

From “Hurricane Neruda”

Pedro Mir

Translated by Jonathan Cohen

Pedro Mir (1913–2000) is considered the Dominican Republic’s foremost literary figure of the twentieth century. Since publishing his first poems in 1937, he sought through literature to place the Caribbean experience in a global historical perspective. He went into exile in 1947 as he had become the subject of mounting suspicions by the Trujillo dictatorship. When he returned fifteen years later, following the death of the dictator, the poet immediately won the hearts of the Dominican people, and his poetry readings were mass public events attended by enthusiastic crowds of citizens from every walk of life.

In 1982 the legislature of the Dominican Congress conferred upon Mir the title of National Poet, and in 1993 he received the National Prize for Literature, the highest honor a literary artist can receive in the Dominican Republic. On the occasion of Mir’s death, the president of the Dominican Republic declared three days of national mourning and celebrated the poet’s memory and his work: “[Don Pedro] will always be with us because his thinking was transcendent, and he truly fathomed the national Dominican soul.”

El Huracán Neruda won the Annual Poetry Award given by the Secretary of Education of the Dominican Republic in 1975, the year of the poem’s original publication. This “Elegy with a Song of Despair” was written in response to the death of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (1904–73) and the military dictatorship that followed the assassination of the democratically elected president of Chile, Salvador Allende, which occurred twelve days before the poet’s death. The poem is modeled in part on Neruda’s tribute to Simón Bolívar, “A Song for Bolívar,” the source of its epigraph (adapted by Mir): “The bolívar roar over / Bolívar Volcano.”

Jonathan Cohen is an award-winning translator of Latin American poetry and scholar of inter-American literature. In addition to Mir, he has translated Ernesto Cardenal, Enrique Lihn, and Roque Dalton, among others.

He is the translator (with Donald D. Walsh) of Mir's Countersong to Walt Whitman and Other Poems, originally published in 1993 by Azul Editions, and republished this year by Peepal Tree Press.

1

A lot of time has passed over Neruda Volcano
as the fevered ranting has over the neruda quake
and the sleeping lava from the neruda eruption
over the din of the imposing neruda situation.

Everything is asleep, Father. The velvet is
dead asleep on the oldest pianos' ivory keys.

There's a lady named Luisa from her brown
eyes to the sound of her hair, from her voice
like a needle to the knotted end of a thread
where a little boy sleeps. The delicate dawn
rocks in her glance and slides across her hand,
rolls bleeding, falls to the ground and all at once
we are faced with the rising Hurricane Neruda,
the neruda gust and neruda whirlwind and
neruda
gale force,
 recreated by the grave
explosion of the infernal neruda dismay.

2

What's happened, Father? Suddenly everything disturbs us.
Everything, even the water itself has become unbearable.
The water lilies in the city's aqueducts, which
not long ago brought clouds to their brows and
thought calmly about tubers and sponges,
have all at once become reckless.

 It is now known
that several cascades have fallen asleep in the woods.
That adolescent waters have spent the night naked
in the streets.

 And that steam turbines have turned
and returned the water to its former clouds.
 And as well

that freshly washed sheets are drying sooner than
expected.

And no doubt the same fate
has been met by sweat drops, oranges and mirrors . . .

What's happened, Father? Everything is dead. Everything
is deranged. Everything flooded. The neruda
snail in the vastness of neruda seas.
Captain Neruda in the breakers of a neruda
archipelago.

And everything neruda burning in the essential wood
of that night lit up with neruda emotion:

Tonight I want to write the saddest lines . . .

And suddenly the celestial roar in the neruda firmament.
Neruda amid the stars of the infernal neruda derangement.

3

What's happened, true Father of the hurricane
and the volcano and modern lava? What's happened
to the ivory and the velvet of old pianos
and to the breakers of archipelagos?

4

The story is very simple.

The neruda
evidence found on mountain sides
and at times in river sand.
Neruda traces in the highest layers
of the atmosphere and in the bones
of some insatiable individuals
have revealed the conclusive link
between the people and the reins of dawn.

A fortunate discovery capable of
emancipating infinite regions
of the oceans and deserts
and above all eliminating night
and the eclipses of poppies.

And that's all. And it has been enough

for everything. Since everything got flooded.
Everything denied and drowned.

Because it has been dawn and not metal
that is tearing the people apart in their mills.
It's just the people themselves in a neruda
situation. Or in other words the very people
in a dawn situation.

And so it's told
in countless ballads all around the world
and it appears in nursery rhymes:

.....

9

And when the copious fermenting fruit
fills the wooden vat and the smiling girl
emerges from it—and in the tassels

of sugarcane fields, drop by drop
sweat is distilled—from the people's
throat comes their clearest note

that reaches Latin America and sings.
And all of a sudden Hurricane Neruda
arises from the neruda whirlwind.

And in Southeast Asia the sharp
contradiction shatters history
and in neruda night neruda sun:

triumph in life and glory in death.
And in Europe a sowing of guns
with a neruda carnation on victory day.

My heart and the heart of thousands
of hearts believe in your poetry,
our Father who keeps an eye on Chiles

now and in the future. Poetry,
your poetry, announced that Captain
Bolívar, the people's captain, would return

every hundred years with Hurricane
Neruda whirling around his head, and here are
a hundred years of Chile and your death.

Another two centuries will pass as well.
If not it's because tonight the whole world
keeps coming back to your death, amen.

From the farthest tip of the blade,
from the copper mines and molten
iron in the crucible and the first

of the metals and then silver,
passing the manganese and bauxite,
a belt of hands grows long

and gathers in your exact violence,
and conveys in human terms
the diplomacy of dynamite.

And on all the roads your hands
emerge and open to a better world.
And amid the tassels and future grains

and sweating hands and sweat,
there's a Chile that turns to cataclysm
and a Chile that returns to splendor.

A more neruda Chile in the abyss,
more Chilean in fervor and more neruda
and universal than the universe itself,

under the grey neruda consternation.
And all of a sudden firm Hurricane
Neruda sets off a neruda blast of air
and the Captain is back, singing.