Two Odes by Pablo Neruda  
Translated by Martín Espada  
NTM 2016

Today we’re excited to bring you two odes by Pablo Neruda in beautiful translations by Martín Espada. Neruda published three collections of odes, aiming to praise the simple objects and find beauty in unexpected places. But make no mistake: Ode to the Chair is in fact an anti-war poem, while Ode to Walt Whitman is a song in praise for the simple man. Espada is a master of language and he delights in the playfulness and verve of these poems. Enjoy.  
—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman

Ode to the Chair

A chair in the jungle:  
a sacred tree-trunk creaks  
beneath the tough lianas,  
the climbing vines rise up,  
blood-stained beasts  
howl from the shadows,  
big leaves fall from the green sky,  
the serpent shakes  
his dry rattles,  
a bird crosses the foliage  
like an arrow fired at a flag,  
the branches raise their violins,  
the insects  
perched on their flowers  
pray motionlessly,  
our feet sink  
in  
the black seaweed  
of a jungle sea,  
the fallen clouds of the jungle,  
and all I ask  
for the foreigner,  
for the desperate explorer,  
is a chair  
from the tree of chairs,  
a plush and disheveled  
throne,  
the velvet of a big easychair  
devoured by climbing vines.  
Yes,  
a chair that loves the universe
for the man who walks and walks,  
a solid  
 foundation,  
 the supreme  
 dignity  
 of rest!

Get back, you thirsty tigers,  
you throngs of bloody flies,  
get back, you black underbrush  
of ghostly leaves,  
get back, you deep waters,  
you iron leaves,  
you eternal snakes,  
amid the thunderclaps  
there is a chair,  
for me, for all of us,  
a chair not only  
to relieve  
a fatigued body  
but  
for everything  
and everyone,  
for strength lost  
and contemplation found.

War is as wide as the dark jungle.  
Peace  
begins  
with  
a single  
chair.
Ode to Walt Whitman

I don’t know
at what age,
or where,
in the great wet South
or on the fearsome coast
beneath the brief
scream of the seagulls,
I touched a hand and it was
the hand of Walt Whitman:
I stepped on the earth
with bare feet
and walked across the grasslands,
across the firm dew
of Walt Whitman.

Through
all my early
years
that hand came with me,
that dew,
his solid fatherly pine,
his expanse of prairie,
his mission of circulating peace.

Without
disdain
for the gifts
of the earth,
the capital’s
abundant curves,
or the purple
initial
of wisdom,
you
taught me
to be an American,
you lifted my eyes
toward
the treasure
of the grain:
broad poet,
across the
clarity
of the plains,
you made me see
the high mountain
as my guardian.
Out of the subterranean
echo
you collected
everything
for me,
everything that grew,
you gathered the harvest
galloping through the alfalfa,
cut the poppies for me,
followed the rivers
to arrive in the kitchen
by afternoon.

But your shovel
brought more
than earth
to light;
you unearthed
humanity,
and the humiliated
slave
walked
with you, balancing
the black dignity of his stature,
conquering
joy.

You sent
a basket
of strawberries
to the stoker
down
in the boiler,
your verse
paid a visit
to every corner of your city
and that verse
was like a fragment
of your clean body,
like your own fisherman’s beard
or your legs of acacia in solemn stride.
Your shadow
of bard and nurse
moved among the soldiers,
the nocturnal caretaker
who knew
the sound
of dying breath
and waited with the dawn
for the absolutely silent
return
of life.

Good baker!
Elder first cousin
of my roots,
turret
of Chilean pine,
for
a
hundred
years
the wind has passed
over your growing grasslands
without
eroding your eyes.

These are new
and cruel years in your land:
persecution,
tears,
prison,
venomous weapons
and wrathful wars
have not crushed
the grass of your book,
the pulsing spring
of your fresh waters.
And oh!
those
who murdered
Lincoln
now
lie in his bed,
toppling
his chair
of fragrant wood
to raise a throne
spattered with blood and misfortune.

But
your voice
sings
in the train stations
on the edge of town,
your words
splash
like
dark water
across
the
loading docks
at night,
and your people,
white
and black,
poor
people,
simple
as all people
are simple,
do not forget
your bell:
they congregate singing
beneath
the magnitude
of your spacious life:
they walk among people
with your love
nurturing the pure evolution
of fraternidad across the earth.

About Martín Espada
Called by Sandra Cisneros “the Pablo Neruda of North American poets,” Martín Espada was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1957. He has published almost twenty books as a poet, editor, essayist and translator. His new collection of poems from Norton is called *Vivas to Those Who Have Failed* (2016). Other books of poems include *The Trouble Ball* (2011), *The Republic of Poetry* (2006), *Alabanza* (2003), *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell’s Kitchen* (2000), *Imagine the Angels of Bread* (1996), *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* (1993) and *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover’s Hands* (1990). His many honors include the Shelley Memorial Award, the Robert Creeley Award, the National Hispanic Cultural Center Literary Award, an American Book Award, the PEN/Revson Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship. *The Republic of Poetry* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The title poem of his collection *Alabanza*, about 9/11, has been widely anthologized and performed. His book of essays, *Zapata’s Disciple* (1998), was banned in Tucson as part of the Mexican-American Studies Program outlawed by the state of Arizona, and will be reissued in a new edition this fall. A former tenant lawyer in Greater Boston’s Latino community, Espada is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

**About Pablo Neruda**
Pablo Neruda was the pseudonym of Chilean poet Ricardo Neftali Reyes Basualto. He was born on July 12, 1904, in Parral, a little town in central Chile, but his family moved to Temuco City when he was just a few months old. It was there he showed interest in poetry and made his early works, and where he picked "Pablo Neruda" as a pseudonym because his father did not approve of his writing.

Neruda is considered one of the greatest Spanish-language poets of the 20th century. He wrote in a variety of styles such as erotically charged love poems as in his collection *Twenty Poems of Love and a Song of Despair*, surrealist poems, historical epics, and overtly political manifestos.

Neruda was also known as an outspoken Communist. During his lifetime, Neruda occupied many diplomatic positions and served a stint as a senator for the Chilean Communist Party. He was the honorary Chilean consul in Burma, Ceylon, Java, Singapore, Buenos Aires, Barcelona, and Madrid. In 1943 he returned to Chile but left in 1949 because Chilean President Gabriel Gonzalez Videla outlawed communism in Chile in 1948 and issued a warrant for Neruda's arrest. From 1949-1952, Neruda lived in exile in different European countries.

Pablo Neruda won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971. He died in Santiago, Chile, on September 23, 1973, a few days after the military coup in which his friend Salvador Allende, the first socialist to have been democratically elected in Latin America, was toppled and later murdered.