

## 55. *Memoirs* by Pablo Neruda

*Memoirs* by Pablo Neruda, the Nobel-Prize-winning poet, is a loosely chronological, autobiographical journal, mostly composed of observations and commentary, not thorough, nor factual, perhaps not even sensible. Neruda can become tedious when he decides to tell the reader what he thinks the reader should know. But when he abandons messages and loses himself in the writing, *Memoirs* is too rich to eat in big servings.

The book has many flavors, but they do not blend: the man who owned a Stradivarius so beautiful he would not allow it to be played, even taking the violin into his coffin . . . the panther with eyes like yellow knives . . . the search for rich, white vellum and the feel of wicker . . . stairways . . . hairy spiders? Neruda writes, “The closest thing to poetry is a loaf of bread or a ceramic dish or a piece of wood lovingly carved, even if by clumsy hands.” How easy! Poetry must be everywhere, and we must all be poets.

The section, “My First Poem,” is typical of the others and, certainly, does not start with Neruda’s first poem. Neruda begins with the brutal hunting of swans, poor flyers, clumsy, easily caught and killed with sticks. He recalls a battered swan he tended for twenty days when he was a child. Even though the swan was almost his size, Neruda carried him in his arms down to the river every day until he “found out that swans don’t sing when they die.” Half of a page, then Neruda writes of eating green plums dipped in salt . . . of writing poems in his math notebook . . . of catching bumblebees in his handkerchief . . . of reading books about breadfruit and Malaysia . . . of a day when he finally “set down a few words . . . different from everyday language” . . . Poetry?

When did Neruda write that first poem? The day he handed his stepmother a neatly-written poem? Or the day a swan died in his arms?

And what is to be made of the following passage:

You can say anything you want, yes sir, but it's the words that sing, they soar and descend . . . I bow to them . . . I cling to them, I run them down, I bite into them . . . I love words so much . . . The ones I wait for greedily. . .they glitter like colored stones, they leap like silver fish, they are foam, thread, metal, dew . . . I stalk certain words . . . They are so beautiful that I want to fit them all into my poem . . . I catch them in midflight, as they buzz past, I trap them, clean them, peel them, I set myself in front of the dish, they have a crystalline texture to me, vibrant, ivory, vegetable, oily, like fruit, like algae, like agates, like olives . . . And I stir them, I shake them, I drink them, I gulp them down, I mash them, I garnish them . . . I leave them in my poem like stalactites, like slivers of polished wood, like coals, like pickings from a shipwreck, gifts from the waves . . . Everything exists in the word.

Whether writing about familiar friends or famous people, his native Chilean cities or foreign places he visited as a diplomat, Neruda's memories are intensely lyrical. No foreign city is more beguiling than his beloved Valparaiso, "secretive, sinuous, winding," where every hill has a "profound" name and the stairways that spill down those hills are "shed like petals." With "his reedy, almost childish voice," Fidel Castro seems "but an overgrown boy whose legs had suddenly shot up before he had lost his kid's face and his scanty adolescent's beard." After Neruda's generous friend Alberto Rojas had given away his material belongings, he "would jot down a line from a poem on a scrap of paper" and offer it "as if he were putting a priceless jewel in your hand."

Each exotic city becomes an eccentric friend, and the famous become equally as familiar as Neruda's friends. Every memory he shares with us reveals a poetic sensitivity, a magical juxtaposition of the mundane and the mysterious. *Memoirs* is a book to pick up for minutes and think about for hours. Few books make it so easy to see the poetry in our own lives, to turn so satisfyingly to our own memoirs, to hunt so eagerly for our own pens and paper.

What was Neruda's first poem? He never tells us.