

Poet's Choice

by Robert Hass

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Several weeks ago I printed several translations of Rainer Maria Rilke's great sonnet "Herbsttag," along with the original German text. To my surprise I received at least two dozen new translations in the mail from readers, many of them quite wonderful. It confirmed my own experience of reading poetry in translation. You glimpse the original, or your idea of the original, behind the English of the translation, and the idea of it haunts you. It's the impulse, often enough, that starts the translation.

So here's another opportunity and another autumn sonnet, this time one of the best-known poems in Latin American literature, "Piedra Negra Sobre Una Piedra Blanca" ("Black Stone Upon a White Stone"), by the great Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo. This time I'm going to give you first a literal translation. My Spanish is primitive, so I have borrowed it from one of my favorite books, *The Poem Itself* (Simon & Schuster, 1960), by Stanley Burnshaw. In the book Burnshaw offers, as an alternative to poetic translations, word-by-word translations of a whole range of modern poems in French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, with a grammatical commentary. Here is his version of the Vallejo poem:

I shall die in Paris with heavy showers,
on a day of which I already possess the memory.
I shall die in Paris -- and I'm not dismayed --
perhaps on Thursday, like today, in the autumn.
It shall be a Thursday, because today, Thursday,
as I prose
these lines, my forearms have gone bad
and never before in all my road
have I felt myself so lonely as today.
Cesar Vallejo is dead; everybody kept hitting him
even though he has done nothing to them;
they hit him hard with a stick, and hard

also with a rope; his witnesses are
the Thursdays and the bones of his forearms,
the loneliness, the rains, the roads . . .

In his commentary Burnshaw points out several odd things about the flavor of the language. The *aguacero* of the first line is "heavy showers." The *lluvia* of the last line is "rain." In line 5, he uses the curious medieval verb *prosar* for the composing of poetry. In line 6, he uses the somewhat medical word *humeros*, literally "humerus," for the bones of his arm, and *me he puesto a la mala* is colloquial, a way of saying "ache" or "hurt." And line 7 is also strange; *todo mi camino* comes where one expects "all my life" and thus gives you something like "in all the road of my life." Line 10 -- the one line that varies the 12-syllable pattern -- uses a present subjunctive, *haga nada* instead of the conditional *hiciera nada* that a Spanish reader might expect; a literal translation would be "without his doing them." And, in the same line, *le pegaban*, "they used to hit him," is a past-tense form, and it's followed by a present-tense verb: The effect of the tense "everybody [used to] hit him without his doing anything to them. "They hit [present tense] him hard . . ." The word *palo*, translated here as "stick," could also mean "club."

The Spanish text looks like this:

Me morire en Paris con aguacero,
un día del cual tengo ya el recuerdo.
Me morire en Paris -- y no me corro --
tal vez un jueves, como es hoy, de otono.
Jueves sera, porque hoy, jueves, que prosar
estos versos, los humeros me he puesto
a la mala y, jamas como hoy, me he vuelto,
con todo mi camino, a verme solo.
Cesar Vallejo ha muerto, le pegaban
todos sin que el les haga nada;
le daban duro con un palo y duro
tambien con una sogá; son testigos
los dias jueves y los huesos humeros,
la soledad, la lluvia, los caminos . . .

The poem was published in a posthumous collection of his poems, *Poemas humanos*, in 1939. One of the haunting things about it is that he did die in Paris. His life had not been easy. He grew up in an Andean village outside of Lima, went to the university in the capital, where he was jailed for his political activities. He left Lima for Paris in 1923, where he lived in poverty and practiced his art. He was intensely moved and engaged by the Spanish Civil War and threw himself into it with furious energy, often carrying messages and money back and forth from Paris to Barcelona. It's thought that this wore him down. In any case, he died of a fever of unknown origin, perhaps the recurrence of a childhood illness, in Paris in 1937.

Here's a version I've made of the poem:

Blackstone on Whitestone

I will die in Paris on a rainy day,

on a day I can already remember.

I will die in Paris -- and I don't mind --

perhaps on a Thursday in autumn, like today.

It will be a Thursday, because today, Thursday,

as I write

these lines, the bones in my arm ache badly,

and never before, in all my road, have I felt

myself as lonely as I do today.

Cesar Vallejo is dead, everyone kept hitting him,

even though he had done nothing to them.

They hit him hard with a stick, and hard

also with a rope; his witnesses

are the Thursday and the bones of his arms,

the loneliness, the rains, the roads . . .

This is doing it the easy way. I ignored the rhymes. I mostly ignored the 12-syllable line. I ignored the grammatical strangenesses, and just tried to find a clear way through the main line of the poem, letting the timing of the phrasings in the stanzas, and the imagery, and the intense melancholy carry it. But I know I did not get Vallejo's poem. Perhaps you will try.

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