men were beset by bread or by the knife:
the drover, the son of seaports, the dark captain of the plow,
or those who gnaw at the cluttered streets:
all of them weakened, waiting their death, their brief death
daily,
and their dismal weariness each day was like
a black cup they drank down trembling.

IV

The mightiest death invited me many times:
like invisible salt in the waves it was,
and what its invisible savor disseminated
was half like sinking and half like height
or huge structures of wind and glacier.

I came to the iron edge, the narrows
of the air, the shroud of fields and stone,
to the stellar emptiness of the final steps
and the dizzying spiral highway:
yet broad sea, oh death! not wave by wave you come
but like a gallop of nighttime clarity
or the absolute numbers of night.

You never came poking in pockets, nor could
you visit except in red robes,
in an auroral carpet enclosing silence,
in lofty and buried legacies of tears.

I could not in each creature love a tree
With its own small autumn on its back (the death of a
thousand leaves),
all the false deaths and resurrections
with no earth, no depths:
I wanted to swim in the broadest lives,
in the openest river mouths,
and as men kept denying me little by little,
blocking path and door so I would not touch
with my streaming hands their wound of emptiness,
then I went street after street and river after river,
city after city and bed after bed,
and my brackish mask crossed through waste places,
and in the last low hovels, no light, no fire,
no bread, no stone, no silence, along,
I roamed round dying of my own death.

V

Solemn death it was not you, iron-plumed bird,
that the poor successor to those dwellings
carried among gulps of food, under his empty skin:
something it was, a spent petal of worn-out tope,
a shred of heart that fell short of struggle
or the harsh dew that never reached his face.
It was what could not be reborn, a bit
of petty death with no peace or place:
a bone, a bell, that were dying within him.
I lifted the iodine bandages, plunged my hands
into meager griefs that were killing off death,
and all I found in the wound was a cold gust
that passed through loose gaps in the soul.

VI

Then on the ladder of the earth I climbed
through the lost jungle's tortured thicket
up to you, Macchu Picchu.
High city of laddered stones,
at last the dwelling of what earth
never covered in vestments of sleep.
In you like two lines parallel,
the cradles of lightning and man
rocked in a wind of thorns.

Mother of stone, spume of condors.

High reef of the human dawn.

Spade lost in the primal sand.

This was the dwelling, this is the place:
here the broad grains of maize rose up
and fell again like red hail.

Here gold thread came off the vicuña
to clothe lovers, tombs, and mothers,
king and prayers and warriors.

Here men's feet rested at night
next to the eagles' feet, in the ravenous
high nests, and at dawn
they stepped with the thunder's feet onto the thinning mists
and touched the soil and the stones
till they knew them come night or death.

I look at clothes and hands,
the trace of water in an echoing tub,
the wall brushed smooth by the touch of a face
that looked with my eyes at the lights of earth,
that oiled with my hands the vanished

beams: because everything, clothing, skin, jars,
words, wine, bread,
is gone, fallen to earth.

And the air came in with the touch
of lemon blossom over everyone sleeping:
a thousand years of air, months, weeks of air,
of blue wind and iron cordillera,
that were like gentle hurricane footsteps
polishing the lonely boundary of stone.

VII

You dead of single abyss, shadows of one ravine,
 the deepest, thus on a scale
 with your greatness there came
 the true, the most consuming
 death and from the drilled-out rocks,
 from the red-topped columns,
 from the laddered aqueducts
 you plummeted as in autumn
 to one sole death.

Today the empty air does not weep,
 is not familiar with your clayey feet,
 forgets your pitchers that filtered the sky
 when knives of lightning spilled it out,
 and eaten by mist the might
 tree was cut down by gusts.

It held up a hand that fell suddenly
 down from the height to the end of time.
 You're no more now, spidery hands, frail
 fibers, entangled web—
 whatever you were fell away: customs, frayed
 syllables, masks of dazzling light.

Yet a permanence of stone and word,
 the city like a bowl, rose up in the hands
 of all, living, dead, silenced, sustained,
 a wall out of so much death, out of so much life a shock
 of stone petals: the permanent rose, the dwelling place:
 the glacial outposts on this Andean reef.

When the clay-colored hand
 turned to clay and the eyes' small lids fell shut,
 filled with rugged walls, crowded with castles,
 and when man lay all tangled in his hole,
 there remained an upraised exactitude:
 the high site of the human dawn:

the highest vessel that held silence in:
a life of stone after so many lives.

VIII

Climb up with me, American love.

Kiss the secret stones with me.
The torrential silver of the Urubamba
sends pollen flying to its yellow cup.
The empty vine goes flying,
the stony plant, the stiff garland
over the silent mountain gorge.
Come, miniscule life, between the wings
of the earth, while—crystal and cold, a buffeted air
dividing the clash of emeralds—
oh wild water you come down from the snow.

Love, love, until the sudden night,
from the Andes'ringing flintstone,
to the red knees of dawn,
study the blind child of the snow.

Oh Wilkamayu of resonant threads,
when you shatter your bands of thunder
into white spume, like wounded snow,
when your steep gale
sings and slashes arousing the sky,
what language do you bring to the ear
barely uprooted from your Andean foam?

Who seized the lightning of the cold
and left it chained on the heights,
split into its chilling tears,
shaken in its rapid swords,
beating its war-worn stamens,
borne on its warrior bed,
stormed in its rock-bound end?

What do your tormented flashings say?
Your secret insurgent lighting—did it

once travel thronging with words?
Who goes on crushing frozen syllables,
black languages, banners of gold,
bottomless mouths, throttled shouts,
in your slender arterial waters?

Who goes clipping floral eyelids
that come to gaze from the earth?
Who hurls the dead stalks down
that drop in your cascading hands
to thresh their threshed-out night
in geologic coal?

Who flings down the linking branch?
Who yet again buries farewells?

Love, love, do not touch the brink
or worship the sunken head:
let time extend full span
in its hall of broken wellsprings,
and between ramparts and rapid water
gather the air in the pass,
the wind's parallel plating,
the blind channel of the cordillera,
the bitter greeting of the dew,
and climb through the denseness flower by flower,
trampling the serpent flung to earth.

In this cliff-hung region, stone and forest,
dust of green stars, jungle clarity,
Mantur breaks out like a living lake
or a new ledge of silence.

Come to my very being, to my own dawn,
up to the crowning solitude.

The dead realm lives on still.

And across the Sundial like a black ship
the ravening shadow of the condor cruises.

IX

Sidereal eagle, vineyard of mist.
Bulwark lost, blind scimitar.
Starred belt, sacred bread.
Torrential ladder, giant eyelid.
Triangled tunic, pollen of stone.
Granite lamp, bread of stone.
Mineral serpent, rose of stone.
Buried ship, wellspring of stone.
Lunar horse, light of stone.
Equinox square, vapor of stone.
Final geometry, book of stone.
Iceberg carved by the squalls.
Coral of sunken time.
Rampart smoothed by fingers.
Rood struck by feathers.
Branching of mirrors, ground of tempests.
Thrones overturned by twining weeds.
Rule of the ravenous claw.
Gale sustained on the slope.
Immobile turquoise cataract.
Sleepers' patriarchal bell.
Collar of subjected snows.
Iron lying on its statues.
Inaccessible storm sealed off.
Puma hands, bloodthirsty rock.
Shading tower, dispute of snow.
Night raised in fingers and roots.
Window in the mist, hardened dove.
Nocturnal plant, statue of thunder.
Root of the cordillera, roof of the sea.
Architecture of lost eagles.
Cord of the sky, bee of the heights.
Bloodstained level, constructed star.
Mineral bubble, moon of quartz.
Andean serpent, brow of amaranth.
Dome of silence, purebred homeland.

Bride of the sea, cathedral tree.
Salt branch, blackwinged cherry tree.
Snowswept teeth, cold thunder.
Scraped moon, menacing stone.
Crest of the cold, pull of the air.
Volcano of hands, dark cataract.
Silver wave, direction of time.

X

Stone upon stone, and man, where was he?
 Air upon air, and man, where was he?
 Time upon time, and man, where was he?
 Were you too then the broken bit
 of half-spent humankind, an empty eagle, that
 through the streets today, through footsteps,
 through the dead autumn's leaves,
 keeps crushing its soul until the grave?
 The meager hand, the foot, the meager life . . .
 Did the days of unraveled light
 in you, like rain
 on pennants at festival,
 give off their dark food petal by petal
 into your empty mouth?

Hunger, coral of humankind,

hunger, hidden plant, root of the woodcutter,
 hunger, did your reef-edge climb
 to these high and ruinous towers?

I question you, salt of the roads,
 show me the trowel; architecture, let me
 grind stone stamens with a stick,
 climb every step of air up to the void,
 scrape in the womb till I touch man.

Macchu Picchu, did you set
 stone upon stone on a base of rags?
 Coal over coal and at bottom, tears?
 Fire on the gold and within it, trembling, the red
 splash of blood?
 Give me back the slave you buried!
 Shake from the earth the hard bread
 of the poor, show me the servant's
 clothes and his window.
 Tell me how he slept while he lived.
 Tell me if his sleep

was snoring, gaping like a black hole
that weariness dug in the wall.
The wall, the wall! If every course of stone
weighed down his sleep, and if he fell underneath
as under a moon, with his sleep!

Ancient America, sunken bride,
your fingers too,
leaving the jungle for the empty height of the gods,
under bridal banners of light and reverence,
blending with thunder from the drums and lances,
yours, your fingers too,
those that the abstract rose and rim of cold, the
bloodstained body of the new grain bore up
to a web of radiant matter, to the hardened hollows,
you too, buried America, did you keep in the deepest part
of your bitter gut, like an eagle, hunger?

XI

Through the dazing splendor,
through the night of stone, let me plunge my hand
and let there beat in me, like a bird a thousand years
imprisoned,
the old forgotten human heart!
Let me forget today this joy this is broader than the sea,
because man is broader than sea and islands
and we must fall in him as in a well to rise from the bottom
with a branch of secret water and sunken truths.
Let me forget, broad stone, the sovereign symmetry,
transcendent measure, honeycombed stones,
and from the square edge let me this day slide
my hand down the hypotenuse of haircloth and bitter blood.
When, like a horseshoe of red-cased wings, the furious condor
hammers my temples in the order of flight
and the hurricane's blood-dipped feathers sweep the dark dust
on diagonal stairways, I see not the swift beast,
not the blind cycling of its claws,
I see the ancient human, a human slave, sleeping
in the fields, I see one body, a thousand bodies, a man, a
thousand women
under black gusts, blackened by rain and night,
with the stonework's massive carving:
Jack Stonebreaker, son of Wiracocha,
Jack Coldbiter, son of the green star,
Jack Barefoot, grandson of the turquoise,
Rise to be born with me, brother.

XII

Rise to be born with me, brother.

Give me your hand out of the deep
region seeded by all your grief.
You won't come back from bottom rock.
You won't come back from time under ground.
No coming back with your hardened voice.
No coming back with your drilled-out eyes.
Look at me from the bottom of earth,
plowman , weaver, voiceless shepherd:
trainer of guardian llamas:
mason on a dangerous scaffold:
water-bearer of Andean tears:
goldsmith with fingers bruised:
farmer trembling over the seed:
potter spilled on your clay:
bring all your age-old buried
griefs to the cup of this new life.
Show me your blood and your furrow,
say to me: here I was punished
when a gem didn't shine or the earth
give forth its stone or grain on time:
mark me the stone you stumbled on
and the wood they crucified you on,
strike light for me from your old flints,
the ancient lamps, the whiplash stuck
within your wounds through centuries,
and the axes' brightness stained with blood.
I come to speak through your dead mouth.
All through the earth join all
the silent wasted lips
and speak from the depths to me all this long night
as if I were anchored here with you,
tell me everything, chain by chain,
link by link, and step by step,
file the knives you kept by you,

drive them into my chest and my hand
like a river of riving yellow light,
like a river where buried jaguars lie,
and let me weep, hours, days, years,
blind ages, stellar centuries.

Give me silence, water, hope.

Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.

Fasten your bodies to me like magnets.

Hasten to my veins to my mouth.

Speak through my words and my blood.