

## ODE TO PABLO NERUDA BY OLIVE SENIOR

1

You did say:

*Don't call up my person  
I am absent.*

But your signs are still decipherable in the pure stone,  
in water, in the palm-prints of the labourer. And by those  
who like me seek the pure voice untrammelled, the courage  
to speak of things nobler than the self, to write impure poetry  
that bears witness to the raw and the natural, to be *the voice from the bottom of  
the well.*

I want to pay homage but here in the north,  
separated by a continent from Santiago, Isla Negra,  
or my own island home, so far from the sea I can't strike  
the right chord; the measure that I tread moves no one else.  
I find myself drifting and wordless.

So I turn to find again something you said  
about grasping poetry like thread?  
Here it is:

*You must spin it  
fly a thread  
and climb it . . .*

*This isn't a matter  
for deliberation  
it's an order.*

But away from the elements of which my life has been spun  
I can't even remember what the knot stands for  
that I'm feeling in the thread that fills my hand now.  
The thread tying up the bundle of How-It-Was. The thread  
that I cling to though you've said poetry is of the here-and-now *revived by the  
light of each new day.*

\* *Neruda's words are in italics*

The here-and-now eludes me and I worry about clinging too tightly to this thread. For what happens if it becomes too knotted to decipher, too clotted with blood, with mud from the traveller, too broken to tie again, too ravelled, too threadbare?

What if you use it all up – for a clothesline that breaks, for a leash the dog runs off with? What if there's no thread left? And no more where it came from? There, I've said it. What if you confidently go to bed leaving a spindle of new thoughts to be processed. Next morning you reach for the thread and it's gone like smoke – It's cobweb you're left with.

So Pablo Neruda, although I absolutely agree with many things you have said this thing with the thread I find a bit slippery as if you'd reeled it off without thinking and simply disappeared leaving in the blue this monstrous kite

and me  
the one  
holding  
the string.

2

This thread of poetry: Where does it come from?  
Are you born with it? Is it handed to you like a sweet  
or a rattle to a child, who takes it without thinking?  
As I took your kite string?

Here's how I see it: This thread is one that crosses your path like the spider's web. You walk through unaware  
The Great Spider still clings to it. So now Spider clings to you, my friend. This is not an accident. You have been chosen Spider's apprentice. To master language. As Trickster, to spin and weave tales. To prophesy and heal.

The go-between serving earth and sky. Sometimes the messenger left dangling.

After you have taken the thread – the thread you cannot refuse – you must choose how to handle it. You might cut off bits to skip rope with or play cat's cradle. That's fine for joy needs to unwind. But there comes a time when you might be forced to confess: I don't know what I did with the rest of it.

For one day – it's like that scenario that tantalizes in our nightmares, only this one is real – one day, you are caught in a dragnet. After your arrest you are brought to account before some tribunal that will throw the book at you charging you with theft.

Of what? You will ask. And Neruda will reply: For not repaying your debt of poetry to the people who forged you your good life with their blood and their sweat.

All you had to do was weave the thread

*into cloth*

*for those who have*

*only rags,*

*nets*

*for fishermen . . .*

*and a flag*

*for each and every one.*

You may plead Not Guilty. But perhaps you have already been weighed and found wanting:

*There are some poets so big*

*they don't fit in doorways*

*and some merchants so sharp*

*they don't remember being poor.*

If found unconvincing you'll be disconnected, cast away. Alone, you're left knotted up and wordless.

Here's the real trick (and no one ever tells you this):  
The thread of poetry to safely travel, the knot of yourself  
you must first unravel.

*You have to bathe in your own grave  
and from the enclosing earth  
take a look upward at your pride....  
Then, you learn to measure  
You learn to speak, You learn to be.*

Stripped  
and skeletal  
you first  
navigate  
the crawl-space  
that allows you  
to enter  
the labyrinth

blindly  
you must  
trace every inch  
of the root's meander  
the convolutions  
of the vine  
the veined stem

you must take the measure  
of the thread born from root  
reed stem or fleshy leaf

the thread purged of sap or resin  
retted  
scourged and riven  
to expose its gut.

Immersed  
in water  
to cast off

impurities

its fibrous heart  
elucidated

its old skin shed

you'll  
encounter

the thread

born again

as sinews of rope  
its tensile strength  
corded

The thread that can now  
be woven  
into strong linen

Like jute fibre  
meshed into string

Or like reeds, criss-crossed  
into sound centered  
at the cross-roads  
where the crack  
of the whip now  
deflects evil forces  
clears a path.

If you find yourself  
back here  
You have mastered  
the first trick.

You

can make your way  
through the needle's eye  
pulled up  
by the thread  
of your poem

dragged down  
by the weight  
of words  
waiting  
to be strung.

The real apprenticeship  
has begun.

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So this knot that I've been feeling, this pearl of anxiety  
I'll make part of this rosary of the Alpha and Omega  
which could serve as the necklace for Brahma  
for Buddha Muhammed the Virgin Mary for Oya.

But really it need not be more than my simple mnemonic  
to remind of that journey I myself took long ago through the  
roots through the vines. The songs of the heartwood, the calligraphy of the veins  
of the leaves almost lost in my meanderings.

I needed, Neruda, this kite-string to jerk me back to the  
source of creation, to that mantra of obligation

A chain-link of miles strung out across oceans  
a creole spider-work of many hands.

The beads telling not decades but centuries.

Like this strand of those ancestors handed a one-way  
passage to the clearing-house for the convict, the criminal  
and cut-throat, the patriot and the rebel,  
the pious pilgrim, the debtor, the poor, the downtrodden,  
the foolish, the brave heart, the no-hope younger son.

A lifeline to the plantations – the only one other than swinging  
as seaman, as buccaneer, as pirate from the rigging, the  
yard-arm, the gallows.

Here's a bead  
for the spirit necklace  
of that other lineage.  
The ones bound in chains  
dragged across the Atlantic  
in vessels, full-rigged.  
Their vocal chords ripped  
with their names  
on the tips of their tongues.  
Washed away in salt water  
the cartography of home.

Survivors of these crossings transplanted shoots, planted  
their children's navel cords to become  
the roots and the vines for my string.

And a special bead  
for a few I never knew:  
the ones who flew  
the ones who didn't touch salt  
so stayed fluid as air  
light as the web of the spider.  
Flew back on the wings  
that they wove from obligation  
pulled by the strings  
of ancestral desire.

But the ones that will never die out are too gelatinous  
to be strung, being seaweed themselves like floating  
sargassos on the currents of life. Spirit pirates with no roots  
of their own. The same ones who forged the chains of  
indenture, brokered sugar cane sweetened with slave blood. Their tentacles still  
as far-reaching and fatal as the entanglements of the constrictor of vegetal  
growth: the  
Strangler Fig.

So much more unstated as my legacy. Not found in my blood but possessing me. The fibres of belonging to this world.

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I've had to weave a cloth to wrap it all up in, a bundle for carrying for I'm travelling too. But not flying – too much salt in my veins.

I've been seeking a thread to tie up the bundle which has been growing unwieldy with the cries and the whispers of the ones I can't name: The lost ones, the limboed, the un-cared for, the un-loved. The mortified, the discarded, the "disappeared". All resting uneasy on my conscience. Along with the poems I failed to deliver or neglected to write and not saying: "I love you" enough.

Yes, we each have our measure, and our burden to carry but sometimes the cries are so piercing, we are silenced.

And  
there  
are  
times  
like this  
when  
having  
crossed  
the abyss  
I want  
to feel  
free  
to fly  
kites  
if I wish  
or just  
dangle  
from



a thread  
like  
the  
spider.

So I'm seeking that old woman, the wizard of the cords who used to tie up the wind with three knots in a bundle and sell it to sailors: "Mark well, my good man. Loosen this knot for light breezes, this one to send you clipping along and this – woe betide – for a battering."

Yes, I let loose the hurricane. And I'm sorry about the damage but I forgot which knot was which – that's the problem with raw thread it – all looks the same. But my hurricane heart feels better for its roaring, for scouring the world. For it's the strong wind that cleanses, that unburdens and purifies. It uplifted the fallen. And broke the thread. But I'll mend it and restring with fresh beads.

6

I wanted more than woman's knotted portion so I refused to learn the way of thread: sewing, embroidery, darning, weaving, tapestry, knitting or crochet do not appear on my CV.

But look at this:

In the sky  
a kite  
still aloft  
and the one  
holding  
the thread  
is me.

Maybe I'll accept after all my commission as apprentice Spider who spins from her  
gut the threads for flying,  
for tying up words that spilled, hanging out tales long  
unspoken, reeling in songs, casting off dances.  
And perhaps for binding up wounds?

With strips and remnants left over (and with bits and pieces  
of this kite I'm reeling in) I can make a costume for the  
dancing fools the masqueraders who dress in rags and tatters

Egungun  
Jonkonnu  
Pitchy-Patchy  
Pierrot and Gombay

the ones who dance the ancestors.

Perhaps when they dance they'll let the wind spin their strips  
and their tatters into thread flying ready to be climbed.

Or feather them into birds on the ascendant, their wings  
lightly stirring up the ocean below the Middle Passage.

Perhaps they'll spin off into rainbow-hued streamers  
plummeting the spaces of Earth into which all those  
millions "disappeared"

Awaking and setting free the dreamers.

For sometimes

*It's hard to tell  
if we close our eyes or if night  
opens in us other starred eyes,  
if it burrows into the wall of our dream  
till some door opens.*

And so, my trickster powers evolving, I'm learning like you,

Pablo Neruda veteran tightrope walker, to swing more easily *between joy and obligation*.

Here it is: this poem I've made for you like a quilt from thread and strips as a way of thanking you – not for all your other gifts (for that would require a book) – but simply in exchange for your kite which – as you have seen – I've turned to good use.

And for allowing me to explore boundlessness.

For witnessing how the thread of poetry can serve for binding up and for un-binding. And for the bounty of these lines which have unwound themselves

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“God is dead” wrote Nietzsche.

“Heaven is empty”

wrote Kandinsky,

“God is dead”.

You, Pablo Neruda,  
saw instead

*The heavens  
unfastened  
and open.*