

Jonathan Cohen

Introducing Waldeen's Neruda

Waldeen von Falkenstein (1913–1993)—known professionally by her first name alone—achieved fame during her lifetime as the founder of modern dance in Mexico during the 1940s. She has yet to receive the recognition she deserves for her work as a translator of Pablo Neruda's poetry into English. Her translations from his epic *Canto General*, published in the early 1950s, introduced Neruda and his image-driven poetics to many of the generation of post–Second World War poets, in particular those looking for alternatives to the prevailing formalist mode of verse.

Waldeen and Neruda became friends in Mexico City when he was there as Chile's consul general (1940–1943). She translated poems that formed part of *Canto General*. He was so deeply moved by her translations that he told her: "Waldeen, thank you, for your poems of my poems, which are better than mine." He gave her his formal permission to translate the entire epic. An astute observer, Neruda recognized the challenge of translating his poetry into English, saying that translators of it succeeded in conveying its meaning but not its atmosphere.

Waldeen, however, succeeded at conveying both meaning and atmosphere in her Neruda translations. A poet in her own right as well as a dancer and choreographer, she understood the essential relationship between poetry and music and their common root in dance. This was her secret. Although Waldeen translated about one third of *Canto General*, she published only a few of her translations. The aesthetics of the New Criticism and the politics of the Cold War conspired during the 1950s to block her Neruda from gaining a wide readership here in the North.

A couple of years before Waldeen died in Mexico, where she had lived most of her life (she grew up in California), she sent me her unpublished translations. At that time, I tried to publish them on her behalf, but magazines rejected my many attempts, telling me variations of “We have already done so much Neruda” and “Waldeen *Who?*” I recently opened the drawer where I had put these translations and, after reading them again, was moved by their beauty to try once more. This time with better luck.

Can we have too much poetry by Neruda? Absolutely not. At his best, it is poetry at its best. Especially when the translator, unlike many of his translators, renders him in a way that is true to his Spanish—to the lush imagery and music of it, and to the dance of the language. Here is Waldeen’s Neruda, his “Coming of the Birds,” from the opening section of *Canto General* titled “Lamp in the Earth,” in which the poet celebrates the creation of South America.

Pablo Neruda

Coming of the Birds

Translated from Spanish by Waldeen

All was flight on our earth.
Like drops of blood and feathers
the cardinals bled
the dawn of Anáhuac.
The toucan was an adorable
casket of lacquered fruit,
the hummingbird retained
sparks of the first lightning
and its diminutive bonfires
blazed in the motionless air.

Illustrious parrots filled
the leafy forest
like green-gold ingots
newly cast from the clay
of sunken swamps,
and from their circular eyes
stared a yellow ring,
ancient as minerals.
All the eagles of heaven
nurtured their bloody lineage
in the populous sky,

and aloft on carnivorous wings
the condor soared above the world,
kingly assassin, solitary friar
of the sky, black talisman of the snow,
hurricane of falconry.

The engineering of the ovenbird
made out of fragrant clay
small resonant theaters
where he appeared, singing.

The *atajacaminos** emitted
his dank cry by the edge
of cavern pools.

The wild Araucanian pigeon
made stinging nests of nettles
where she placed her regal gift
of indigo-blue eggs.

The starling of the South,
sweet-smelling carpenter of autumn,
displayed her starry breast
in scarlet constellation,
and the austral song sparrow
tilted up its flute fresh
from the eternities of water.

Bedewed like a water lily
the flamingo opened wide its doors
of rose-hued cathedral,
and took flight like the dawn
far from the sultry wilderness
where hang the precious jewels
of the quetzal, who suddenly awakes,

* Nighthawk. —JC

stirs, glides and blazons,
its virgin live-coals on wing.

A marine mountain soars
toward the islands, a moon
of birds that flies Southward,
over the fermented islands
of Peru.

It is an alive river of shadows,
it is a comet of small
innumerable hearts
that darken the world's sun
like a dense-tailed morning star
pulsing toward the archipelago.

And at end of the wrathful sea,
in the ocean's downpour,
arise the wings of the albatross
like two systems of salt,
establishing with spacious hierarchy
in the silence
between torrential gales,
the order of solitude.