

Richard Siken: With All my Road

César Vallejo is cry cry crying about how he will die in the rain, in Paris, on a Thursday. Poor little sad sack, poor bruised pear. It's inevitable, death. What can you do? The poem I'm referring to is "Black Stone on a White Stone" and it was not prophetic: Vallejo died in Paris on a Friday? Good Friday, April 15, 1938.

Originally written in Spanish, this poem, probably Vallejo's best known, has been translated into English many times by many people. It is 14 lines long and repeats itself quite a bit, like most crybaby poems do. And yet, in the middle, in the turn from line seven to eight, something fantastically weird happens. Or does it? Here are three versions:

and never so much as today have I found myself
with all the road ahead of me, alone. ?trans. Robert Bly

? never like today, have I turned
on my whole journey, to see myself so alone. ?trans. Robert Hass

?and, never like today, have I turned,
with all my road, to see myself alone. ?trans. Clayton Eshleman
and José Rubia Barcia

With all my road. These four words. At least, according to Eshleman and Barcia. He's alone? sure, we all are, especially when we die? it's true and sad and sentimental, but he has road. César Vallejo is a man with road and what the hell does that mean?

The exact cause of Vallejo's death is uncertain. Some assert that he fell ill from years of deprivation and strain, exhaustion from working ceaselessly for the Spanish Republican cause, and heartbreak over Spain's failure to establish communism. Others say it was malaria. Diseases are nasty. Then again, so is heartbreak.

Four hundred and twenty years earlier, in November of 1519, the Spanish fleet, led by Hernando Cortez, entered Tenochtitlan (the capital of the Aztec Empire, now Mexico City) armed (unknowingly) with smallpox, polio, yellow fever, and malaria. The Aztecs were decimated. Fifty-three years later, in 1572, Francisco Pizarro entered Peru and similarly decimated the Incas.

Imagine a history of the Americas where the native populations are immune to Old World

diseases. Imagine a future of the Americas where everyone is immune to heartbreak.

After Cortez but before Pizzaro, around 1545, fairly early in the history of algebra, something fantastically weird happened. Girolamo Cardano, messing around squares and square roots, found himself faced with insoluble equations. The problem was the square root of negative one. It didn't fall on the number line. It wasn't a "real" number but it made certain kinds of problems easier to solve.

By 1777, Leonhard Euler was referring to this number with the symbol i from the German word for imaginary indicating its difference from the supposedly "real" positive and negative numbers. Only twenty years later, in 1797, Caspar Wessel found a place to put i and its multiples: he invented a new number line. It crossed the traditional number line vertically. He took the "real" number line and his "imaginary" number line and turned the whole tangle into a number plane.

Can you do that? Can you just plug in some made up thing and end up with solutions? Can you simply draw some extra lines, some invented unreal roads, and end up with a better map? You don't expect to be acclaimed as a great scientist until you discover something, but shouldn't this something have to be real?

Let's jump ahead another hundred and twenty-five years. It's 1922 and Ludwig Wittgenstein has just published his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* which insists, among other things, that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Basically: how you say it is how you think it. And, more dramatically: if you can't say it, you can't think it.

Do you have road or is it merely in front of you? Do you have explicable or inexplicable needs? What exotic things exist outside of your vocabulary? What modes of thought exist outside of your syntax, your grammar? Is there a problem you just can't get your head around? And, if you can't think it, how can you solve it?

A man is driving down a country road. He is thinking about building a robot. The robot will be black and yellow and it will destroy the world. There is a pasture on the right side of the road. The pasture has a wooden fence around it. There is a horse in the pasture. The horse sees a car drive by. The man in the car does not see the horse because he is preoccupied by his thoughts. There are many ways to talk about this and each way will have a different emphasis. Vary the word choice, vary the word order, and you have very different events:

Distracted man does not see horse. what happened to the robot?

Horse invisible due to imaginary robot. what happened to the man?

Evil robot obscures man's vision. what happened to the horse?

Is the horse invisible? Who has agency, the man or the robot? Is the robot evil because he has blinded the man or because he will destroy the world?

"To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." That's Wittgenstein again. So, go ahead, imagine a form of life. Imagine your life. Think about what you say and ask yourself if you want to be the kind of person who says those kinds of things. Change your language and you change your thoughts. Change your thoughts and you change yourself. Imagine your possible selves and decide which ones you want to inhabit.

?Language is a virus from outer space, and hearing your name is better than seeing your face.? That?s Laurie Anderson in 1984, quoting and adding to William S. Burroughs line in her multimedia production ?United States, Parts I-IV? and it is prophetic. Four hundred and twelve years in the Americas, from Cortez to Anderson, and it?s still about heartbreak and disease, only now it?s heartbreak and language disease, and I wonder if they aren?t the same thing. Funny how you can?t always make yourself happy but you can always make yourself sad. Okay, its not funny but it?s true. It?s how you word it. It?s contagious. It?s sadness. It?s a language disease.

A man is running past a horse, through a pasture. The pasture has a wooden fence around it. Behind the man is an evil yellow and black robot that is destroying the world. The man has reached the wooden fence at the end of the pasture. Does he know the word for ladder? Does he know the word for climb?

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