

AIRBORN/HIJOS DEL AIRE



Octavio Paz
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In the spring of 1969 four friends — Charles Tomlinson, Jacques Roubaud, Edoardo Sanguineti and I — met in Paris, for the space of a week, in order to write the first western renga. Renga is the traditional Japanese name for a poem composed by several poets, three or four, who write successively stanzas of three and of two lines, without rhyme, but with a fixed syllabic measure. Our own renga was written by four poets in four tongues and the stanzaic pattern we followed was that of the sonnet, unrhymed and in free verse. After this experiment, Charles Tomlinson and I decided to explore yet another way of approach. We had the idea of writing two series of poems, each one around a theme. The chosen form was once more the sonnet, stricter than that of our renga, but still without rhyme. The real innovation consisted in writing the sonnets by correspondence. Renga in slow motion.

The themes we settled on were House and Day. Then, an exchange of letters: Charles wrote the first quatrain of House and sent it to me, I wrote the second, sent it to him and so on until four sonnets were completed. We followed the same procedure with Day which I began. The last sonnet of House was written entirely by me and the last of Day by Tomlinson: each of us brought to its end the series begun by the other.

In the first quatrain of House, Charles alludes, as a matter of course, to his cottage in Gloucestershire, a simple country structure of the eighteenth century which he, with his own hands, has set to rights. I replied, likewise as a matter of course, with a quatrain which alludes to the house of my childhood in Mixcoac, now destroyed, like the rest of the village, by the expansion of Mexico City. Two themes which arose spontaneously interweaved: the house set to rights and the one destroyed. Two kinds of poet, he who lives in a cottage in the country, though this is the civilized English countryside, and he who lives in an apartment in town, though this town is the urban jungle which makes up Mexico City.

It was my turn to begin Day and I began it with an evocation of a spring day in Cambridge. Charles replied in perfect accord. Then, this English day changed to night, night was succeeded by dawn and dawn by a Mexican noonday fifteen years ago in whose light Charles and

Brenda walked along la calle de Venustiano Carranza and discovered, among the traffic and the people, a source of quiet. Truces and mercies of time in that well of pure water within the poetic memory.

At the same time as we were composing our poems we went on to translate them. The second line of the first quatrain of Tomlinson's gave me a lot of trouble. The quatrain begins thus: 'One builds a house of what is there/(horsehair bonded the plaster when horses were)'. I understood this to mean that the Tomlinsons' house had been the stables of an old manor in the vicinity — famous as having lodged one of the loves of Charles the Second — and that, during the work of reconstruction, Tomlinson had come across horsehair stuck in the plaster. Consequently I translated: *crines en la argamasa de la caballerizia* (horsehair in the mortar of the stables). Charles undeceived me: no, in the pre-industrial era they used to bond mortar with horsehair. As I'd promised myself not to exceed the fourteen syllables, this elliptical line occurred to me: *con crin ligaban la argamasa — habia caballos* (they bonded the mortar with mane — there were horses).

Once our little book was complete we looked around for a title. Brenda Tomlinson suggested *Airborn* to us. An exact title: our booklet was an offspring of air. Charles pointed out that the expression contained other meanings: airborne, every poem is made of air (Pound: 'I made it out of a mouthful of air') and an air is a song. But there's even more to it: the day I received Tomlinson's letter suggesting this title, I read a *loa* of Sor Juana in which Æolus, god of air, appears:

I who am presiding god
of the rarity of air,
whose office is the government
of the Birds' imperium where
through transparencies of space
in wandering varieties,
animated rainbows, they,
little vanities on wing,
people and adorn its sway . . .

Airways are the most used today, as much by travellers as by post. Nevertheless, they have been and are also the traditional ways of poetry: across the thoroughfares of the air, 'wandering varieties', the stanzas of the poem are propagated, 'animated rainbows'. Since its origin poetry has been the art of joining together the echoes of words: chains of air, impalpable but unbreakable. I will add that poetry is further, and above all, an art of breath, inspiration and expiration.

OCTAVIO PAZ

These collaborative poems were the result of a meeting, early one summer in Gloucestershire, when, out of the many words we had thought and spoken, we chose 'house' and 'day' as the words for a future postal meditation in sonnet form. 'House' arose because the stone cottage in which Octavio Paz and his wife were our guests was a place we all felt affection for, and also because at that time the Pazes had no settled house of their own. 'Day' was our last day together, when the sky took on a Constable-like activity, the breeze moving clouds swiftly through the blue and involving the landscape in a rapid succession of changes. I think time was at the back of all our minds, and that 'day' (time passing) thus came into a natural relationship with 'house' (time measured by place). We drove to the station through the green countryside, only to find that the train no longer ran. In the hour or so we had to wait we stole time from time and conceived our little work.

CHARLES TOMLINSON

The passages in italic type are those written in Spanish by Octavio Paz, and translated by Charles Tomlinson. The passages in roman type are those written in English by Charles Tomlinson, and translated by Octavio Paz.

The couplet of Góngora is from E. M. Wilson's translation of the *Soledades*.

AIRBORN/HIJOS DEL AIRE

To Brenda and Marie José

HOUSE/CASA

**O hermitage well found
Whatever hour it be . . .!**

LUIS DE GONGORA

I

La casa se construye con lo que ahí encontramos
(con crin ligaban la argamasa — había caballos)
y con lo que traemos (la rima anda escondida):
para su tiempo, espacio—tiempo para su espacio.

*Mas nacemos en casas que no hicimos.
(Vuelve la rima, puente entre líneas.)
El sol desenterradas imágenes revuelve
y me devuelve aquella casa en ruinas,*

no por mí: por el tiempo deshecha — se revela
en su marcha la rima, la inoída,
frágil contra su espacio—y disonante.

*El tiempo la deshace y el tiempo la rehace;
la rima, sol que nace de eco en eco,
la ilumina: ya no es espacio sino tiempo.*

I

One builds a house of what is there
(horsehair bonded the plaster when horses were)
and of what one brings (the rhyme concealed):
space into its time, time to its space.

*Yet we are born in houses we did not make.
(The rhyme returns, a bridge between the lines.)
The sun revolves its buried images
to restore to mind that ruined house once more*

time and not I unmade—the rhyme revealed
only by the unheard pace of time,
and fragile yet dissonant against its space.

*Time unmakes and builds the house again:
and rhyme, a sun brought, echo by echo, to birth,
illuminates, unspaces it back to time.*

II

*Casa por la memoria edificada
—blancos intermitentes—, más pensada
que vivida y más dicha que pensada,
casa que dura el tiempo de decirla,*

en leche tú comienzas, en calor y comida,
repite las palabras tus substancias primeras,
el pensamiento guarda tu olor de pan intacto
o flota en el estanque de sus recordaciones:

*casa en la conjunción de dos pasados
y de dos escrituras, construída
por un murmullo en busca de sentido,*

colmena de palabras donde la miel del tiempo
con sabor instantáneo colma y sacia
esta boca, esta mente—ciudadela de células.

II

*House that memory makes out of itself
between the spaces of blank time — more thought
than lived and yet more said than thought,
house that lasts as long as its own sound takes:*

house, you began in milk, in warmth, in eating:
words must re-tongue your first solidities
and thought keep fresh your fragrance of bread baking
or drown in the stagnation of its memories:

*house in which two pasts conjoin and two
hands inscribe their separate histories,
a murmur in search of meaning builds you*

where, in a hive of words, time's honeying
flavours and fills with momentary savour
this mouth and mind, this citadel of cells.

III

En las cosas impreso, un ser despierta:
atrás dejé, grabadas en un olmo,
iniciales y fechas — las marcas no se borran,
allá quedó mi infancia y una guerra en España

*— la misma que grabó con su navaja
no en el tronco del olmo imaginario:
adentro de mi frente, la roja orografía
de sus escombros, su palabra rota.*

Por gustar otra vez su aroma de verdad
— levadura del pan milagroso y primero —
y esperar, ya sin extravagancia, a la esperanza,

*tracé, no con ideas ni con piedras,
con aire y luz, la forma de mi tránsito:
las casas son encuentros, despedidas.*

III

A self awakened in the press of things:
hacked into elm-bark there I left behind
initials, date: and the marks remain:
they fix a childhood and a war in Spain:

*it was the blade of that same war graved deep —
not on the trunk of an imagined elm —
but in my head the red map of the ranges
of its fallen debris and its broken word.*

So that to taste again my hope's true fragrance,
leaven of that miraculous first bread,
to hope, yet hope without extravagance,

*I traced, not with ideas nor with stones
but air and light, the due shape of my going:
houses are meetings and departures too.*

IV

*Casas que van y vienen por mi frente,
semillas enterradas que maduran
bajo mis párpados, casas ya vueltas
un puñado de anécdotas y fotos,*

*fugaces construcciones de reflejos
en el agua del tiempo suspendidas
por ese largo instante en que unos ojos
recorren, distraídos, esta página:*

*yo camino por ellas en mi mismo,
lámpara soy en sus cuartos vacíos
y me enciendo y apago como un ánima.*

*La memoria es teatro del espíritu
pero afuera ya hay sol: resurrecciones.
En mí me planto, habito mi presente.*

IV

*Houses that come and go within my head,
the buried seeds that lie there ripening
under my eyelids, houses turned already
to a handful of anecdotes and photographs;*

*unsteady structures of reflections
in the water of time hovering suspended
through this wide instant where a pair of eyes
travel distractedly across this page:*

*moving through them I enter my own self,
I am the lamp inside their empty rooms
and like a soul I kindle and extinguish.*

*Memory is the mind's own theatre.
Outside: the resurrections of the sun:
myself I plant within myself: this present is my habitation.*

DIA/DAY

**Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridall of the earth and skie.**

GEORGE HERBERT

I

*Arbol copioso cada día. Este
(cinco de Julio) hora a hora se vuelve
invisible: árbol que se borra
y en follajes futuros se vuelca.*

Nuestras palabras pactan con el día
— luz, agua, piedra, un mundo que se muestra
en cosas obstinadas en ser: esos renuevos
no por designio suyo nos alegran

*sino por ser exclamaciones vegetales,
onomatopeyas de celebración
de la química resurrección anual,*

mientras la tarde cubre la página acabada,
sombra que absorbe sombra,
y en un follaje en llamas el día se consume.

*Copious tree each day. This one
 (July the fifth) grows hour by hour
 invisible: a tree obliterated
 to be freighted down with future leaves.*

Coming to terms with day — light, water, stone —
 our words extend a world of objects
 that remains itself: the new leaves
 gladden us, but for no motive of their own —

*merely to be vegetable exclamations,
 onomatopoeias of celebration
 of the yearly chemical resurrection,*

where evening already stains the finished page
 and shadow absorbing shadow, day
 is going down in fire, in foliage.

II

Escolias de sueños, somos los herederos
de la noche de nuevo descubierta, regreso
a la palabra del origen, oscuras sílabas
de frondas invisibles y seres inauditos.

*Rompe la madrugada en oleaje
promiscuo — consonantes y vocales —
golpeando los diques del lenguaje
y estalla sin llegar a ser palabra.*

Presencia toda ausencia hasta que no revienta
contra muro y ventana — mientras las sombras
brotan arquitecturas que ha de poblar la luz.

*Amanece, con dedos impalpables
despega párpados la madrugada,
llueve, no afuera, adentro, en la memoria.*

II

Scholiasts of dreams, we are the heirs
of the rediscovery of night — return
to origins of the word, dark syllables
from leaves unseen, from selves unheard.

*Day dawns through a promiscuous succession
of waves — vowels and consonants — and breaks
down the dikes of language to explode
endlessly outwards and become no word.*

This presence is all absences until
we hear it wash against our panes, our walls
and shadows shape the architecture light must fill.

*It dawns: with fingerings impalpable
daybreak sets ajar the lidded eye:
raining, it rains into the space of memory.*

III

*La ciudad amanece con ruido de cadenas,
la luz se rompe el pecho en las esquinas
y, ciega, en la memoria desarraiga
los árboles, los días, de follajes de sílabas:*

por las calles Bolívar y Carranza
en busca de la Fuente de la Rana
y el Reloj Turco — urbanidades postales —
bajo un cielo de hace quince años ya,

*entre la gente, el tráfico, los autos,
daba el reloj la hora, filósofo cortés,
no sin escepticismo pero exacto*

— cuenta que es fidedigna pero falsa:
dentro del tiempo — tregua, dádiva de las horas —
hay una fuente. En ella yo bebo todavía.

III

*The city wakens to a din of chains,
at the street-corners light is torn apart
and blind, uproots within the memory
the trees — the days —, their leāves of syllables:*

crossing Bolivar and Carranza street
in search of the Fuente de la Rana
and the Turkish clock — post-card civilities —
under a sky of fifteen years ago:

*through to-ing, fro-ing, passers-by and cars,
courteous philosopher, the clock strikes the hours
tactfully sceptical, always exact,*

true to the count and yet false to the fact
of that well within time — time's truces, time's mercies —
even, at this waste hour, still tasted here.

IV

Días en torno al poema y a su día único,
días como el viento que incesante regresa
a esta casa de palabras que tú y yo hemos construido:
sus ventanas atisban el mar y el cielo

por descubrir en la estela del avión
presagios de la mente del otro: las cartas,
piedras que vuelan, alzan un muro cuya línea dibuja
una hora y un donde, un lugar del espíritu.

¿Qué es más real, aquello que un día vimos
o las imágenes que la memoria
en la mente despierta para saber qué somos?

Más real que ambas es la amistad,
el día que la funda, los días que la confirman:
en su latir pasamos y quedamos.

Lo sabemos:
sólo somos medidas de su música.

IV

Days that haunt the poem's single day
are like the air revisiting this house
of vocables that you and I designed:
its windows watch an ocean and a sky

to learn what portion of the other's mind
the jet-trails presage: letters are stones that fly
to settle in a wall of which the line
traces an hour, a where, a place of thought.

What is more palpable, the thing we saw
or the images its recollection brought
into the mind to ask us what we are?

Friendship is more palpable than both,
the day that founded it, and time its confirmation:
we go and stay, knowing in that pulsation
we are the measure of its music flowing.

Daughter I was of air, already
I dissolve away in day

PEDRO CALDERON DE LA BARCA

