

## Afterword

WE DECIDED TO provide a selection of Octavio Paz's poems as a starting point for this "conversation". Limiting ourselves to only a few proved very difficult, however, for Octavio Paz wrote such a large number of accomplished poems. While much of his work is imbued with profound meaning, cultural references and literary allusions, his mastery of the form is also reflected in poems of lighthearted sensibility.

The eight poems we ended up selecting\* are among Paz's best known and are, we think, representative of his wide range of moods and sentiments, ideal for those previously unacquainted with him or the topics of his poems. They were intended to spark inspiration and also to sow seeds of greater curiosity.

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In "Piedra de sol"—or "Sun Stone"—Paz reaches the pinnacle of artistic and poetic expression. It is now considered the foundation of his oeuvre and one of the most important poems of the twentieth century. It begins with these justly celebrated first lines:

*un sauce de cristal, un chopo de agua,  
un alto surtidor que el viento arquea,  
un árbol bien plantado mas danzante,  
un caminar de río que se curva,  
avanza, retrocede, da un rodeo  
y llega siempre*

a crystal willow, an aqueous poplar,  
a high fountain arching in the wind,  
a well-rooted tree that's dancing,  
a waterway that curves,  
advances, retreats, detours  
and yet arrives

A long poem, 584 lines of eleven syllables each, the circular “Piedra de sol” marks the Aztec calendar, starting where it ends and ending where it begins. While the poem makes mention of, among others, Dante, Christian imagery, Greek mythology, Lincoln, Madero, Trotsky, and the Spanish Civil War, as well as to love and memory, Paz also ponders on some basic questions about life and our existence:

*¿la vida, cuándo fue de veras nuestra?,  
¿cuándo somos de veras lo que somos?*

Life, when was it truly ours?  
When are we truly what we are?

The poem—like much modernist poetry—can be dense and difficult, but it is characteristic of Paz that every poem can be read and enjoyed at many levels and by people with different levels of familiarity with his poetic and cultural references, for Paz also cared deeply about rhythm and musicality, and was fully aware of the expressive possibilities of words and the emotions they help kindle.

The spoken and written word, language, poetry and the art of poetry, are common themes—themes and concerns Paz shared with his fellow poets and hence obvious choices to begin this conversation; we include two that show this most explicitly:

**The word outloud** (*La palabra dicha*)

The word arises  
written from the page.  
The word,  
stalactitic,  
on a column engraved  
letter by letter one by one.  
Its echo icing over  
the stony sheet.

Essence,  
white like the page,  
the word arises.  
It walks  
the high-wire  
from silence to shout  
on the edge  
of strictly saying.  
Hearing: sound's nest,  
its labyrinth.

What it says it says not  
what it says: how to say  
what it says not?  
Say  
perhaps the virgin is urgent.

A cry  
in a dead crater  
in another galaxy  
how does one say ataraxy?

What is said is said  
straight and backwards  
the mind demined  
of mine off-line  
cemetery, some tarry  
seamen's no semen.

Ear's labyrinth  
what you say is un-said  
from silence to shout  
unheard.

Innocence in no sense:  
Shut up to speak.

“The word outloud” is a poet’s poem, for poetry is both a written and spoken form; here Paz contrasts and merges the two. “*Proema*”, or “Proem”, is literally a prose poem, a commingling of the two forms:

**Proem** (*Proema*)

At times poetry is the vertigo of bodies and the vertigo of  
speech and the vertigo of death;  
walking, eyes closed, along the edge of the precipice and the  
verbena of underwater gardens;  
the laugh that sets fire to rules and holy commandments;  
the parachute descent of words onto the beaches of the  
page;  
the despair that embarks on a paper boat and crosses,  
for forty nights and forty days, the sea of nocturnal anguish  
and the rock-strewn terrain of daytime anguish;  
the idolatry of “I” and the dissipation of “I”;  
the beheading of epithets, the burying of mirrors;  
the recollection of freshly cut pronouns in the gardens of  
Epicurus and Nezahualcoyotl;  
the flute solo on the terrace of memory and the dance of  
flames in the caverns of thought;  
the migrations of flocks of verbs, wings and claws, seeds and  
hands;  
the bony and root-laden nouns planted in the undulations of  
language;  
love unseen and love unheard and love unspoken:  
love to love.

But some of Paz’s poems touch us more directly. Paz frequently recited these at academic and popular forums, and on the radio and television. One of his favorites—and it is easy to see why—is “*Como quien oye llover*”:

**Hear the rain** (*Como quien oye llover*)

Hear me as you hear the rain,  
in the back of your mind,  
pitter-patter, drizzling,  
water that is air, air that is time,  
the day's not yet gone,  
evening's yet to come,  
figures in the mist,  
just 'round the corner,  
figures of time,  
at the bend in this moment,  
hear me as you hear the rain,  
without hearing, but hearing what I say,  
with eyes open to what's within,  
asleep with the senses awake,  
it's raining, pitter-patter, a murmur of syllables,  
air and water, weightless words:  
of what we were and are,  
the days and years, this moment,  
time without weight, enormous burden,  
hear me as you hear the rain,  
the wet tarmac shining,  
the mist rises and walks,  
the night opens and watches me,  
it's you wrapped in mist,  
you and your face of night,  
you and your skin, faintly flashing,  
crossing the street, entering by my temples,  
watery paces on my eyelids  
hear me as you hear the rain,  
the tarmac glistens, you cross the street,  
it's the wandering fog in the night,  
it's the night asleep in your bed,  
it's the ocean swell of your breathing,  
your watery fingers wet my brow,

your fiery fingers burn my eyes,  
your airy fingers open the eyelids of time,  
gushing forth apparitions and resurrections,  
hear me as you hear the rain,  
the years pass, the moments return,  
can you hear your steps next door?  
neither here nor there: you hear them  
in another time that is right now,  
hear the steps of time,  
creator of places without mass or location,  
hear the rain running down the terrace,  
the night is already darker in the copse,  
the rays have bedded down among the leaves,  
a rambling garden adrift  
—come, your shadow covers this page.

One can hear his voice here in this poem that never ceases to awake the wisp of a smile. A similar yet shorter poem—and one of the clear favorites among the poets contributing to this collection—is “*Entre irse y quedarse*”:

**Between going and staying** (*Entre irse y quedarse*)

Between going and staying, the day is stuck,  
a block of frozen transparency.

Everything is seen yet all is elusive:  
the horizon untouchably near.

Papers on the table, a book, a vase:  
all rest in the shadow of their names.

Blood ascends more slowly through my veins  
a single syllable beating stubbornly in my temples.

The indifferent light transforms  
opaque walls, time without history.

The afternoon has spread out: now it's a bay  
rocking the world with its gentle swaying.

We are neither asleep nor awake:  
We are, we just are.

The moment lets itself go:  
we pull ourselves away; pauses in transit.

Reality for Paz is not something solid, but rather something that only exists when experienced and can only be experienced through the medium of the senses, filtered by both the conscious and unconscious.

Paz can be very direct and very laconic: some poems are very short. We included some of these here. "Hermandad" or "Brotherhood" is partially based on verses attributed to the astronomer Claudius Ptolemy reflecting Platonic ideas of the immortality of the soul and the divinity: who, he asks, plays with us?

**Brotherhood** (*Hermandad: homenaje a Claudio Ptolomeo*)

I am man; how little I last  
and the night stretches on.  
But I look toward the sky:  
the stars are writing.  
Without comprehending, I understand:  
I am also written,  
and at this very moment  
someone is noting me down.

“*Madrugada*” is very short and to the point:

**Dawn** (*Madrugada*)

Cold quick hands  
one by one pull back  
the bands of darkness  
I open my eyes  
    I remain  
alive  
    in the middle  
of a wound still fresh.

Our final selection is “Árbol adentro” or “A tree within”, which was included in the book of poems of the same title. It shows Paz’s control of metaphor, here with powerful and Surrealist imagery.

**A tree within** (*Árbol adentro*)

A tree’s grown inwards  
from my temples.  
Veins are its roots  
nerves its branches  
and thoughts its tangle of leaves.  
Your glances ignite it  
and its shaded fruits  
are blood oranges  
and pomegranates of flame.

Day breaks  
in the body’s night.  
There, inside my head  
the tree speaks.

Come closer: can you hear it?



It ends, like so much of Paz's poetry, with an invitation to the reader to "come closer" and listen. The editors are gratified that so many poets from Hong Kong, Asia and beyond accepted this invitation.

\* Although accomplished translations of all these poems can be found in *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz: 1957-1987*, edited and translated by Eliot Weinberger (New Directions, 1991), we decided—as part of the process of presenting these selected poems to Asian poets—to translate them ourselves, in whole or (in the case of "*Piedra de sol*"), in part. Peter Gordon executed these translations, reproduced here. But we wish to acknowledge the use of Weinberger's translations as references; certain similarities are inevitable.