

# **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.

## REFERENCES

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

do not 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.

## RAPACIOUS SPACE

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 *gommier rouge*. A red-barked variety is called *gommier 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.

## RIDICULOUS

*letter to a faraway lady friend*

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.

## CHITCHAT

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