HEIGHTS OF MACHU PICCHU

(ALTURAS DE MACHU PICCHU)

— Pablo Neruda

1

From air into air, across an empty net,
I walked through the streets and the atmosphere, moving on
and leaving behind the coin piled high in the leaves
with autumn’s arrival, and through spring and ripe grain
past love at its best, thrown down in a glove
that grabs us like a big full moon.

(Days of flashing light in the rough weather
of bodies: steel turned
to acid silence:
nights crushed into ultimate powder,
shredded stamens of the nuptial country.)

Someone who waited for me by the violins
found a world like a buried tower
sinking its spire deep below all the leaves
the color of raucous sulfur:
and deeper yet, through geological gold,
like a sword sheathed in meteors,
I plunged my turbulent and tender hand
into earth’s genital core.

I pressed my brow to the deep waves,
sank like a drop through sulfurous peace,
and, like a blind man, went back to the jasmine
in our weary human spring.

2

If flower onto flower conveys the high seed,
and the rock holds its disseminated flower
under its beaten coat of diamond and sand,
man crumples the petal of light, which he picks
from pre-determined sources in the sea,
and probes the palpitating metal with his hands.
And soon, amid the clothing and the smoke, on the sunken terrace, like a quantum re-engaged, remains the soul: quartz and sleeplessness, teardrops in the ocean like pools of cold—but beyond that: kill it, stifle it with paper and with hate, bury it daily under the rug, tear it apart in vestments of barbed wire.

No: through the corridors, air, sea or roads, who keeps their blood safe (like scarlet poppies) without a dagger? Anger has exhausted the merchant of beings’ sad wares, and yet, at the top of the plum tree, the dew for a thousand years has left its transparent script on the same waiting branch O! heart O! face ground into the hollows of autumn.

How many times in the wintry city streets or in a bus or a boat in the twilight, or in the thickest solitude, at a fiesta in the night, beneath a sound of shadows and bells, in the very cave of human pleasure have I yearned to stop and find the eternal, inexhaustible vein I once touched in the rock or in the lightning flash released by a kiss.

(That which in the grain, like a yellow history of small ripe breasts, keeps repeating a number, an endless tenderness inside the germinal pods, and which, identical still, dehisces as ivory, and that which in water is transparent nation, bell tolling from the lonely snow to the bloodied waves.)

I could only grasp a cluster of faces or masks hurled, like rings of hollow gold, like clothes, scattered children of a rabid autumn, that would cause the sickly tree of the frightened races to sway.

I found no place to rest my hand, a place as fluid as the water of a fountain under lock, or as firm as a chunk of anthracite or crystal, that would return the warmth or the cold of my outstretched hand.

What was man? In what part of his open conversation, amid the countertops and the whistling, in which of his metallic movements lived the indestructible, the imperishable, lived… life?
Being got thrashed like maize in the bottomless granary of lost facts, miserable
events, from the first to the seventh, to the eighth,
and not one death, but many deaths came to each of them:
every day a little death, dust, maggot, snuffed-out lamp
in a suburb’s mud, a little death with fat wings
entered every man like a short blade
and man was besieged by the bread as by the knife,
the cattle rancher: the son of seaports or the obscure captain of the plow,
or the rodent of the packed streets:

all of them yielding, waiting for death, short everyday death:
and their dismal daily withering was
like a black cup they drank from trembling.

The great death invited me many times:
it lay hidden like salt in the waves,
and what its invisible savor dispensed
were fragments half-collapsed and half-raised
or vast constructs of wind and snowpack.

I came to the iron edge, the straits
in the air, the shroud of agriculture and rock,
to the stellar void of the last few paces
and the vertiginous spiral causeway:
and yet, O! death, vast sea, wave after wave you do not come except as a galloping of evening clarity,
or like the totalizing numbers of night.

You have never rummaged in a pocket
or shown up without dressing in red,
without a carpet at dawn containing silence,
without buried or elevated legacies of tears.

I could not love, in any being, a tree
with its own small autumn in tow (the death of a thousand leaves),
all the false deaths and the resurrections
with no ground, no gaping abyss.

I wanted to swim in the grandest lives,
in the most wide-open river mouths,
and when, little by little, man kept saying no, and path
and door were barred to me, so that I could not touch
his wounded non-existence with my resourceful hands,
then I went from street to street
and river to river, from city to city and bed to bed,
and wore my briny makeup across the wasteland,
and in the last lowly houses, with no lamp, no fire,
no bread, no stone, no silence, alone,
I drifted, dying of my own death.

5
It was not you, grave death, bird of iron plumage,
that the poor heir of housing projects
brought with the fast food under his empty skin:
it was something else, a poor petal of withered rope:
an atom of the breast that backed away from the fight
or the bitter dew that never poured down a brow.
It was what could not be reborn, a piece
of the small death without peace or sense of place:
a bone, an overtone were dying within him.
I lifted the iodine bandages, plunged
my hands into the poor ills that were killing death,
and found nothing in the wound but a cold gust of wind
that entered through the vague interstices of the soul.

6
Then I climbed up the ladder of the earth
through the atrocious thicket of lost jungles
to you, Machu Picchu.

High city of stepped stones,
home at last to what the earth
did not conceal under sleep’s garments.
In you, like two parallel lineages,
the cradles of lightning and man
swayed in a wind of thorns.

Mother of stone, spume of the condors.

High reef of the human dawn.
Shovel lost in the primal sand.

This was the dwelling, this is the place: here the fat grains of maize grew high and came down again like red hail.

Here the golden thread took off from the vicuna to dress the loved ones, the tombs, the mothers, the king, the prayers, the warriors.

Here man’s feet rested at night beside the eagle’s feet, in the high ravenous perches, and at dawn they walked with thunder’s feet through the rarefied fog, and touched the lands and the stones enough to know them at night or in death.

I look at the clothing and the hands, the trace of water in the sonorous hollow, the wall made smooth from the touch of a face that saw with my eyes the lamplights of earth, that oiled with my hands the vanished wood beams: because everything, clothes, skin, dishes, words, wine, bread, has passed, fallen to earth.

And the air entered with orange-blossom fingers over everyone asleep: a thousand years of air, months, weeks of air, of blue wind, of iron cordillera, that were like the steps of gentle hurricanes polishing the solitary precinct of the stone.

You the dead of a single abyss, shadows of one ravine—the deepest one—so it was that in keeping with your stature came the true, the all-consuming death, and from the punctured rocks, from the crimson cornices, from the stepped aqueducts you plummeted as if in autumn to a single death.

Today the empty air weeps no more,
knows nothing of your clay feet,
forgets your jars that filtered the sky
when the knives of lightning made it gush,
and the mighty tree was chewed up
by the fog, and chopped down by the wind.
It supported a hand that fell suddenly
from the height to the end of time.
Now you are nothing, spider’s hands, thin
threads, tangled weave:
everything you were, fell: customs, frayed
syllables, masks of dazzling light.

Yet a permanence of stone and language:
the city lifted itself like a cup in the hands
of all, living, dead, silenced, upheld
by so much death, a wall, by so much life, a shock
of stone petals: the permanent rose, the home:
this Andean reef of glacial colonies.

When the hand the color of clay
itself became clay, and when the small eyelids closed
packed with rugged walls, crowded with castles,
and when all of man curled up in his hole,
there remained an unfurled exactness:
the high place of the human dawn:
the highest vessel to contain the silence:
a lifetime of stone after so many lives.

Climb with me, American love.
Kiss the secret stones with me.
The torrential silver of the Urubamba
sends the pollen flying to its yellow cup.
Let the emptiness of the vine,
the stone plant, the hard garland take flight
above the silence of the mountain gorge.
Come, minuscule life, between the wings
of the earth, while—crystal and cold,
pounded air breaking embattled emeralds apart,
O! savage water, you stream down from the snow.
Love, love, until the abrupt night,
from the sonorous Andean flint,
to the dawn’s red knees,
contemplate the blind son of the snow.

O! Wilkamayu of the sonorous weave,
when you shatter your linear rumblings
into white spume, like wounded snow,
when your windstorm sweeps down
chanting, and whips the enlivened sky,
what language do you bring to the ear
just emerged from your Andean spume?

Who seized the lightning of the cold
and left it chained on high,
scattered in glacial tears,
brandished in swift swords,
pounding its war-hardened stamens,
led to its warrior’s bed,
leaping to its finale of stone?

What do your frenzied flashings say?
Did your secret rebel lightning
once travel teeming with words?
Who goes grinding frozen syllables,
black languages, banners of gold,
deep mouths, stifled cries,
in your meager arterial waters?

Who goes cutting the eyelids of flowers
that come up from the earth to look?
Who throws down the dead clusters
that drop in your cascading hands,
threshing their threshed night
into geological coal?

Who breaks off the branch of links?
Who buries the farewells again?

Love, love, do not touch the border
or adore the submerged head:
let time achieve true size
in its parlor of broken fountains,
and, between the rapids and the walls,
gather the air in the pass,
the parallel sheets of wind,
the blind channel of the cordillera,
the bitter salute of the dew,
and climb, flower by flower, into the thick,
trampling the snake flung to earth.

In the steep zone, stone and forest,
dust of green stars, clear jungle,
Mantur bursts open, like a living lake
or a new level of silence.

Come to my very being, to my own dawn,
toward the crowned solitudes.

The dead kingdom lives on.

And across the Clock the condor’s bloodthirsty shadow
cruises like a black ship.

9

Sidereal eagle, vineyard of mist.
Lost bastion, blind scimitar.
Constellations’ belt, solemn bread.
Torrential ladder, immense eyelid.
Triangular tunic, pollen of stone.
Granite lamp, bread of stone.
Mineral serpent, rose of stone.
Buried ship, fount of stone.
Horse of the moon, light of stone.
Equinoctial square, vapor of stone.
Final geometry, book of stone.
Icepack carved by the gales.
Madrepore of submerged time.
Rampart softened by fingers.
Rooftop fought by feathers.
Branching mirrors, tempest groundwork.
Thrones overturned by the vine.
Rule of the blood-soaked claw.
Windstorm hovering on the slope.
Immobile turquoise waterfall.
Patriarchal bell of the sleepers.
Collar of the dominated snows.
Iron at rest on its statues.
Inaccessible storm foreclosed.
Puma hands, sanguinary rock.
Shadowy tower, discourse of snow.
Night lifted in fingers and roots.
Window of the mists, hard-hearted dove.
Nocturnal plant, statue of thunderclaps.
Cordillera essence, ocean’s roof.
Architecture of lost eagles.
Rope of the sky, bee of the apex.
Bloodstained ground, constructed star.
Mineral boil, moon of quartz.
Serpent of the Andes, amaranth face.
Dome of silence, pure nation.

Bride of the sea, tree of cathedrals.

Bough of salt, black-winged cherry tree.

Snow-swept denture, cold thunder.

Scratched moon, menacing stone.

Crown of the cold, force of the air.

Volcano of hands, obscure cataract.

Silver wave, direction of time.

Stone upon stone, man, where was he?
Air upon air, man, where was he?
Time upon time, man, where was he?

Were you also the broken piece
of man unfulfilled, an empty eagle,
who on the streets today, on the beaten paths,
on the leaves of dead autumn
keeps battering his soul on the way to the grave?
The poor hand, the foot, the poor life…
The days of frayed light
in you, like the rain
on the pennants at a fiesta,
gave their obscure food,
petal by petal, to an empty mouth.

Hunger, coral of man,
hunger, secret plant, root of the woodcutters,
hunger, did your reef’s edge rise
to those high indifferent towers?

I ask you, salt of the roads,
show me the trowel; architecture, let me
poke the stamens of stone with a stick,
climb the steps of the air into emptiness,
scraper the entrails until I touch man.

Machu Picchu, did you put
stone upon stone, and at bottom, shreds?
Coal on top of coal, and in the end, tears?
Fire onto gold, and trembling within,
a big red drop of blood?
Give me back the slave that you buried!
Unearth from these lands the hard bread
of the wretched, show me the clothes
of the serf and his window.
Tell me how he slept when he lived.
Tell me if he snored in his sleep,
his mouth gaping from exhaustion
like a black hole bored through the wall.
The wall, the wall! If every item of stone
weighed down on his sleep, and whether he collapsed
beneath it, as if beneath the moon, with his sleep!

Ancient America, submerged bride,
your fingers too,
from jungle’s end to the vacant highland of the gods,
under nuptial banners of light and reverence,
mixing with the thunder of drums and spears,
yours too, your fingers too,
those that the abstract rose and the edge of the cold, the
bloodied body of the new grain
translated into the fabric of radiant matter, into the hard cavities,
you, you too, buried America, did you contain deep down
in your bitter gut, like an eagle, hunger?

Through the confused splendor,
through the night of stone, let me plunge my hand,
and let there beat within me, like a bird held captive
a thousand years, the old heart of the now forgotten!
Let me forget the gladness that is greater than the sea,
because man is greater than the sea and its islands,
and one must fall into him, as into a well, to rise from the depths
with a branch of secret water and submerged truths.

Let me forget, great stone, the powerful proportion,
the transcendent scale, the honeycombed stones,
and, on the square edge, let me run my hand today
down the hypotenuse of bad blood and haircloth.

When the furious condor, like a horseshoe of red elytra,
hits me in the temples on its line of flight
and when the hurricane’s predatory feathers sweep the dark dust
off diagonal stairways, I do not see the swift animal,
I do not see the blind circle of its claws,
I see the age-old being, the servant, someone asleep in the fields,
I see a body, a thousand bodies, a man, a thousand women
under the black whirlwind, blackened by rain and night,
with the statue’s heavy stone:
Juan the Stonecutter, son of Wiracocha,
Juan the Cold-Bellied, son of the green star,
Juan the Barefoot, grandson of turquoise,
climb and be born with me, brother.

Climb and be born with me, brother.

Give me your hand from the dark soil
of your disseminated sorrow.
You will not be returning from a bed of rocks.
You will not be returning from subterranean time.
You will not be returning with your gruff voice.
You will not be returning with pierced eyes.

Look at me from the depths of the earth,
farmer, weaver, shepherd of few words:
tamer of the tutelary guanaco:
mason on a treacherous scaffold:
water-bearer of Andean tears:
jeweler with damaged fingers:
sower trembling over the seed:
potter distressed by your clay.

Bring to the cup of this new life
your buried sorrows of old.
Show me your blood and your furrow,
say to me: here I was punished,
because the jewel did not shine or the earth
failed to yield a stone or a grain in due time:
show me the stone on which you stumbled
or the wood on which they crucified you,
illuminate for me the old flints,
the old lamps, the whips glued
to the wounds across the centuries,
and the axes shimmering with blood.
I come to speak through your dead mouth.
Across the earth let all the silent lips gone to waste
join together, and speak to me from the deep
during this long night, as if I were anchored beside you,
tell me everything, chain by chain,
link by link, and step by step,
sharpen the knives that you kept safe,
stick them in my breast and in my hand,
like a river of sparkling gold,
like a river of buried tigers,
and let me weep, hours, days, years,
blind ages, stellar centuries.

Give me the silence, the water, the hope.

Give me the struggle, the iron, the volcanoes.

Hang your bodies on me like magnets.

Rush to my veins and to my mouth.

Speak through my words and in my blood.

—translated by André Spears

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