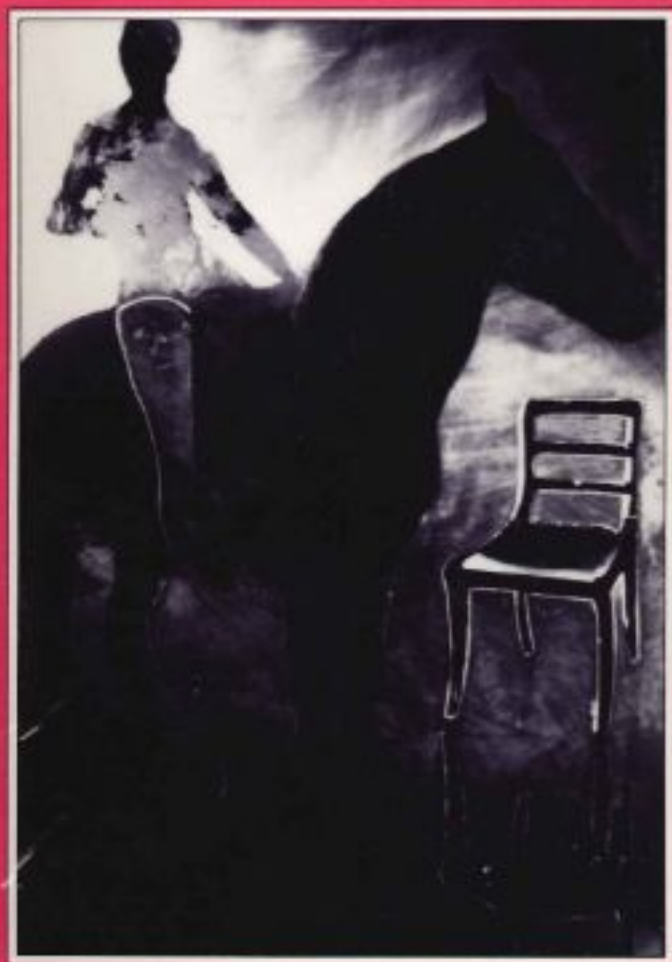


# NERUDA

## THE BOOK OF QUESTIONS



TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM O'DALY

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P A B L O N E R U D A

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The Book of Questions

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*With this sixth and final volume  
of my translation of Neruda's late and posthumous poetry  
I dedicate this body of work*

TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

## INTRODUCTION

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“The only true thoughts are those  
which do not grasp their own meaning.”

ADORNO, from *Minima Moralia*

Pablo Neruda finished *The Book of Questions* (*El libro de las preguntas*) only months before his death in September 1973. With its composition, he comes full circle as a human being and an artist. The 69-year-old poet drinks from the common source of all his essential work, revisiting that “deep well of perpetuity”: the imagination of regeneration and vision. These brief poems, composed entirely of questions, express his dedication to what Hayden Carruth calls the “structure of feeling” underlying experience. Neruda explored many schools of thought, poetic styles, and voices, but his passion lay in finding and improvising upon basic rhythms of perception to reveal unspoken and unspeakable truths.

From *Crepusculario* and *Venture of the Infinite Man*, two of his earliest and lesser known works, to the books that form this series of late and posthumous poetry, Neruda developed a radical trust in the quest to know himself. He also trusted the process of setting aside what he knew long enough to rediscover the secret in another cadence and through other eyes. His imagination never surrendered to familiar patterns and, especially in the later poetry, rarely sought refuge in political or artistic programs. Neruda continued to challenge himself as a human being and an artist, until he became “the astute hunter,” according to Marjorie Agosin, one who by *vocation* seeks “the roots of belonging” wherever he finds himself.

In *The Book of Questions*, Neruda achieves a deeper vulnerability and vision than in his earlier work. These poems integrate the wonder of a child with the experience of an

adult. An adult usually grapples with a child's "irrational" questions solely with the resources of the rational mind. While Neruda craves the clarity rendered from an examined life, he refuses to be corralled by his rational mind. To the 316 questions that compose the 74 poems of this sequence, no rational answers exist. These questions present a reflective surface, in which only one's own face is discerned.

If all rivers are sweet  
where does the sea get its salt?

One must allow images of rivers, sea, sweetness and salt to reverberate more deeply than their literal meanings. One must be patient, instead of rushing to confront the question with a reasoning mind.

Gazing into the night sky from a ship's deck or the desert floor, we glimpse the most distant stars out of the corners of our eyes. When we stare directly at them, they fade from our view. Like those stars, these questions reveal themselves more completely to a receptive mind, a mind engaged in intuitive and emotional perception.

Neruda composes his questions mostly of natural objects—clouds, bread, lemons, camels, friends and enemies. Those substances and forms are intertwined in our daily lives; dying and being born, their tangible limits shine outward to refer to the larger world. They are mysterious because, though they are physical and "real," in themselves they cannot be decided or solved. Rather, Neruda's questions reveal new mysteries linking physical truth to metaphysical truth. Allowing the questions to light the way, we arrive at previously uncharted places.

These poems, however, cannot be considered "road-maps" for the intuitive, emotional, or spiritual paths. They lead a double life: they cast nets of words into our psyches so we might gain understanding, and yet they clearly reside in the Unknown where the answers have no names. In this, Neruda's questions are close to the spirit of the kōan. A kōan is a question (or a question disguised as a statement) in the form of a paradox, which aids students of Zen in the

practice of zazen. An illustration of this paradox can be found in a poem by Zen master Mumon, commenting on two monks arguing with the sixth patriarch about which is actually moving—the wind, a flag, or the mind.

Wind, flag, mind moves,  
the same understanding.  
When the mouth opens  
All are wrong.

That's the way it goes: the mind becomes its own trap and the mouth its darkness. When one is rid of the hypotheses and certainties that haunt the daydreams of past and future, the mind is freed to listen and exist where it is. One then might come to know the value of a question posed by the Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi in the thirteenth century: "How far is the light of the moon/ from the moon?" And why he, after receiving no answer, turned to the moon itself and asked, "Where is God?"

The Anglo-Saxon root of the word "question" is *kuere*, which meant to ask or seek, hence to gain or win. In Latin, it was *quaerere* and *questum*; in English it became *quaestor* and later "quest," "inquest," and "question." Other offshoots of the root became "conquest," "inquire," and "acquire."

Neruda is interested in inquiring about the nature of things, a process initiated by asking questions rooted in experience, offering us what he intuits as true and does not understand. Rather than remain in control, he submerges himself in not-knowing, in the unknowable questions that enter the imagination. The poet is intent on distinguishing between what he believes in his heart and soul (*gnosis*), and received patterns of thinking and feeling that limit imagination and growth.

*The Book of Questions* fulfills a traditional role of all the best poetry. Its greatest gift is to assist us in teaching ourselves how to see, partly by helping to inspire and focus the inner quest. We participate best in responding to Neruda's questions by "running in place" with the images (to borrow

a phrase from Roshi Charlotte Joko Beck), rather than by fleeing to the rational mind. These poems are the lyrical notations of the poet's imagination; they reveal their truths only when we live with them and experience them as they are. When we do this, we reawaken the imagination to the quiet possibilities of wonder and awe. In this state, we ask our own unanswerable questions. And we might come to perceive, reflected within us, the nature of the world beyond mind and sight.

This unique book is a testament to everything that made Neruda an artist. He cannot be labeled a political poet or a love poet, a confessional poet or a nature poet, and only he can rightly accuse himself of being many men, of never knowing "who I am, nor how many I am or will be." To understand this poet's range, it is necessary to listen to him in his more vulnerable moments. These poems contain much of the purity of heart that Neruda's work is known for.

Which yellow bird  
fills its nest with lemons?

Those who have read his poems about the suffering of others at the hands of political and social pathologies, will not be surprised by the lines:

What forced labor  
does Hitler do in hell?

Neruda was a complicated artist who integrated the dark with the light, and who responded to the full array of experiences available to a human being. He recognized his contradictions, embraced them, and eventually freed his work from the confines, the dangerous simplifications, of ideological programs and egotism. By doing so, he created a beautifully interwoven, expansive body of work.

This book is the last in the Copper Canyon Press late and posthumous Neruda series, carrying between its covers the knowledge that the quest continues: what was learned is forgotten, so it can be learned again.

In an earlier book, *Extravagaria*, the poet wonders:



The sons of the sons of the son—  
what will they make of the world?  
Will they turn out good or bad?  
Worth flies or worth wheat?

You don't want to answer me.

But the questions do not die.

WILLIAM O'DALY  
Winter 1991

THE BOOK OF QUESTIONS

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*El libro de las preguntas*

Why don't the immense airplanes  
fly around with their children?

Which yellow bird  
fills its nest with lemons?

Why don't they train helicopters  
to suck honey from the sunlight?

Where did the full moon leave  
its sack of flour tonight?

---

*Por qué los inmensos aviones  
no se pasean con sus hijos?*

*Cuál es el pájaro amarillo  
que llena el nido de limones?*

*Por qué no enseñan a sacar  
miel del sol a los helicópteros?*

*Dónde dejó la luna llena  
su saco nocturno de harina?*

If I have died and don't know it  
of whom do I ask the time?

In France, where does spring  
get so many leaves?

Where can a blind man live  
who is pursued by bees?

If the color yellow runs out  
with what will we make bread?

---

*Si he muerto y no me he dado cuenta  
a quién le pregunto la hora?*

*De dónde saca tantas hojas  
la primavera de Francia?*

*Dónde puede vivir un ciego  
a quien persiguen las abejas?*

*Si se termina el amarillo  
con qué vamos a hacer el pan?*

Tell me, is the rose naked  
or is that her only dress?

Why do trees conceal  
the splendor of their roots?

Who hears the regrets  
of the thieving automobile?

Is there anything in the world sadder  
than a train standing in the rain?

---

*Dime, la rosa está desnuda  
o sólo tiene ese vestido?*

*Por qué los árboles esconden  
el esplendor de sus raíces?*

*Quién oye los remordimientos  
del automóvil criminal?*

*Hay algo más triste en el mundo  
que un tren inmóvil en la lluvia?*

## IV

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How many churches are there in heaven?

Why doesn't the shark attack  
the brazen sirens?

Does smoke talk with the clouds?

Is it true our desires  
must be watered with dew?

---

*Cuántas iglesias tiene el cielo?*

*Por qué no ataca el tiburón  
a las impávidas sirenas?*

*Conversa el humo con las nubes?*

*Es verdad que las esperanzas  
deben regarse con rocío?*

What are you guarding under your hump?  
said a camel to a turtle.

And the turtle replied:  
What do you say to oranges?

Does a pear tree have more leaves  
than *Remembrance of Things Past*?

Why do leaves commit suicide  
when they feel yellow?

---

*Qué guardas bajo tu joroba?  
dijo un camello a una tortuga.*

*Y la tortuga preguntó:  
Qué conversas con las naranjas?*

*Tiene más hojas un peral  
que Buscando el Tiempo Perdido?*

*Por qué se suicidan las hojas  
cuando se sienten amarillas?*

## VI

---

Why does the hat of night  
fly so full of holes?

What does old ash say  
when it passes near the fire?

Why do clouds cry so much,  
growing happier and happier?

For whom do the pistils of the sun burn  
in the shadow of the eclipse?

How many bees are there in a day?

---

*Por qué el sombrero de la noche  
vuela con tantos agujeros?*

*Qué dice la vieja ceniza  
cuando camina junto al fuego?*

*Por qué lloran tanto las nubes  
y cada vez son más alegres?*

*Para quién arden los pistilos  
del sol en sombra del eclipse?*

*Cuántas abejas tiene el día?*



## VII

---

Is peace the peace of the dove?  
Does the leopard wage war?

Why does the professor teach  
the geography of death?

What happens to swallows  
who are late for school?

Is it true they scatter  
transparent letters across the sky?

---

*Es paz la paz de la paloma?  
El leopardo hace la guerra?*

*Por qué enseña el profesor  
la geografía de la muerte?*

*Qué pasa con las golondrinas  
que llegan tarde al colegio?*

*Es verdad que reparten cartas  
transparentes, por todo el cielo?*

## VIII

---

What is it that upsets the volcanoes  
that spit fire, cold and rage?

Why wasn't Christopher Columbus  
able to discover Spain?

How many questions does a cat have?

Do tears not yet spilled  
wait in small lakes?

Or are they invisible rivers  
that run toward sadness?

---

*Qué cosa irrita a los volcanes  
que escupen fuego, frío y furia?*

*Por qué Cristóbal Colón  
no pudo descubrir a España?*

*Cuántas preguntas tiene un gato?*

*Las lágrimas que no se lloran  
esperan en pequeños lagos?*

*O serán ríos invisibles  
que corren hacia la tristeza?*

Is the sun the same as yesterday's  
or is this fire different from that fire?

How do we thank the clouds  
for their fleeting abundance?

From where does the thundercloud come  
with its black sacks of tears?

Where are all those names  
sweet as cakes of yesteryear?

Where did they go, the Donaldas,  
the Clorindas, the Eduvigis?

---

*Es este mismo el sol de ayer  
o es otro el fuego de su fuego?*

*Cómo agradecer a las nubes  
esa abundancia fugitiva?*

*De dónde viene el nubarrón  
con sus sacos negros de llanto?*

*Dónde están los nombres aquellos  
dulces como tortas de antaño?*

*Dónde se fueron las Donaldas,  
las Clorindas, las Eduvigis?*

What will they think of my hat,  
the Polish, in a hundred years?

What will they say about my poetry  
who never touched my blood?

How do we measure the foam  
that slips from the beer?

What does a fly do, imprisoned  
in one of Petrarch's sonnets?

---

*Qué pensarán de mi sombrero,  
en cien años más, los polacos?*

*Qué dirán de mi poesía  
los que no tocaron mi sangre?*

*Cómo se mide la espuma  
que resbala de la cerveza?*

*Qué hace una mosca encarcelada  
en un soneto de Petrarca?*

How long do others speak  
if we have already spoken?

What would José Martí say  
about the pedagogue Marinello?

How old is November anyway?

What does autumn go on paying for  
with so much yellow money?

What is the name of the cocktail  
that mixes vodka and lightning bolts?

---

*Hasta cuándo hablan los demás  
si ya hemos hablado nosotros?*

*Qué diría José Martí  
del pedagogo Marinello?*

*Cuántos años tiene Noviembre?*

*Qué sigue pagando el Otoño  
con tanto dinero amarillo*

*Cómo se llama ese cocktail  
que mezcla vodka con relámpagos?*

And at whom does rice smile  
with infinitely many white teeth?

Why in the darkest ages  
do they write with invisible ink?

Does the beauty from Caracas know  
how many skirts the rose has?

Why do the fleas  
and literary sergeants bite me?

---

*Y a quién le sonríe el arroz  
con infinitos dientes blancos?*

*Por qué en las épocas oscuras  
se escribe con tinta invisible?*

*Sabe la bella de Caracas  
cuántas faldas tiene la rosa?*

*Por qué me pican las pulgas  
y los sargentos literarios?*

### XIII

---

Is it true that voluptuous crocodiles  
live only in Australia?

How do the oranges divide up  
sunlight in the orange tree?

Did salt's teeth come  
from a bitter mouth?

Is it true that a black condor  
flies at night over my country?

---

*Es verdad que sólo en Australia  
hay cocodrilos voluptuosos?*

*Cómo se reparten el sol  
en el naranjo las naranjas?*

*Venía de una boca amarga  
la dentadura de la sal?*

*Es verdad que vuela de noche  
sobre mi patria un cóndor negro?*

## XIV

---

And what did the rubies say  
standing before the juice of pomegranates?

Why doesn't Thursday talk itself  
into coming after Friday?

Who shouted with glee  
when the color blue was born?

Why does the earth grieve  
when the violets appear?

---

*Y qué dijeron los rubíes  
ante el jugo de las granadas?*

*Pero por qué no se convence  
el Jueves de ir después del Viernes?*

*Quiénes gritaron de alegría  
cuando nació el color azul?*

*Por qué se entristece la tierra  
cuando aparecen las violetas?*



But is it true that the vests  
are preparing to revolt?

Why does spring once again  
offer its green clothes?

Why does agriculture laugh  
at the pale tears of the sky?

How did the abandoned bicycle  
win its freedom?

---

*Pero es verdad que se prepara  
la insurrección de los chalecos?*

*Por qué otra vez la Primavera  
ofrece sus vestidos verdes?*

*Por qué ríe la agricultura  
del llanto pálido del cielo?*

*Cómo logró su libertad  
la bicicleta abandonada?*

Do salt and sugar work  
to build a white tower?

Is it true that in an anthill  
dreams are a duty?

Do you know what the earth  
meditates upon in autumn?

(Why not give a medal  
to the first golden leaf?)

---

*Trabajan la sal y el azúcar  
construyendo una torre blanca?*

*Es verdad que en el hormiguero  
los sueños son obligatorios?*

*Sabes qué meditaciones  
rumia la tierra en el otoño?*

*(Por qué no dar una medalla  
a la primera hoja de oro?)*

## XVII

---

Have you noticed that autumn  
is like a yellow cow?

And how later the autumnal beast  
is a dark skeleton?

And how winter collects  
so many layers of blue?

And who asked springtime  
for its kingdom of clear air?

---

*Te has dado cuenta que el Otoño  
es como una vaca amarilla?*

*Y cómo la bestia otoñal  
es luego un oscuro esqueleto?*

*Y cómo el invierno acumula  
tantos azules lineales?*

*Y quién pidió a la Primavera  
su monarquía transparente?*

## XVIII

---

How did the grapes come to know  
the cluster's party line?

And do you know which is harder,  
to let run to seed or to do the picking?

It is bad to live without a hell:  
aren't we able to reconstruct it?

And to position sad Nixon  
with his buttocks over the brazier?

Roasting him on low  
with North American napalm?

---

*Cómo conocieron las uvas  
la propaganda del racimo?*

*Y sabes lo que es más difícil  
entre granar y desgranar?*

*Es malo vivir sin infierno:  
no podemos reconstruirlo?*

*Y colocar al triste Nixon  
con el traste sobre el brasero?*

*Quemándolo a fuego pausado  
con napalm norteamericano?*

Have they counted the gold  
in the cornfields?

Do you know that in Patagonia  
at midday, mist is green?

Who sings in the deepest water  
in the abandoned lagoon?

At what does watermelon laugh  
when it's murdered?

---

*Han contado el oro que tiene  
el territorio del maíz?*

*Sabes que es verde la neblina  
a mediodía, en Patagonia?*

*Quién canta en el fondo del agua  
en la laguna abandonada?*

*De qué ríe la sandía  
cuando la están asesinando?*

Is it true that amber contains  
the tears of the sirens?

What do they call a flower  
that flies from bird to bird?

Isn't it better never than late?

And why did cheese decide  
to perform heroic deeds in France?

---

*Es verdad que el ámbar contiene  
las lágrimas de las sirenas?*

*Cómo se llama una flor  
que vuela de pájaro en pájaro?*

*No es mejor nunca que tarde?*

*Y por qué el queso se dispuso  
a ejercer proezas en Francia?*

And when light was forged  
did it happen in Venezuela?

Where is the center of the sea?  
Why do waves never go there?

Is it true that the meteor  
was a dove of amethyst?

Am I allowed to ask my book  
whether it's true I wrote it?

---

*Y cuando se fundó la luz  
esto sucedió en Venezuela?*

*Dónde está el centro del mar?  
Por qué no van allí las olas?*

*Es cierto que aquel meteoro  
fue una paloma de amatista?*

*Puedo preguntar a mi libro  
si es verdad que yo lo escribí?*

Love, love, his and hers,  
if they've gone, where did they go?

Yesterday, yesterday I asked my eyes  
when will we see each other again?

And when you change the landscape  
is it with bare hands or with gloves?

How does rumor of the sky smell  
when the blue of water sings?

---

*Amor, amor aquel y aquella,  
si ya no son, dónde se fueron?*

*Ayer, ayer dije a mis ojos  
cuándo volveremos a vernos?*

*Y cuando se muda el paisaje  
son tus manos o son tus guantes?*

*Cuando canta el azul del agua  
cómo huele el rumor del cielo?*



XXIII

---

If the butterfly transmogrifies  
does it turn into a flying fish?

Then it wasn't true  
that God lived on the moon?

What color is the scent  
of the blue weeping of violets?

How many weeks are in a day  
and how many years in a month?

---

*Se convierte en pez volador  
si transmigra la mariposa?*

*Entonces no era verdad  
que vivía Dios en la luna?*

*De qué color es el olor  
del llanto azul de las violetas?*

*Cuántas semanas tiene un día  
y cuántos años tiene un mes?*

Is 4 the same 4 for everybody?  
Are all sevens equal?

When the convict ponders the light  
is it the same light that shines on you?

For the diseased, what color  
do you think April is?

Which occidental monarchy  
will fly flags of poppies?

---

*El 4 es 4 para todos?  
Son todos los sietes iguales?*

*Cuando el preso piensa en la luz  
es la misma que te ilumina?*

*Has pensado de qué color  
es el Abril de los enfermos?*

*Qué monarquía occidental  
se embandera con amapolas?*

Why did the grove undress itself  
only to wait for the snow?

And how do we know which is God  
among the Gods of Calcutta?

Why do all silkworms  
live so raggedly?

Why is it so hard, the sweetness  
of the heart of the cherry?

Is it because it must die  
or because it must carry on?

---

*Por qué para esperar la nieve  
se ha desvestido la arboleda?*

*Y cómo saber cuál es Dios  
entre los Dioses de Calcuta?*

*Por qué viven tan harapientos  
todos los gusanos de seda?*

*Por qué es tan dura la dulzura  
del corazón de la cereza?*

*Es porque tiene que morir  
o porque tiene que seguir?*

Has that solemn senator  
who dedicated a castle to me

already devoured, with his nephew,  
the assassin's cake?

Whom does the magnolia fool  
with its fragrance of lemons?

Where does the eagle put its dagger  
when it lies down on a cloud?

?

---

*Aquel solemne Senador  
que me atribuía un castillo*

*devoró ya con su sobrino  
la torta del asesinato?*

*A quién engaña la magnolia  
con su fragancia de limones?*

*Dónde deja el puñal el águila  
cuando se acuesta en una nube?*

Perhaps they died of shame  
those trains that lost their way?

Who has never seen bitter aloe?

Where were they planted,  
the eyes of comrade Paul Éluard?

Do you have room for some thorns?  
they asked the rosebush.

---

*Murieron tal vez de vergüenza  
estos trenes que se extraviaron?*

*Quién ha visto nunca el acíbar?*

*Dónde se plantaron los ojos  
del camarada Paul Éluard?*

*Hay sitio para unas espinas?  
le preguntaron al rosal.*

Why don't old people remember  
debts or burns?

Was it real, that scent  
of the surprised maiden?

Why don't the poor understand  
as soon as they stop being poor?

Where can you find a bell  
that will ring in your dreams?

---

*Por qué no recuerdan los viejos  
las deudas ni las quemaduras?*

*Era verdad aquel aroma  
de la doncella sorprendida?*

*Por qué los pobres no comprenden  
apenas dejan de ser pobres?*

*Dónde encontrar una campana  
que suene adentro de tus sueños?*

What is the distance in round meters  
between the sun and the oranges?

Who wakes up the sun when it falls asleep  
on its burning bed?

Does the earth sing like a cricket  
in the music of the heavens?

Is it true that sadness is thick  
and melancholy thin?

---

*Qué distancia en metros redondos  
hay entre el sol y las naranjas?*

*Quién despierta al sol cuando duerme  
sobre su cama abrasadora?*

*Canta la tierra como un grillo  
entre la música celeste?*

*Verdad que es ancha la tristeza,  
delgada la melancolía?*

When he wrote his blue book  
wasn't Rubén Darío green?

Wasn't Rimbaud scarlet,  
Góngora a shade of violet?

And Victor Hugo tricolored?  
And I yellow ribbons?

Do all memories of the poor  
huddle together in the villages?

And do the rich keep their dreams  
in a box carved from minerals?

---

*Quando escribió su libro azul  
Rubén Darío no era verde?*

*No era escarlata Rimbaud,  
Góngora de color violeta?*

*Y Victor Hugo tricolor?  
Y yo a listones amarillos?*

*Se juntan todos los recuerdos  
de los pobres de las aldeas?*

*Y en una caja mineral  
guardaron sus sueños los ricos?*



Whom can I ask what I came  
to make happen in this world?

Why do I move without wanting to,  
why am I not able to sit still?

Why do I go rolling without wheels,  
flying without wings or feathers,

and why did I decide to migrate  
if my bones live in Chile?

---

*A quién le puedo preguntar  
qué vine a hacer en este mundo?*

*Por qué me muevo sin querer,  
por qué no puedo estar inmóvil?*

*Por qué voy rodando sin ruedas,  
volando sin alas ni plumas,*

*y qué me dio por transmigrar  
si viven en Chile mis huesos?*

Is there anything sillier in life  
than to be called Pablo Neruda?

Is there a collector of clouds  
in the Colombian sky?

Why do assemblies of umbrellas  
always occur in London?

Did the Queen of Sheba  
have blood the color of amaretto?

When Baudelaire used to weep  
did he weep black tears?

---

*Hay algo más tonto en la vida  
que llamarse Pablo Neruda?*

*Hay en el cielo de Colombia  
un coleccionista de nubes?*

*Por qué siempre se hacen en Londres  
los congresos de los paraguas?*

*Sangre color de amaranto  
tenía la reina de Saba?*

*Cuando lloraba Baudelaire  
lloraba con lágrimas negras?*

And why is the sun such a bad companion  
to the traveler in the desert?

And why is the sun so congenial  
in the hospital garden?

Are they birds or fish  
in these nets of moonlight?

Was it where they lost me  
that I finally found myself?

---

*Y por qué el sol es tan mal amigo  
del caminante en el desierto?*

*Y por qué el sol es tan simpático  
en el jardín del hospital?*

*Son pájaros o son peces  
en estas redes de la luna?*

*Fue adonde a mí me perdieron  
que logré por fin encontrarme?*

With the virtues that I forgot  
could I sew a new suit?

Why did the best rivers  
leave to flow in France?

Why does it not dawn in Bolivia  
after the night of Guevara?

And does his assassinated heart  
search there for his assassins?

Do the black grapes of the desert  
have a basic thirst for tears?

---

*Con las virtudes que olvidé  
me puedo hacer un traje nuevo?*

*Por qué los ríos mejores  
se fueron a correr en Francia?*

*Por qué no amanece en Bolivia  
desde la noche de Guevara?*

*Y busca allí a los asesinos  
su corazón asesinado?*

*Tienen primero gusto a lágrimas  
las uvas negras del desierto?*

Will our life not be a tunnel  
between two vague clarities?

Or will it not be a clarity  
between two dark triangles?

Or will life not be a fish  
prepared to be a bird?

Will death consist of non-being  
or of dangerous substances?

---

*No será nuestra vida un túnel  
entre dos vagas claridades?*

*O no será una claridad  
entre dos triángulos oscuros?*

*O no será la vida un pez  
preparado para ser pájaro?*

*La muerte será de no ser  
o de sustancias peligrosas?*

In the end, won't death  
be an endless kitchen?

What will your disintegrated bones do,  
search once more for your form?

Will your destruction merge  
with another voice and other light?

Will your worms become part  
of dogs or of butterflies?

---

*No será la muerte por fin  
una cocina interminable?*

*Qué harán tus huesos disgregados,  
buscarán otra vez tu forma?*

*Se fundirá tu destrucción  
en otra voz y en otra luz?*

*Formarán parte tus gusanos  
de perros o de mariposas?*

Will Czechoslovakians or turtles  
be born from your ashes?

Will your mouth kiss carnations  
with other, imminent lips?

But do you know from where death  
comes, from above or from below?

From microbes or walls,  
from wars or winter?

---

*De tus cenizas nacerán  
checo-slovacos o tortugas?*

*Tu boca besará claveles  
con otros labios venideros?*

*Pero sabes de dónde viene  
la muerte, de arriba o de abajo?*

*De los microbios o los muros,  
de las guerras o del invierno?*

## XXXVIII

---

Do you not believe that death lives  
inside a cherry's sun?

Cannot a kiss of spring  
also kill you?

Do you believe that ahead of you  
grief carries the flag of your destiny?

And in the skull do you discover  
your ancestry condemned to bone?

---

*No crees que vive la muerte  
dentro del sol de una cereza?*

*No puede matarte también  
un beso de la primavera?*

*Crees que el luto te adelanta  
la bandera de tu destino?*

*Y encuentras en la calavera  
tu estirpe a hueso condenada?*



Do you not also sense danger  
in the sea's laughter?

Do you not see a threat  
in the bloody silk of the poppy?

Do you not see that the apple tree flowers  
only to die in the apple?

Do you not weep surrounded by laughter  
with bottles of oblivion?

---

*No sientes también el peligro  
en la carcajada del mar?*

*No ves en la seda sangrienta  
de la amapola una amenaza?*

*No ves que florece el manzano  
para morir en la manzana?*

*No lloras rodeado de risa  
con las botellas del olvido?*

To whom does the ragged condor  
report after its mission?

What do they call the sadness  
of a solitary sheep?

And what happens in the dovecote  
if the doves learn to sing?

If the flies make honey  
will they offend the bees?

---

*A quién el cóndor andrajoso  
da cuenta de su cometido?*

*Cómo se llama la tristeza  
en una oveja solitaria?*

*Y qué pasa en el palomar  
si aprenden canto las palomas?*

*Si las moscas fabrican miel  
ofenderán a las abejas?*

How long does a rhinoceros last  
after he's moved to compassion?

What's new for the leaves  
of recent spring?

In winter, do the leaves live  
in hiding with the roots?

What did the tree learn from the earth  
to be able to talk with the sky?

---

*Cuánto dura un rinoceronte  
después de ser enternecido?*

*Qué cuentan de nuevo las hojas  
de la reciente primavera?*

*Las hojas viven en invierno  
en secreto, con las raíces?*

*Qué aprendió el árbol de la tierra  
para conversar con el cielo?*

Does he who is always waiting suffer more  
than he who's never waited for anyone?

Where does the rainbow end,  
in your soul or on the horizon?

Perhaps heaven will be,  
for suicides, an invisible star?

Where are the vineyards of iron  
from where the meteor falls?

---

*Sufre más el que espera siempre  
que aquel que nunca esperó a nadie?*

*Dónde termina el arco iris,  
en tu alma o en el horizonte?*

*Tal vez una estrella invisible  
será el cielo de los suicidas?*

*Dónde están las viñas de hierro  
de donde cae el meteoro?*

Who was she who made love to you  
in your dream, while you slept?

Where do the things in dreams go?  
Do they pass to the dreams of others?

And does the father who lives in your dreams  
die again when you awaken?

In dream, do plants blossom  
and their solemn fruit ripen?

---

*Quién era aquella que te amó  
en el sueño, cuando dormías?*

*Dónde van las cosas del sueño?  
Se van al sueño de los otros?*

*Y el padre que vive en los sueños  
vuelve a morir cuando despiertas?*

*Florece las plantas del sueño  
y maduran sus graves frutos?*

## XLIV

---

Where is the child I was,  
still inside me or gone?

Does he know that I never loved him  
and that he never loved me?

Why did we spend so much time  
growing up only to separate?

Why did we both not die  
when my childhood died?

And why does my skeleton pursue me  
if my soul has fallen away?

---

*Dónde está el niño que yo fui,  
sigue adentro de mí o se fue?*

*Sabe que no lo quise nunca  
y que tampoco me quería?*

*Por qué anduvimos tanto tiempo  
creciendo para separarnos?*

*Por qué no morimos los dos  
cuando mi infancia se murió?*

*Y si el alma se me cayó  
por qué me sigue el esqueleto?*

Is the yellow of the forest  
the same as last year's?

And does the black flight  
of the relentless seabird repeat itself?

And is where space ends  
called death or infinity?

What weighs more heavily on the belt,  
sadnesses or memories?

---

*El amarillo de los bosques  
es el mismo del año ayer?*

*Y se repite el vuelo negro  
de la tenaz ave marina?*

*Y donde termina el espacio  
se llama muerte o infinito?*

*Qué pesan más en la cintura,  
los dolores o los recuerdos?*

And what is the name of the month  
that falls between December and January?

By what authority did they number  
the twelve grapes of the cluster?

Why didn't they give us longer  
months that last all year?

Did spring never deceive you  
with kisses that didn't blossom?

---

*Y cómo se llama ese mes  
que está entre Diciembre y Enero?*

*Con qué derecho numeraron  
las doce uvas del racimo?*

*Por qué no nos dieron extensos  
meses que duren todo el año?*

*No te engañó la primavera  
con besos que no florecieron?*



In the middle of autumn  
do you hear yellow explosions?

By what reason or injustice  
does the rain weep its joy?

Which birds lead the way  
when the flock takes flight?

From what does the hummingbird hang  
its dazzling symmetry?

---

*Oyes en medio del otoño  
detonaciones amarillas?*

*Por qué razón o sinrazón  
llora la lluvia su alegría?*

*Qué pájaros dictan el orden  
de la bandada cuando vuela?*

*De qué suspende el picaflor  
su simetría deslumbrante?*

Are the breasts of the sirens  
spiral shells from the sea?

Or are they petrified waves  
or the stationary play of the spume?

Hasn't the meadow caught fire  
with wild fireflies?

Did autumn's hairdressers  
uncomb these chrysanthemums?

---

*Son los senos de las sirenas  
las redondescas caracolas?*

*O son olas petrificadas  
o juego inmóvil de la espuma?*

*No se ha incendiado la pradera  
con las luciérnagas salvajes?*

*Los peluqueros del otoño  
despeinaron los crisantemos?*

When I see the sea once more  
will the sea have seen or not seen me?

Why do the waves ask me  
the same questions I ask them?

And why do they strike the rock  
with so much wasted passion?

Don't they get tired of repeating  
their declaration to the sand?

---

*Quando veo de nuevo el mar  
el mar me ha visto o no me ha visto?*

*Por qué me preguntan las olas  
lo mismo que yo les pregunto?*

*Y por qué golpean la roca  
con tanto entusiasmo perdido?*

*No se cansan de repetir  
su declaración a la arena?*

Who can convince the sea  
to be reasonable?

What's it get from demolishing  
blue amber, green granite?

And why so many wrinkles  
and so many holes in the rock?

I came from behind the sea,  
now where do I go when it cuts me off?

Why did I close the road,  
falling into the sea's trap?

---

*Quién puede convencer al mar  
para que sea razonable?*

*De qué le sirve demoler  
ámbar azul, granito verde?*

*Y para qué tantas arrugas  
y tanto agujero en la roca?*

*Yo llegué de detrás del mar  
y dónde voy cuando me ataja?*

*Por qué me he cerrado el camino  
cayendo en la trampa del mar?*

Why do I hate cities  
smelling of women and urine?

Isn't the city the great ocean  
of quaking mattresses?

Doesn't Oceania of the winds  
have islands and palm trees?

Why did I return to the indifference  
of the limitless ocean?

---

*Por qué detesto las ciudades  
con olor a mujer y orina?*

*No es la ciudad el gran océano  
de los colchones que palpitan?*

*La oceanía de los aires  
no tiene islas y palmeras?*

*Por qué volví a la indiferencia  
del océano desmedido?*

How large was the black octopus  
that darkened the day's peace?

Were its branches made of iron  
and its eyes, of dead fire?

And why did the tricolored whale  
cut me off on the road?

---

*Cuánto medía el pulpo negro  
que oscureció la paz del día?*

*Eran de hierro sus ramales  
y de fuego muerto sus ojos?*

*Y la ballena tricolor  
por qué me atajó en el camino?*

Who devoured before my eyes  
a shark covered with pustules?

Who was guilty, the squall  
or the bloodstained fishes?

Is this continual breaking  
the order or the battle?

---

*Quién devoró frente a mis ojos  
un tiburón lleno de pústulas?*

*Tenía la culpa el escualo  
o los peces ensangrentados?*

*Es el orden o la batalla  
este quebranto sucesivo?*

Is it true that swallows  
are going to settle on the moon?

Will they carry spring with them  
tearing it from the cornices?

Will the moon swallows  
take off in autumn?

Will they search for traces of bismuth  
by pecking at the sky?

And will they return to the balconies  
dusted with ash?

---

*Es verdad que las golondrinas  
van a establecerse en la luna?*

*Se llevarán la primavera  
sacándola de las cornisas?*

*Se alejarán en el otoño  
las golondrinas de la luna?*

*Buscarán muestras de bismuto  
a picotazos en el cielo?*

*Y a los balcones volverán  
espolvoreadas de ceniza?*



Why don't they send moles  
and turtles to the moon?

Couldn't the animals that engineer  
hollows and tunnels

take charge of  
these distant inspections?

---

*Por qué no mandan a los topos  
y a las tortugas a la luna?*

*Los animales ingenieros  
de cavidades y ramuras*

*no podrían hacerse cargo  
de estas lejanas inspecciones?*

You don't believe that dromedaries  
keep moonlight in their humps?

Don't they sow it in the desert  
with secret persistence?

And hasn't the sea been lent  
for a brief time to the earth?

Won't we have to give it back  
with its tides to the moon?

---

*No crees que los dromedarios  
preservan luna en sus jorobas?*

*No la siembran en los desiertos  
con persistencia clandestina?*

*Y no estará prestado el mar  
por un corto tiempo a la tierra?*

*No tendremos que devolverlo  
con sus mareas a la luna?*

Wouldn't it be best to outlaw  
interplanetary kisses?

Why not analyze these things  
before outfitting other planets?

And why not the platypus  
who is dressed for space?

Weren't horseshoes made  
for horses on the moon?

---

*No será bueno prohibir  
los besos interplanetarios?*

*Por qué no analizar las cosas  
antes de habilitar planetas?*

*Y por qué no el ornitorrinco  
con su espacial indumentaria?*

*Las herraduras no se hicieron  
para caballos de la luna?*

And what was beating in the night?  
Were they planets or horseshoes?

This morning must I choose  
between the naked sea and the sky?

And why is the sky dressed  
so early in its mists?

What was awaiting me in Isla Negra?  
The green truth or decorum?

---

*Y qué palpitaba en la noche?  
Eran planetas o herraduras?*

*Debo escoger esta mañana  
entre el mar desnudo y el cielo?*

*Y por qué el cielo está vestido  
tan temprano con sus neblinas?*

*Qué me esperaba en Isla Negra?  
La verdad verde o el decoro?*

Why was I not born mysterious?  
Why did I grow up without companions?

Who ordered me to tear down  
the doors of my own pride?

And who went out to live for me  
when I was sleeping or sick?

And which flag unfurled there  
where they didn't forget me?

---

*Por qué no nació misterioso?  
Por qué crecí sin compañía?*

*Quién me mandó desvencijar  
las puertas de mi propio orgullo?*

*Y quién salió a vivir por mí  
cuando dormía o enfermaba?*

*Qué bandera se desplegó  
allí donde no me olvidaron?*

And what importance do I have  
in the courtroom of oblivion?

Which is the true picture  
of how the future will turn out?

Is it the grain seed  
among its yellow masses?

Or is it the bony heart,  
that delegate of the peach?

---

*Y qué importancia tengo yo  
en el tribunal del olvido?*

*Cuál es la representación  
del resultado venidero?*

*Es la semilla cereal  
con su multitud amarilla?*

*O es el corazón huesudo  
el delegado del durazno?*

Does the living drop of mercury  
run downward or forever?

Will my sorrowful poetry  
watch with my own eyes?

Will I have my smell and my pain  
when, destroyed, I go on sleeping?

---

*La gota viva del azogue  
corre hacia abajo o hacia siempre?*

*Mi poesía desdichada  
mirará con los ojos míos?*

*Tendré mi olor y mis dolores  
cuando yo duerma destruido?*

What does it mean to persist  
on the alley of death?

How in salt's desert  
is it possible to blossom?

In the sea of nothing happens,  
are there clothes to die in?

Now that the bones are gone  
who lives in the final dust?

---

*Qué significa persistir  
en el callejón de la muerte?*

*En el desierto de la sal  
cómo se puede florecer?*

*En el mar del no pasa nada  
hay vestido para morir?*

*Cuando ya se fueron los huesos  
quién vive en el polvo final?*



How is the translation of their languages  
arranged with the birds?

How do I tell the turtle  
that I am slower than he?

How do I ask the flea  
for his championship stats?

Or tell the carnations  
that I'm grateful for their fragrance?

---

*Cómo se acuerda con los pájaros  
la traducción de sus idiomas?*

*Cómo le digo a la tortuga  
que yo le gano en lentitud?*

*Cómo le pregunto a la pulga  
las cifras de su campeonato?*

*Y a los claveles qué les digo  
agradeciendo su fragancia?*

Why do my faded clothes  
flutter like a flag?

Am I sometimes evil  
or am I always good?

Do we learn kindness  
or the mask of kindness?

Isn't the rosebush of evil white  
and aren't the flowers of goodness black?

Who assigns names and numbers  
to the innumerable innocent?

---

*Por qué mi ropa desteñida  
se agita como una bandera?*

*Soy un malvado alguna vez  
o todas las veces soy bueno?*

*Es que se aprende la bondad  
o la máscara de la bondad?*

*No es blanco el rosal del malvado  
y negras las flores del bien?*

*Quién da los nombres y los números  
al inocente innumerable?*

Does the drop of metal shine  
like a syllable in my song?

Does a word sometimes  
slither like a serpent?

Didn't a name like an orange  
creep into your heart?

From which river do fish come?  
From the word *silversmithing*?

When they stow too many vowels  
don't sailing ships wreck?

---

*Brilla la gota de metal  
como una sílaba en mi canto?*

*Y no se arrastra una palabra  
a veces como una serpiente?*

*No crepitó en tu corazón  
un nombre como una naranja?*

*De qué río salen los peces?  
De la palabra platería?*

*Y no naufragan los veleros  
por un exceso de vocales?*

Do the o's of the locomotive  
cast smoke, fire and steam?

In which language does rain fall  
over tormented cities?

At dawn, which smooth syllables  
does the ocean air repeat?

Is there a star more wide open  
than the word *poppy*?

Are there two fangs sharper  
than the syllables of *jackal*?

---

*Echan humo, fuego y vapor  
las o de las locomotoras?*

*En qué idioma cae la lluvia  
sobre ciudades dolorosas?*

*Qué suaves sílabas repite  
el aire del alba marina?*

*Hay una estrella más abierta  
que la palabra amapola?*

*Hay dos colmillos más agudos  
que las sílabas de chacal?*

Can you love me, syllabary,  
and give me a meaningful kiss?

Is a dictionary a sepulchre  
or a sealed honeycomb?

In which window did I remain  
watching buried time?

Or is what I see from afar  
what I have not yet lived?

---

*Puedes amarme, silabaria,  
y darme un beso sustantivo?*

*Un diccionario es un sepulcro  
o es un panal de miel cerrado?*

*En qué ventana me quedé  
mirando el tiempo sepultado?*

*O lo que miro desde lejos  
es lo que no he vivido aún?*

When does the butterfly read  
what flies written on its wings?

So it can understand its itinerary,  
which letters does the bee know?

And with which numbers does the ant  
subtract its dead soldiers?

What are cyclones called  
when they stand still?

---

*Cuándo lee la mariposa  
lo que vuela escrito en sus alas?*

*Qué letras conoce la abeja  
para saber su itinerario?*

*Y con qué cifras va restando  
la hormiga sus soldados muertos?*

*Cómo se llaman los ciclones  
cuando no tienen movimiento?*

Do thoughts of love fall  
into extinct volcanoes?

Is a crater an act of vengeance  
or a punishment of the earth?

With which stars do they go on speaking,  
the rivers that never reach the sea?

---

*Caen pensamientos de amor  
en los volcanes extinguidos?*

*Es un cráter una venganza  
o es un castigo de la tierra?*

*Con qué estrellas siguen hablando  
los ríos que no desembocan?*

What forced labor  
does Hitler do in hell?

Does he paint walls or cadavers?  
Does he sniff the fumes of the dead?

Do they feed him the ashes  
of so many burnt children?

Or, since his death, have they given him  
blood to drink from a funnel?

Or do they hammer into his mouth  
the pulled gold teeth?

---

*Cuál es el trabajo forzado  
de Hitler en el infierno?*

*Pinta paredes o cadáveres?  
Olfatea el gas de sus muertos?*

*Le dan a comer las cenizas  
de tantos niños calcinados?*

*O le han dado desde su muerte  
de beber sangre en un embudo?*

*O le martillan en la boca  
los arrancados dientes de oro?*



Or do they lay him down to sleep  
on his barbed wire?

Or are they tattooing his skin  
for the lamps in hell?

Or do black mastiffs of flame  
bite him without mercy?

Or must he travel without rest,  
night and day with his prisoners?

Or must he die without dying  
eternally under the gas?

---

*O le acuestan para dormir  
sobre sus alambres de púas?*

*O le están tatuando la piel  
para lámparas del infierno?*

*O lo muerden sin compasión  
los negros mastines del fuego?*

*O debe de noche y de día  
viajar sin tregua con sus presos?*

*O debe morir sin morir  
eternamente bajo el gas?*

If all rivers are sweet  
where does the sea get its salt?

How do the seasons know  
they must change their shirt?

Why so slowly in winter  
and later with such a rapid shudder?

And how do the roots know  
they must climb toward the light?

And then greet the air  
with so many flowers and colors?

Is it always the same spring  
who revives her role?

---

*Si todos los ríos son dulces  
de dónde saca sal el mar?*

*Cómo saben las estaciones  
que deben cambiar de camisa?*

*Por qué tan lentas en invierno  
y tan palpitantes después?*

*Y cómo saben las raíces  
que deben subir a la luz?*

*Y luego saludar al aire  
con tantas flores y colores?*

*Siempre es la misma primavera  
la que repite su papel?*

Who works harder on earth,  
a human or the grain's sun?

Between the fir tree and the poppy  
whom does the earth love more?

Between the orchids and the wheat  
which does it favor?

Why a flower with such opulence  
and wheat with its dirty gold?

Does autumn enter legally  
or is it an underground season?

---

*Quién trabaja más en la tierra,  
el hombre o el sol cereal?*

*Entre el abeto y la amapola  
a quién la tierra quiere más?*

*Entre las orquídeas y el trigo  
para cuál es la preferencia?*

*Por qué tanto lujo a una flor  
y un oro sucio para el trigo?*

*Entra el Otoño legalmente  
o es una estación clandestina?*

Why does it linger in the branches  
until the leaves fall?

And where are its yellow trousers  
left hanging?

Is it true that autumn seems to wait  
for something to happen?

Perhaps the trembling of a leaf  
or the movement of the universe?

Is there a magnet under the earth,  
brother magnet of autumn?

When is the appointment of the rose  
decreed under the earth?

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*Por qué se queda en los ramajes  
hasta que las hojas se caen?*

*Y dónde se quedan colgados  
sus pantalones amarillos?*

*Verdad que parece esperar  
el Otoño que pase algo?*

*Tal vez el temblor de una hoja  
o el tránsito del universo?*

*Hay un imán bajo la tierra,  
imán hermano del Otoño?*

*Cuándo se dicta bajo tierra  
la designación de la rosa?*

# PABLO NERUDA

## The Book of Questions

TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM O'DALY

Completed only months before his death in 1973, Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions* is the seventh and concluding volume in the Copper Canyon Press late Neruda series. Facing the inevitability of the U.S.-backed coup that would destroy the Allende government in Chile and devastate the country, and facing his own imminent death by cancer, Neruda wrote several small, remarkably various books. These brief poems, composed entirely of unanswerable questions, express the Nobel Laureate's lifelong dedication to revealing an inner structure of feeling that underlies all experience. In his quest for self-revelation, Neruda finds the mundane objects of the world most fruitful not as poetic ornaments, but as forceful paradox inviting speculation. The rational mind alone cannot find a completely satisfactory response to such poetry, so the reader is driven deeper into each poem in the search for unarticulate truth. These poems are openings rather than closures. At the end, he leaves us with yet another enigmatic beginning.

*The Book of Questions* is by turns Orphic, comic, surreal, and poignant. "Tell me," he asks, "is the rose naked / or is that her only dress?" In these poems, the sacred and the profane become the Janus masks of the world, reality defined in the margins of a silence molded by encounters between the taken-for-granted things of the daily world and the boundless imagination of one of this century's greatest poets. "Is there anything in the world sadder / than a tree standing in the rain?" William O'Daly has made luminous, lyrical versions that remain faithful to the Spanish, an American English equivalent that approaches the resonance of the original without sacrificing the sheer hypnotic power of Neruda's precise vision.



Cover: Galia Garwood

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