



## FIVE WAYS OF READING CÉSAR VALLEJO\*

by Catalina Ocampo

*I exit through my own teeth, smoking,  
shouting, forcing my way out...*

### I. WEATHER

And then there's the sky,  
    due west-northwest;  
the birds' hilarity right where the branches  
prick the air –  
    it's April on loan,  
for an hour or so. Elsewhere,  
the equatorial belt hangs tight.

Construct yourself, he'd said,  
    *pero en columnas combas;*  
describe yourself but atmospheric,  
    in two-time to your skeleton.

Back then there was less choice, I guess:  
the frozen eucalyptus leaves at dawn,

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\* The poems in this series contain quotations, translations, paraphrases, and mistranslations from the following poems by Peruvian poet César Vallejo: "Oye a tu masa, a tu cometa...", "La rueda del hambriento," "Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca," "Calor, cansado voy con mi oro," "París, Octubre 1936," "Los nueve monstrous," and poems XXVIII and LXIX from *Trilce*.

dry seasons, Tuesdays,  
on Wednesdays, the wet.

## II. HUNGER

They blunt it with spare change  
and *boxer* glue:

Vallejo's wheel, his *dadme*  
keeping close track of the day.

The stomach's a stone that devours itself.  
The tables are set but whose is the banquet.

sponge dipped in vinegar  
half-tone that won't resolve itself

*...pero dadme*, please, a piece of bread to sit on,  
*pero dadme*  
*en español*  
something, after all, to drink, to live, to rest on...

A man at the *zona rosa* threatens a stick  
over a windshield; man with a weeviled beard,  
held by the cuff of his shirt.

*"Tengo sed."*

*Hard digestion halts; sugar,*  
*bile; funereal oil, el café.*

## III. TRAVEL

He never returned to Lima;  
kept Paris like a silver coin  
or prophecies he never took too seriously;  
boots, coat, alleyway,

*botones, aguacero;*  
claimed he remembered his death  
and what to do from there  
but depart,  
*de mi gran situación, de mi sombrero,*  
from my number sunken part to part.

You still hear, though, the acorn at his throat,  
an Andean, disconcerting fog.

A Quechua *dejo* limping at the breaks.

Under the city's bridges, trapped papers  
flap against hulled beams, the rats  
hold conference and phosphorescent orange growths  
bloom through the trash.

Car, exhaust,  
*lugar, luna, gasolina.*

If I don't think too hard, the 95  
could very well be on its way  
away from Chía,  
away from ribcage, stove, and continent.

*Aterrado*, adjective and noun. *Aterrado*  
*quiere decir, también, sin tierra.*

#### IV. PAIN

Plaza de Bolívar. Catedral de San Isidro.  
They were quaint enough but –  
A birds' haunch snagged  
at the stakes fixed on the balconies. Nearby,  
a man with a stump of a body asks for change.

I wonder if that's what he meant –  
the heart in its drawer,  
the lizard in its chest,  
the function of the purest grass:  
*ese dolernos doblemente.*

“History is what hurts,” and I kept asking,  
who said it?  
who said it?  
My endocrine gland, my ankle.

That spring we ate pear soup and made our peace  
with the skin's small, ancestral chronicle.  
But then I ached her through July and blamed it  
on the seen eye and the listened ear  
*y en los nueve monstruos*  
*y el abecedario.*

## V. READING

From *Trilce*:  
*El mar, y una edición en pie,*  
and on its single leaf, the front and back  
are at a stand-off.  
That's c. 1921  
before the month at sea. From there,  
the poems would turn towards  
our sorry anthropoid  
or urine goldening the Paris streets.  
You still read them like this,  
you still have to jump from the harbor.

*labialed tungsten platelets*

*canine contracts*  
*and static chelonian ls*

Every system of interpretation  
is a false frontier,  
Mihailescu said: *hay que des-imaginar...*  
Your library's weight.

Gapped skeleton  
of a ship at sea:  
*texto anegado.*

The sea's edition on its feet,  
at once face, obverse, and reverse.