AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

FROM LIKE A MISUNDERSTANDING OF SALVATION...

TRANSLATED BY A. JAMES ARNOLD & CLAYTON ESHLEMAN
In 1994 Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), with the assistance of Daniel Maximin, collected twenty-two poems under the title “Like a Misunderstanding of Salvation....” Since his death the collection has acquired the status of a poetic testament, marking out what the father of Caribbean negritude saw as his lasting accomplishment while noting how the desire to create a heroic diasporic persona had overreached itself. Already in *i, laminaria...* twelve years earlier Césaire had scaled back his view of the poet’s role. No longer the inspired *vates* of *Miraculous Weapons* (1946) and *Solar Throat Slashed* (1948), the modest laminarian alga clinging determinedly to its rock became the poet’s alter ego in 1982. We read these poems differently, no longer expecting grand flourishes or sweeping effects. “Like a Misunderstanding of Salvation” states obliquely but clearly enough what was implied in *i, laminaria...* “Ridiculous” treats with bitter sarcasm the Promethean motif his earlier persona assumed in the tragic oratorio “And the Dogs Were Silent” (1946): “I am not nailed to the most absurd of rocks / No winged feat of valor ever visited me / From the abyss no chorus rises toward me / Unless it be the occasional hiccup of a cargo of castaways.” In “References” the “he” clearly references Césaire’s own career in Martinique: “He sought no alibi / on the contrary / he scanned the landscape to incrust himself / husbander of the place....” In “incrust” we recognize the same poetic turn Césaire had used in imagining himself as an alga. In this late verse the language of poetry is no longer a vehicle; it is the substance of the poem: “I challenge not / I greet the words (gathering the blood of sound) / I know their memory, what they have to offer me: / that is to say *everything...*” (“Rumination”). A clear echo of “And the Dogs Were Silent” is heard again in “Word Owing”: “on the way / without diverting the dogs / the wind through you living through yourself hounds them....”

The post-scriptum to “Ridiculous” offers conditional consolation: “But if all sap has been abolished / If the current flows not / If the trade wind is lacking / If even pollen and sand reach me not / native / If from myself to myself / the useless path gets scared and pursues itself / May my silence alone deliver to me / By a blow in the hollow of helpless repose / The ill-deciphered jubilation of a / solitary magma / Rider of time and spume.”

The poems selected for this issue were translated by A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman for the bilingual *Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, which is scheduled for publication in 2017 by Wesleyan University Press.
He sought no alibi
on the contrary
he scanned the landscape to incrust himself
husbander of the place

that erosion should erode him
that the trade winds should slap him
(the all-morne, the all-volcano)

the coherence of the journey was not thereby affected
cross-country tracks being merely scree wounds
groping he sketched
the fragile chance turned toward the sun

mummy of mud
RUMINATION

Got to know how to interrogate their double
at the price of reading the time only by their church bell
which is not unrelated to the diving bell

got to appreciate their lack of restraint
their drunkenness being self-installation as mad gods

their beauty is savage in profile
ever unpredictable.
listen to them. Auscultate the labyrinth.

I listen along the imperious blood that ascends
through the debris the falun* the wreckage
faithful sap.

I challenge not
I greet the words (gathering the blood of sound)
I know their memory, what they have to offer me:
that is to say everything

it happens that I create islands
out of calderas showered with orange groves

* Falun: An ambivalent image; in geology an underlying limestone sediment, in Buddhism falun is the Dharma (truth) wheel, which represents the universe in its movement.
WORD OWING

How many rivers
mountains
seas

disasters
to think how many centuries
the forests

word owing:

stagnation encoiled
the hard alone is arable
dance memory dance eligible
the invisible in its site

advance devance
let slumber on the horizon the caravane of mornes*
let the lion in the north belch forth its entrails
at the crossroad amidst lava too quickly cooled
you shall encounter the child

the wind is what is intended

accompany it far with a fervor of the lung

advance

on the way
without diverting the dogs
the wind through you living through yourself hounds them
over everything mountain-like that has been built in you
construct each step disconcerting
the sleepy rubble
donot disfigure the pure face of the future
builder of a strange tomorrow

may your thread not be tangled
may your voice not be hoarse
may your ways not be limited

advance

* Morne(s): In Two Years in the French West Indies Lafcadio Hearn defined the term as “used throughout the French West Indian colonies to designate certain altitudes of volcanic origin....” The Creole French term was derived from Spanish morro, a hillock.
Thyrsus trunks
Drapings
Chitchat among sylvan deities
The outland chatter of tree ferns

Here and there a bloody baring of the chest
By impassive balisiers*
Rapacious figuration
(whether ferocious or sumptuous
the quest is thirst for being)

Soon it will be the play of light gold castanets
Then the burned-alive trunk of the simaroubas*

May they yet gesticulate as I would have it
Theater in the dust of female fire
They are the last wild wrestlers of the hill

Minister-of-the-pen of this strange court
It is too little to say that I wander
Day and night this domain
The domain itself requires and necessitates me
Guardian
To ensure that everything is there
Intact absurd
Fairy lamp
Cocoons from earthy need
And may it all suddenly burst into flame from an imperceptible sense
Whose decree in me I could never bend.
* Balisier(s): The flower of *Canna indica*, symbol of Césaire’s Parti Progressiste Martiniquais, founded in 1958 after his break with the French Communist Party two years earlier. The balisier is sometimes assimilated to a “red heart” for the color of its flower spikes.

* Simarouba: In Martinique, where the *Bursera simaruba* is used to construct border fences, it is known as the *gomnier rouge*. A red-barked variety is called *gomnier sang*, “blood gum tree.”
PHANTASMS

Getting under way isn’t done at bullet train speed
It remains stuck in the morning’s beginnings
And its ordinary foggy raiment
The collusion of silence has taken charge of the whole
Beneath an iron heel it’s a profusion of cries

Serpent cries
Rattlesnake cries
Lizard-waiting-for-the-sun cries
Dessicated stick-insect cries

Besides the everyday cries there are cries
Of forever
Those stand arrogantly
Posted in the vague disquiet of their testimony
And sheathed in the armor of their role

Locust cries of devouring solitudes.
I am not nailed to the most absurd of rocks
No winged feat of valor ever visited me
From the abyss no chorus rises toward me
Unless it be the occasional hiccup of a cargo of castaways
No need to specify
That I care nothing about the civil status established
evidently out of pure nostalgia
I have been slashed by no complacent beak
Threatened by no serious vengeance
as for the rest
Difficulties with hindsight
being very well compensated by the broadening of vision
I do not browse panic
I do not ruminate on remorse
Scarcely do I peck among the ordinary season
Awaiting the time of a brief spark
(the time called dead)
the wake of a lost assent
or if you prefer of an order

P.S.:
But if all sap has been abolished
If the current flows not
If the trade wind is lacking
If even pollen and sand reach me not
native
If from myself to myself
the useless path gets scared and pursues itself
May my silence alone deliver to me
By a blow in the hollow of helpless repose
The ill-deciphered jubilation of a
solitary magma
Rider of time and spume
CRATERS

The thought of a quick denouement is annulled for lack of lava, along rivers too stony to be unintelligible to the serpents’ thirst.

Bloodthirsty Erinys loosed pitilessly beating the bushes until extinguishing itself when in the autumnal mist.

I am not duped.

Distress will not tire of playing leap-frog with the craters, even though it may be moved long enough for an illumination of some suicidal volcano outpouring.
For nibbling at a sunrise
for furling a sunset
The animals will have fled
carrying out of the city
its last key to warmth.
For now it is barely
a question
of unmasking a door
while groping through
the desolation of the intimate mould
up to the speed of hazardous tenderness
which makes my brother the resolute tree
My brother the wave-torn wind
My brother the nauseated volcano
And the ceaselessly choked-down sob
of the undertow