

# TALKING TO NERUDA'S QUESTIONS



**M T C Cronin**

***Also by M T C Cronin***

Zoetrope – we see us moving  
the world beyond the fig

Everything Holy

Mischief-Birds

Talking to Neruda's Questions

Bestseller

My Lover's Back ~ 79 Love Poems

The Confetti Stone and other poems

beautiful, unfinished – PARABLE/SONG/CANTO/POEM

< More or Less Than > 1-100

# **Talking to Neruda's Questions**

**M T C CRONIN**

**Shearsman Books**  
**Exeter**

Published in the United Kingdom in 2004 by  
Shearsman Books Ltd  
58 Velwell Road  
Exeter EX4 4LD

at

[http://www.shearsman.com/ebooks/ebooks\\_home.html](http://www.shearsman.com/ebooks/ebooks_home.html)

Copyright © M.T.C. Cronin, 2001.

The right of M.T.C. Cronin to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988. All rights reserved. Copies of this publication may be downloaded and stored on a computer, and may also be printed for the use of the reader. Commercial distribution and further copying of the text is prohibited without the prior permission of the author.

The cover shows the collection of bottles at Pablo Neruda's house, Isla Negra, Chile. Photograph by Tony Frazer. 1992.

### *Acknowledgements*

*Talking to Neruda's Questions* was first published as Stray Dog Edition No. 5 by Vagabond Press, Sydney, Australia. Some of the poems first appeared in *Hermes*, *Southerly* and *The Prague Review*. A bilingual Spanish/English version of the text will be published by SAFO, Santiago, in late 2004, with translations by Juan Garrido Salgado.

*Talking to Neruda's Questions* was written in response to William O'Daly's translation of Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions* (Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, WA., 1991)

I

Airplanes scatter their children like Hansel's crumbs  
and the sky is eaten by birds and leaves.

The yellow bird which is afraid of night  
has been filling its nest with the sun's lemons.

Helicopters can be taught nothing,  
not even the difference between honey and sunlight...

This night, on the threshold of a thin hour,  
the full moon has left its sack of flour.

## II

If you have died and don't know it  
ask the time of a pregnant clock.

France, in spring, gets its leaves  
from the cinema.

The blind man who is pursued by bees  
should make his home of quiet wood.

If yellow runs out  
we shall make bread from laughter.

### III

I tell you, the rose is neither naked nor dressed  
but is un-dressed only by the human heart.

Trees conceal their great roots  
because they must grow.

Only the newest road hears  
the regrets of the thieving automobile.

Is there anything in the world sadder  
than a train standing in the rain? A mother.

#### IV

In heaven there is a church for every hope  
and for every hope not filled, there is a church.

The shark does not attack the sirens  
because they too want warmth.

Yes, smoke talks with clouds  
but does it always whisper?

If our desires must be watered with dew  
it is true we want tomorrow.



## V

When the turtle told the camel  
it guarded oranges beneath its shell

the camel's own hump quivered  
with five kinds of fruit.

A pear tree has more leaves than books ever written  
but less than books never written.

Leaves commit suicide when they feel yellow  
because they have only metaphoric eyes to see the sun.

## VI

The hat of night flies full of holes  
because the dark juggles the light.

Passing near the fire old ash whispers  
'My father's hands'.

Clouds cry and grow happy  
when they see the river smile.

At eclipse the pistils of the sun  
burn for the mind's eye.

There are enough bees in a day  
for a week.

## VII

Peace belongs to an infinity of doves.  
War is waged by one leopard's spot.

The professor teaches the geography of death  
so that dirt has emotion.

Swallows who are late for school  
are asked for a reason.

Across the sky they scatter  
letters of all forgotten words.

## VIII

Sleeping upsets volcanoes.

Christopher Columbus could not discover Spain  
because he was dreaming of the Spanish.

A cat has as many questions as you would  
if you had nine lives.

Tears as yet unspilled  
do not wait to become tears

but join the seven seas  
unseparated from the eye of their maker.

## IX

The sun's fire is always the same as yesterday's  
but different to tomorrow's.

We thank the clouds for their fleeting abundance  
when we resemble all things.

The thundercloud comes from  
its black sacks of tears.

How can you ask where are the names  
sweet as the cakes of yesteryear?

They have gone behind the lips  
of those who have ceased to speak them.

X

In a hundred years the Polish  
will think my hat was of some comfort to me.

Who never touched your blood  
will say your poetry is like bubbles bursting.

With an invisible finger  
we measure the foam that slips from beer.

Imprisoned in one of Petrarch's sonnets  
a fly lives the life of a lion.

## XI

When speaking after us, others speak  
for the time it takes all words to live and die.

José Martí would say the pedagogue Marinello  
wears two shoes.

November is the same age  
as the gap between the scorpion and the centaur.

With its yellow money  
autumn is paying for the consequences of television.

The cocktail of lightning bolts and vodka  
left its name for safekeeping with the deaf, dumb and blind.

## XII

The infinite white smile of rice  
is for the simile and its lovely job.

In the darkest ages they write with invisible ink  
because no-one sees.

The beauty from Caracas knows  
the rose has skirts for every occasion.

The fleas and literary sergeants bite you  
because they are starved of salt.



### XIII

Voluptuous crocodiles live only in Australia  
because there the lovely rivers run after life.

In the orange tree, with no thought to numbers,  
the oranges divide up sunlight.

Salt's teeth came from a wise mouth  
bitter once and aware of the sweet.

It may be a black condor at dark over your country,  
or it might be night shifting its perspective on the world.

#### XIV

At the juice of the pomegranates  
the rubies said 'We melt'.

Thursday does not consider coming after Friday  
because it is too sad to plan.

The whale shouted with glee  
when the colour blue was born.

When violets appear the earth grieves  
it has given its wildness up to death.

XV

It is true that vests are preparing to revolt  
and also that smocks are apolitical.

Again and again spring offers its green clothes  
for all the right reasons.

Agriculture laughs at the pale tears of the sky  
because the sky's tears are never sorrowful.

The abandoned bicycle did the cha cha  
to win its freedom.

## XVI

Salt and sugar build white towers  
from excavations from the body and earth.

Dreams are not a duty in an anthill  
but fantasies are only permitted if performed efficiently.

In autumn, the earth meditates  
on landscapes of the cerebral cortex.

(Let us give a medal to the first gold leaf  
and a rose petal pillow for the bed of the last.)

## XVII

Autumn is like a yellow cow  
slow from a fat summer.

Later the bony hand of its dark skeleton  
will wave to the new winter

which has collected its layers of blue  
with abandoned brushes

left by painters who have rushed outdoors  
to beg the spring for its kingdom of air.

## XVIII

Basalt from the mine taught the grapes  
the cluster's party line.

To let run to seed or to do the picking: which is harder  
depends on the beauty and wildness of what grows.

Hell we can only create imperfectly  
but we need it for our stories.

Like those told year in, year out  
of politicians whose bums we'd like over the brazier.

Not to mention the single flower that grows  
after every bomb has been dropped.

## XIX

They have counted the gold in the cornfields  
and have measured it against the gold in the sun.

If, at midday, the mist in Patagonia is green  
what colour is it when the clocks stop?

In the deepest water of the abandoned lagoon  
the shore sings its memory songs.

As it is murdered the watermelon laughs  
at the last edge of the knife (and at poetry!).

XX

Amber contains the tears of the sirens  
but only those that came with laughter.

The flower that flies from bird to bird  
has a name you cannot find the scent of.

Isn't it better, just never?

Cheese performed its heroic deeds in France  
because there the grapes quivered like maidens on the vine.



## XXI

It was in Venezuela that light was forged  
and also there that garlic told its first rumour.

The centre of the sea is in the same place as what you now think.  
Waves do not go there because they cannot match its strength.

The meteor was a dove of amethyst  
that hatched from an ancient storm.

You are allowed to ask your book  
anything you have not written in it.

XXII

His love has gone to find hers  
and hers, well it has gone to find his.

Tomorrow, my eyes, I'll tell you,  
we shall see each other in the clarity of today.

When you change the landscape you do it not with your hands  
bare or gloved, but with the sticky fingers of a large peach.

When the blue of water sings  
the rumour of the sky smells like the earth's marketplace.

### XXIII

Sometimes when the butterfly transmogrifies it turns  
into a flying fish; at others, a broken-off piece of sky.

It wasn't true that God lived on the moon  
but a short holiday was had there by a very old friend.

The scent of the blue weeping violets  
is the colour of my eyelids on Sunday city afternoons.

There are as many weeks in a day and years in a month  
as there are minutes in my fingers and hours in my toes.

## XXIV

4 is the same 4 for everybody and all sevens are equal;  
zero – or O – however, is somewhat of a sticking point...

My light and the convict's light  
travel(s) the same but shine(s) differently.

For the diseased,  
April is the same colour as the closest thing to hand.

The occidental monarchy with stones in its boots  
will fly flags of poppies.

XXV

The grove undressed itself for the snow  
because snow has the softest blanket.

Which is God among the Gods of Calcutta?  
The God that spells itself the same.

Silkworms live raggedly  
because they know the limits of immortality.

The sweetness of the heart of the cherry  
is hard because there are many days to live

and hard  
because there are even more to die.

XXVI

That solemn senator  
who dedicated a castle to you

has devoured with his nephew the assassin's cake.  
But they have both also just gone to the hospital.

With its fragrance of lemons the magnolia (on her pubis)  
fools the camembert with its scent of semen.

When it lies down on a cloud  
the eagle leaves its dagger on the mountain's sideboard.

## XXVII

The trains that lost their way did not die of shame  
but of loyalty (like Wilde's swallow).

They who float too far above the ground  
have never seen bitter aloe.

The eyes of comrade Paul Éluard  
were planted on our backs.

There they cut with the thorns of the rosebush  
to remind us of friendship.

## XXVIII

Old people do not remember debts and burns  
because they are busy remembering death.

The scent of the surprised maiden was as real  
as your determination of surprise.

The poor don't understand as soon as they stop  
being poor, because the rich don't understand.

The bell that will ring in your dreams can be found  
in the cage that holds the sound of a bell.



## XXIX

In round metres, between the sun and the oranges,  
the distance is the thickness of my tongue.

The first child awake stirs the sun  
when it falls asleep on its burning bed.

Yes, the earth sings like a cricket in the music of the heavens –  
and it also dies like a cricket on a concrete path.

Sadness might be thick and melancholy thin,  
but happiness is plump if left to feed unnoticed.

XXX

When he wrote his blue book Rubén Darío was green  
but he was that bluey-green (or greeny-blue?) that people argue about.

And if Rimbaud was scarlet  
and Góngora a shade of violet

and Victor Hugo tricoloured and you, Neruda, yellow ribbons,  
what colour am I?

Memories of the poor do huddle together in villages  
but occasionally wander to become lost in times of flood or drought.

The rich keep their dreams in a box carved from minerals  
but it has a lid so heavy that it can never be opened.

XXXI

You should ask the person in your dreams who looks like you  
what you came to make happen in this world.

You cannot be still and move when you do not want  
because the world is not and is you.

You roll without wheels  
and fly without wings or feathers

and migrate even though your bones live at home  
because the mysteries exonerate not one of us.

XXXII

To be called MTC Cronin might be sillier than Pablo Neruda.  
Or is that just pretentious?

Yes, there is a cloud-collector in the Colombian sky.  
He is the brother of the girl who guards the fountains.

Assemblies of umbrellas always occur in London  
because it is a city of elbows and fingers.

The Queen of Sheba  
had blood the colour of her lover's lips.

When Baudelaire wept  
his tears cleft like mercury.

### XXXIII

The sun is a bad companion  
to the traveller in the desert

and is congenial in the hospital garden  
because the sun too, has moods.

They may be birdfish in the nets of moonlight  
and fishbirds on the silver hooks cast by stars.

I do not know if it was where they lost you that you found yourself  
but it was where you lost them that you first lost yourself.

#### XXXIV

With the virtues you forgot you could sew a new suit,  
bake a good cake and throw a party for all those you ever insulted.

The best rivers left to flow in France  
because there they could hear the music of Germany.

It does not dawn in Bolivia after the night of Guevara  
because dawn is lost in the jungle

where the assassinated heart of the hero  
hides its sturdy beat from the children of assassins.

The black grapes of the desert have a thirst for tears  
but also a hunger for a desperate vision.

XXXV

Our life might be a tunnel between two vague clarities  
or it may be the smell of lettuce.

Our life might be a clarity between two dark triangles  
or it may be the crunch of lettuce.

Or life might be a fish prepared to be a bird  
or perhaps a lettuce prepared to be a salad.

Death might consist of non-being or of dangerous substances  
or it may be just eyelashes falling...

XXXVI

If death is an endless kitchen,  
life is a poky bathroom.

Your disintegrated bones will search  
not for your form, but for a dancing wind.

Your destruction will merge with another voice  
and light; the kinds that come through leaves.

Your worms, if not part of dogs or butterflies,  
will at least find their way to the most royal toad.



XXXVII

Czechoslovakians? Turtles? Born from your ashes?  
Why not the double helix of a poem?

Your mouth will kiss carnations with other lips  
and your heart will be a sparrow, unable to rest.

And if death comes from above or below  
still it rests in the crevice where your flesh meets the air.

From microbes, walls, wars and winter –  
it is sheltered by your body from all harm.

XXXVIII

I believe death lives inside a cherry's sun,  
as in every thing that speaks to me of life.

A kiss of spring can kill you  
and from the kiss of the killed spring is born.

Ahead, grief does not carry the flag of my destiny  
but it comes behind to sweep the smiles that slipped.

I discover a small skull resting inside one larger  
and hear the sounds of the herd.

XXXIX

I sense danger in the sea's laughter  
but am not moved by it.

I see a threat in the bloody silk of the poppy  
but see no reason for it.

I see that the apple tree flowers to die in the fruit  
but do not fear it.

I weep amongst laughter.  
I laugh in the oblivion we share.

XL

After its mission the ragged condor reports  
to the tree losing its bark.

The sadness of a solitary sheep  
is called tiredness.

If the doves learn to sing  
the dovecote can no longer hold their gentleness.

If the flies made honey  
the bees would go on a picnic with the ants.

## XLI

After he's moved to compassion  
the rhinoceros lasts as long as his shadow.

What's new for the leaves  
of recent spring? This barrenness.

In winter the leaves do not hide with the roots  
but with friendly animals whose thoughts will cause them to be born.

To be able to talk with the sky, the tree learned  
from the earth its roundness and then its uprightness.

## XLII

I don't know if he who is always waiting suffers more  
than he who has never waited, but for one joy comes easier.

The rainbow ends not in your soul nor on the horizon  
but in the storm around your eyes.

If heaven is for suicides an invisible star,  
the star seen is only a heartbeat away.

The vineyards of iron from where the meteor falls  
are microscopic; smaller even than the fillings in our teeth.

### XLIII

It was the lady of the forgotten idea  
who made love to you in your dream as you slept.

The things in dreams go not to the dreams of others  
but to the songs and moans of inanimate things.

The father who lives in your dreams does not die when you wake,  
but sits out the day in his old chair.

In dreams, plants blossom,  
but their solemn fruit that ripens tastes neither sour nor sweet.

#### XLIV

The child you were is waiting for you to catch up  
to the small person you will be at death.

He knows you never loved each other,  
that is why he remains only in occasional laughter.

You spent so much time growing up together  
because only what cleaves can be cleft.

You both did not die when your childhood died  
because to the child it is always a game.

Though your soul has fallen away your skeleton  
pursues you because you deserve a fright.



XLV

The yellow of the forest is not the same as last year's.  
Every year it grows more sad.

The black flight of the relentless sea bird  
repeats itself until all journeys have been made again.

Where space ends is called both death and infinity,  
but also sometimes a very funny place.

Sadnesses and memories together do not weigh  
as heavy on the belt as each alone.

XLVI

The name of the month between December  
and January is Little-Month-Without-Cares.

By the authority of the three-handed vintner  
they numbered the twelve grapes of the cluster.

We don't have longer months that last all year  
because the year likes to say itself.

Spring never deceived me with unblossoming kisses  
but once led me up the garden path.

XLVII

In the middle of autumn I hear yellow  
explosions and small brown sighs.

The rain weeps its joy for the balconies  
and windows and also weeps for the uncherished.

The birds undistracted by rooted plants  
lead the way when the flock takes flight.

From earthly beauty  
the hummingbird hangs its dazzling symmetry.

## XLVIII

The breasts of sirens are spiral shells  
and petrified waves

and the stationary play of the spume.  
But they give life to nothing but comparison.

The meadow is afire with wild fireflies  
and the air is ablaze with their hot breaths.

Autumn's hairdressers uncombed these chrysanthemums  
and gossiped the while about the red Californian saprophyte.

## XLIX

When you see the sea once more it will have seen  
what you were but not what you have become.

You and the waves ask each other the same questions  
because no other questions exist.

Waves waste their passion on the rock because they know  
the danger of heading off to sea with passion unspent.

They never tire of declaring to the sand  
their ebb and flow: *the blood of land and sea.*

L

The whore who is not a whore  
can convince the sea to be reasonable.

From demolishing blue amber, green granite,  
the sea gets toothpaste.

So many wrinkles and holes in the rock  
because the rock would give advice.

You came from behind the sea;  
when it cuts you off, head for that idea of yourself.

You closed the road and fell into the sea's trap  
because your cooperation is unnecessary.

LI

You hate cities smelling of women and urine  
because you are known by the womb.

The city is the great ocean of quaking mattresses  
and also the sea of minor complaints.

Oceania of the winds has islands, palm trees  
and unclassifiable films.

You returned to the indifference of the limitless ocean  
for a glimpse at your own divinity.

## LII

The black octopus that darkened the day's peace  
was as big as the messenger's bicycle tyre.

Its branches were iron and its eyes dead fire,  
but its body was made entirely of bad news.

The tricoloured whale cut you off on the road  
because your mother screamed until she lost her voice.



### LIII

Before your eyes, the infra-red film  
devoured a shark covered with pustules.

Both were guilty, the squall and the bloodstained fishes,  
but the pornographer was more so.

This continual breaking is not the order or the battle,  
but the story about how chaos was reached.

LIV

Swallows who have forgotten how to speak  
may settle on the moon.

With them they will carry spring, torn from the cornices,  
and wrapped in their beaks as if words.

They will take off in autumn  
and search the sky for its language

but find only bismuth  
and perpetual snow...

When they return to the balconies dusted with ash  
they will wake you with their lunar voice.

## LV

Moles and turtles aren't sent to the moon  
because a pyramid of them supports the earth.

And although they engineer hollows and tunnels,  
the distant inspections on the surface of the moon

would prove far too interesting  
for their steady dispositions.

LVI

Moonlight mixed with wishes  
is kept in dromedaries humps

and when sown in the desert  
it grows a glittering mirage.

And the sea lent to earth  
must be given back at Christmas

to the moon and its tides  
which are waiting up the chimney.

LVII

If we outlawed interplanetary kisses  
would we need a prison-cage of moonbeams?

And would a court of love  
try the kissers in their beds?

The platypus in its spacesuit  
could round up the offenders

and the horses in their quiet shoes  
could look for evidence on the moon.

LVIII

At night beat planets and horseshoes,  
but also the answers to my heart.

This morning you must choose between  
the naked sea's content and the sky's form.

The sky is dressed so early in its mists  
because night left late from her sheets.

In Isla Negra green truth awaited you.  
Decorum was its patience.

## LIX

You were not born mysterious because neither was I.  
You grew up without companions because we did not meet.

The first poem ordered you to tear down  
the doors of your pride.

Your last friend met went out to live for you  
when you were sleeping or sick.

Out there, where they did not forget you,  
the flag of again unfurled.

LX

In the courtroom of oblivion  
you will recognize one person's face.

The true picture of the future  
is obscured by your foot (and again if your foot is moved).

It is the brushstrokes of the grain seed  
among its yellow masses.

And the bony heart sent by the peach  
which is moved by the field's gold visions.



LXI

The living drop of mercury runs  
forever downward and forever...

Your sorrowful poetry will watch  
with eyes blackened by the fist of beauty.

When destroyed, you go on sleeping,  
your smell and pain will find another kettle of flesh.

LXII

To persist on the alley of death  
means we are not through with life's lessons.

In salt's desert it is possible to bloom  
if one gives up hope.

In the sea of nothing happens there are clothes to die in  
but nothing suitable for tea parties.

Now that the bones are gone  
their posture lives in the final dust.

### LXIII

The translation of their languages is arranged with the birds  
on the day of the week that does not exist.

To tell the turtle you are slower than he  
you must first spell calipash and calipee.

To ask the flea for his championship stats  
your mind must straddle the distance.

To tell the carnations you are grateful for their fragrance  
wash their scent in your warmest dreams.

## LXIV

Your faded clothes flutter like a flag  
because they know your story.

Of whom can you ask the questions:  
am I sometimes evil or am I always good?

Kindness and the mask of kindness are the same:  
the self-conscious has no authentic face.

If the rosebush of evil is white and flowers of goodness black,  
are red petals the lost smiles of the heartless?

The unsurprised assign numbers and names  
to the innumerable innocent.

LXV

The drop of metal shines like a syllable in your song  
and weights your blood with necessity.

The word *anything* slithers like a serpent:  
*any* curls; *thing* hisses.

Like an orange, the name of perpetuity  
crept into my heart.

Fish come from the river flowing behind our houses.  
From the word silversmithing flows women and an army.

Stowing too many vowels causes sailing ships to sink;  
too many consonants keeps navigators from stars.

LXVI

The o's of locomotive are enamoured  
of vengeance and fast-moving clouds.

In the language of no message  
rain falls over tormented cities.

At dawn, the ocean air repeats  
the smooth syllables of *rara avis*.

There isn't a star more wide open than the word *poppy*,  
but the star folder in which I keep my star opens wider than the sky.

If there were two fangs sharper than the syllables of *jackal*,  
they would bite the tongue of any who spoke a word.

LXVII

The syllabary may love, even kiss you,  
if you say its name with a voice of light.

Not a sepulchre or a sealed honeycomb,  
the dictionary is the hiding place of rescued ideas.

In the window that looks onto misgiving  
you remained watching buried time.

What you see from afar is simply the shadows  
of these hills you stand on.

## LXVIII

In the myths of the chrysalis  
the butterfly reads what flies written on its wings.

To understand its itinerary, the bee knows  
the letters of a sleeping alphabet.

With the numbers of the solar system  
the ant subtracts its dead soldiers.

When they stand still, cyclones are called  
by the same name as all great deaths.



LXIX

Thoughts of love fall into extinct volcanoes  
and of hate into disrepair.

A crater is not an act of vengeance nor a punishment  
of the earth, but a beautiful lack.

The rivers that never reach the sea  
go on speaking to the stars of a starless sky.

LXX

In hell, Hitler is forced  
to protect his anonymity.

He paints walls and cadavers  
and sniffs fumes of the dead;

he eats the ashes of children  
and drinks blood from a funnel;

hammered into his mouth  
are many pulled gold teeth; but mostly

he just sits forgotten on the chair  
just inside hell's door.

LXXI

At night he lies on a bed of barbed wire  
while his skin is tattooed for the lamps in hell

and his flesh is bitten by black mastiffs of flame,  
but he can never rest as night and day

he must travel with those he persecuted.  
And though eternally under the gas

he must die without dying, the oddest thing  
is that he cannot hear his own voice

and as hard as he tries  
catches no-one's attention.

## LXXII

Though all rivers are sweet  
the sea gets its salt from Neptune's tears.

The seasons know they must change their shirt  
because déjà vu reminds them.

Slow in winter because why give in and later  
with a rapid shudder because surrender is sweet.

Roots know they must climb towards light  
because they are intimate with fossils and god.

They greet the air with flowers and colours  
because the air has welcomed them home.

LXXIII

A human works harder on earth than the grain's sun  
because the human makes work even of himself.

The earth loves the fir tree and the poppy  
comparable to its love for caves and kittens.

Between the orchids and the wheat  
it favours the one whose beauty is useful.

The flower with opulence and wheat  
with its dirty gold because of words.

Autumn enters illegally  
with its lovers and dangerous plans.

LXXIV

It lingers in the branches until the leaves fall  
because the eye is unwelcome upon sadness.

Its yellow trousers are left hanging  
with all summer's bright questions.

Autumn waits for adultery  
in the trembling of a leaf

and for fluent readers  
of movements of the universe.

There is a magnet under the earth.  
It attracts the names of life.

At the birth of significance  
the appointment of the rose is decreed under the earth.