

The following legendary poem, from Vallejo's posthumous *Poemas humanos*, has been translated numerous times into English, most famously, perhaps, by Robert Bly and Clayton Eshleman, two poet-translators long antagonistic towards each other's renderings of the Peruvian poet. There are some new proposals in the following translation I am offering: Among them, the title, where the preposition *has*, without exception, so far as I can tell, been previously rendered as "on," or "on top of." The word "above," I believe, more suggests the wider sense of "sobre," in relation to the Andean burial ritual alluded to by Vallejo. As well, the word "aguacero," in the first line, is not properly "rain," as it has been usually translated. It means that the skies have opened up in a torrent. Also, the phrase "no me corro," in the first stanza, has a hard tone of defiance that hasn't yet been adequately rendered in the various translations. And "soga," nearly always given as "rope," has a more suggestive meaning in the poem: The word in Spanish also means both a hanging noose and a yoke for an animal of burden (it would certainly have strongly had those vernacular senses in Peru at the time Vallejo wrote the poem). So I have provided the word with a compound translation. Finally, the most complex and strange passage in the poem, in the second stanza, "los h umeros me he puesto a la mala," which has never quite been gotten right, is given a new interpretation here. Not that I have it quite right, either. Even in the Spanish, the weird declaration resists comfortable understanding. The Spanish original follows the translation.

—Kent Johnson

Black Stone Above a White Stone

I'll die in Paris in a downpour,
on a day I can already remember.
I'll die in Paris--and I stare it down--
Maybe on a Thursday, like today, in autumn.

Thursday, because today, Thursday, when I pen
these lines, I've got my humeri all out of whack
and dark, and never, as today, have I turned round,
in all my long road, to see myself so alone.

César Vallejo has died, they all beat him
even when he never did a thing to them;
they beat him hard with a rod and hard

too with a cord yoke; the witnesses
are the Thursdays and the bones of the arms,
the loneliness, the rain, the roads...

Piedra negra sobre piedra blanca

Me moriré en París con aguacero,
un día del cual tengo ya el recuerdo.
Me moriré en París -y no me corro-
tal vez un jueves, como es hoy, de otoño.

Jueves será, porque hoy, jueves, que proso
estos versos, los húmeros me he puesto
a la mala y, jamás como hoy, me he vuelto,
con todo mi camino, a verme solo.

César Vallejo ha muerto, le pegaban
todos sin que él les haga nada;
le daban duro con un palo y duro

también con una soga; son testigos
los días jueves y los huesos húmeros,
la soledad, la lluvia, los caminos...