

César Vallejo

Ten Poems from *Poemas Humanos*, César Vallejo, translated by Clayton Esleman in *The Complete Poetry, César Vallejo, A Bilingual Edition*, University of California Press, 2007

GOOD SENSE

- There is, mother, a place in the world called Paris. A very big place and far off and once again big

My mother turns up the collar of my overcoat, not because it is beginning to snow, but so it can begin to snow.

My father's wife is in love with me, coming and advancing backward toward my birth and chestward toward my death. For I am hers twice: by the farewell and by the return. I close her, on coming back. That is why her eyes would have given so much to me, brimming with me, caught red-handed with me, manifesting herself through finished tasks, through consummated pacts.

My mother is confessed by me, named by me. Why doesn't she give as much to my older brothers? To Victor, for example, the eldest, who is so old now that people say: He looks like his mother's younger brother! Perhaps because I have traveled so much! Perhaps because I have lived more!

My mother grants a charter of colorful beginnings to my stories of return. Before my life of returnings, remembering that I have traveled during two hearts through her womb, she blushes and remains mortally livid when I say, in the treatise of the soul: That night I was happy. But the more she becomes sad; the more she would become sad.

- My son, you look so old!

And files along the yellow color to cry, for she finds me aged, in the sword blade, in the outlet of my face. She cries over me, saddens over me.

What need will there be for my youth, if I am always to be her son? Why do mothers ache finding their sons old, if the age of the sons never reaches that of their mothers? And why, if the children, the more they are used up, come nearer to their parents? My mother cries because I am old from my time and because never will I grow old from hers!

My farewell set off a point in her being more external than the point in her being to which I return. I am, because of the excessive time in my return, more the man before my mother than the child before my mother. There resides in the candor which today makes us glow with three flames. I say to her then until I hush:

- There is, mother, in the world, a place called Paris. A very big place and very far off and once again big.

My father's wife, on hearing me, eats her lunch and her mortal eyes descend softly down my arms.

THE LOW POINT IN LIFE

A man said:

- The low point in my life took place in the battle of the Marne, when I was wounded in the chest.

Another man said:

- The low point in my life occurred during a tsunami in Yokohama, from which I was miraculously saved, sheltered under the eaves of a lacquer shop.

Another man said:

- The low point in my life happens when I sleep during the day.

And another said:

- The low point of my life has been during my greatest loneliness.

And another said:

- The low point in my life was my imprisonment in a Peruvian jail.

And another said:

- The low point in my life is having surprised my father in profile.

And the last man said:

- The low point of my life hasn't happened yet.

I AM GOING TO SPEAK OF HOPE

I do not suffer this pain as César Vallejo. I do not ache now as an artist, as a man or even as a simple living being. I do not suffer this pain as a Catholic, as a Mohammedan or as an atheist. Today I simply suffer. If my name were not César Vallejo, I would still suffer the very same pain. If I were not an artist, I would still suffer it. If I were not a man or even a living being, I would still suffer it. If I were not a Catholic, atheist, or Muhammadan, I would still suffer it. Today I suffer from further below. Today I simply suffer.

I ache now without any explanation. My pain is so deep, that it never had a cause nor does it lack a cause now. What could have been its cause? Where is that thing so important, that it might stop being its cause? Its cause is nothing; nothing could have stopped being its cause. For what has this pain been born, for itself? My pain is from the north wind and from the south wind, like those neuter eggs certain rare birds lay in the wind. If my bride were dead, my pain would be the same. If they slashed my throat all the way through, my pain would be the same. If life were, in short, different, my pain would be the same. Today I simply suffer from further above. Today I simply suffer.

I look at the hungry man's pain and see that this hunger is so far away from my suffering, that were I to fast unto death, at least a blade of grass would always sprout from my tomb. The same with the lover. How engendered his blood is, in contrast to mine without source or consumption!

I believed until now that all things of the universe were, inevitably, parents or offsprings. But behold that my pain today is neither parent nor offspring. It lacks a back to darken, as well as having too much chest to dawn and if they put it in a dark room, it would not give light and if they put it in a brightly lit room, it would cast no shadow. Today I suffer come what may. Today I simply suffer.

[A woman with peaceful breasts...]

A woman with peaceful breasts, before which a cow's tongue becomes a violent gland. A temperate man, mandibular in character, able to march side by side with the coffer's hinges. A child is at the side of the man, carrying in reverse, the animal rights of the couple.

Oh the word of man, free from adjectives and adverbs, which woman declines in her unique female case, even among the thousand voices of the Sistine Chapel! Oh that skirt of hers, at the maternal point where the child puts his hands and plays with the pleats, sometimes making his mother's pupils dilate, as in the sanctions of the confessionals!

I derive a great pleasure from seeing the Father, the Son and the Holy-host like this, with all the emblems and insignias of their offices.

[Longing ceases...]

Longing ceases, tail in the air. Suddenly, life amputates itself, abruptly. My own blood splashes me in feminine lines, and even the city itself comes out to see what it is that stops unexpectedly.

- What's going on here, in this son of man? – the city shouts, and in the hall of the Louvre, a child cries in terror at the sight of the portrait of another child.

- What's going on here, in this son of woman? – the city shouts, and in a statue from the Ludwigian century, a blade of grass is born right in the palm of its hand.

Longing ceases, at the height of the raised hand. And I hide behind myself, to watch if I slip through below or maraud on high.

[No one lives in the house anymore...]

- No one lives in the house anymore – you tell me -; all have gone. The living room, the bedroom, the patio, are deserted. No one remains any longer, since everyone has departed.

And I say to you: When someone leaves, someone remains. The point through which a man passed, is no longer empty. The only place that is empty, with human solitude, is that through which no man has passed. New houses are deader than old ones, for their walls are of stone or steel, but not of men. A house comes into the world, not when people finish building it, but when they begin to inhabit it. A house lives only off men, like a tomb. That is why there is an irresistible resemblance between a house and a tomb. Except that the house is nourished by the life of man, while the tomb is nourished by the death of man. That is why the first is standing, while the second is laid out.

Everyone has departed from the house, in reality, but all have remained in truth. And it is not their memory that remains, but they themselves. Nor is it that they remain in the house, but that they continue about the house. Functions and acts leave the house by train or by plane or on horseback, walking or crawling. What continues in the house is the organ, the agent in gerund and in circle. The steps have left, the kisses, the pardons, the crimes. What continues in the house are the foot, the lips, the eyes, the heart. Negations and affirmations, good and evil, have dispersed. What continues in the house, is the subject of the act.

BLACK STONE ON A WHITE STONE

I will die in Paris in a downpour,
a day which I can already remember.
I will die in Paris – and I don't budge –
maybe a Thursday, like today, in autumn.

Thursday it will be, because today, Thursday,
as I prose these lines, I have forced on
my humeri and, never like today, have I turned,
with all my journey, to see myself alone.

César Vallejo has died, they beat him,
all of them, without him doing anything to them;
they gave it to him with a stick and hard

likewise with a rope; witnesses are
the Thursdays and the humerus bones,
the loneliness, the rain, the roads...

[Confidence in glasses, not in the eye...]

Confidence in the glasses, *not* in the eye;
in the staircase, never in the step;
in the wing, *not* in the bird
and in yourself alone, in yourself alone, in yourself alone.

Confidence in wickedness, not in the wicked;
in the glass, but never in the liquor;
in the corpse, not in the man
and in yourself alone, in yourself alone, in yourself alone.

Confidence in many, but no longer in one;
in the riverbed, never the current;
in pants, not in legs
and in yourself alone, in yourself alone, in yourself alone.

Confidence in the window, not in the door;
in the mother, but not in the nine months;
in destiny, not in the gold die,
and in yourself alone, in yourself alone, in yourself alone.

[Today a splinter has gotten into her...]

Today a splinter has gotten into her.
Today a splinter has gotten into her close, striking her
close, hard, in her mode
of being and in her now famous centavo.
Fate has painted her terribly,
all over;
the door has painted her,
the girdle has pained her, giving her
thirst, affliction
and thirst for the glass but not for the wine.
Today, secretly, the smoke of her dogma
poured out of the poor neighborhood of the air;
today a splinter has gotten into her.

Immensity pursues her
at a superficial distance, at a vast linkage.
Today on one cheek, north, and on one cheek, east
came out of the poor neighbor of the wind;
today a splinter has gotten into her.

Who will buy, in these harsh, perishable days,
a smidgen of café con leche,
and who, without her, will descend her trace until giving birth?
Who will it be, then, Saturday, at seven?
Sad are the splinters that get into her
one,
exactly there precisely!
Today a flame quenched in the oracle got into
the poor neighbor of the voyage;

today a splinter has gotten into her.

The pain has pained her, the young pain,
the child pain, excruciating pain, striking her
in her hands
and giving her thirst, affliction
and thirst for the glass but not for the wine.
The poor, poor little thing!

[Let the millionaire walk naked, stark naked!]

Let the millionaire walk naked, stark naked!
Disgrace for whoever builds his deathbed with treasures!
A world for whoever greets;
an armchair for whoever sows in the sky;
weeping for whoever finishes what he makes, keeping the beginnings;
let the spur-wearer walk;
no duration for that wall on which another wall is not growing;
give to the wretched all his wretchedness,
bread, to whoever laughs;
let the triumphs lose, the doctors die;
let there be milk in blood;
let a candle be added to the sun,
eight hundred to twenty;
let eternity pass under bridges!
Scorn whoever gets dressed,
crown feet with hands, fit them in their size;
let my self sit next to me!
To weep having fit in that womb,
blessed be whoever observes air in air,
many years of nail for the hammer stroke;
strip the naked,
make the cape put on pants,
let copper gleam at the expense of plates,
majesty for whoever falls from the clay into the universe,
let the mouths weep, the looks moan,
prevent steel from enduring,
thread for the portable horizons,
twelve cities for the stone path,
a sphere for whoever plays with his shadow;

a day made of one hour, for the husband and wife;
 a mother for the plow in praise of soil,
 seal liquids with two seals,
 let the mouthful call roll,
 let the descendants be,
 let the quail be,
 let the race of the poplar and the tree be;
 contrary to circular expectations, let the sea defeat his son
 and weeping the gray hair;
 leave the asps alone, fellow men,
 furrow the flame with seven logs,
 live,
 raise the height,
 lower the deepage deeper,
 let the wave accompany its impulse walking,
 the crypt truce succeed!
 May we die;
 wash your skeleton daily;
 pay no attention to me,
 a lame bird for the despot and his soul;
 a dreadful stain, for whoever goes it alone;
 sparrows for the astronomer, for the sparrows, for the aviator!
 Give off rain, beam sun,
 keep an eye on Jupiter, on the thief of your gold idols,
 copy your writing in three notebooks,
 learn from the married when they speak, and
 from the solitary, when they are silent;
 give the sweethearts something to eat,
 the devil in your hands something to drink,
 fight for justice with your nape,

make yourselves equal,
let the oak be fulfilled,
let the leopard between two oaks be fulfilled,
let us be,
let us be here,
feel how water navigates the oceans,
nourish yourselves,
let the error be conceived, since I am weeping,
accept, while goats and their young climb the crags;
make God break the habit of being a man,
grow...!
They are calling me. I'll be back.