

RAG, CARDBOARD AND TIN VOICES

The Poetry of Mexican Toys

Luis Felipe Fabre*

What does the *alebrije*¹ watching me know of me? Where is that so-still toy truck made of reeds going? What melody made the horn sigh? Coordinated by Mauricio Martínez Rosas, *Arcoiris de sueños, así juegan los niños mexicanos* (Rainbow of Dreams. This Is How Mexican Children Play) (Nacional Financiera, Mexico City, 1995) pays homage to traditional toys and the craftsmen who make these fantasies in clay, wire and wood possible.

THE VOICES OF PLAY AND TOYS

In this section of the book, Gutierre Aceves Piña reviews different kinds of common, ordinary games, from tongue-twisters, marionettes, miniatures and paper dolls, to games of chance, noisemakers, sugar skulls and boxers. These toys continue to use indigenous techniques and materials, although, over time, they have incorporated all kinds of elements. One of the main characteristics of traditional toys is that they are unique, smothered in ordinariness and they tend to be permanent. Industrial toys

* Poet. First prizewinner for poetry, *Punto de Partida* magazine, 1995.

¹ *Alebrijes* are brightly painted, fantastic animals carved in wood. [Translator's Note.]



Photo: Rigoberto Moreno Santana



are different in that they are aseptic, homogeneous, changing and continually fresh.

How can you not be seduced by the imperfections in a hand-crafted toy? It is as if those little defects gave each toy a personality of its own, making it more like human beings: one eye bigger than the other, drops of paint fallen by sheer accident, a fingerprint of the craftsman pressed into the clay while molding the nose.

Some toys have a ritual or religious function and are made for particular holidays like Christmas, All Saints Day or Corpus Christi. Others try to teach civic pride or prepare children for their future roles in society. But, as Aceves Piña tells us, "The educational or ritual intentions imposed on toys are no barrier to their being able to seduce the imagination and being subjected to games, that territory of pleasure, that aimless land in which useful ends are avoided and leisure is exalted: compost for the creation of other worlds."

Whether it transmits ideologies from the adult world or not, one of the main values of play continues to be the lack of a precise end. It shares with poetry, then,

its tendency to uselessness. Being something useless in an increasingly utilitarian world is quite enough in itself.

FROM THE FANTASY WORKSHOP

How can we even say the word "ball" without wanting to kick it? How do we say piñata without wanting to break it, even if only with our voices? Much can be said about traditional Mexican toys, but to touch their essence, you have to play with them. All poetry implies play. Playing with language, building doorless castles or houseless windows with words, playing hide-and-seek with its meanings, or exploding language with fire crackers ripping it apart like a Judas doll the day before Easter Sunday, so nothing is left but sound and light. Maybe that is why Raúl Aceves and Jorge Elías Luján both chose poetry to approach toys.

"From the Fantasy Workshop," a collection of writings about traditional toys, includes everything from children's rhymes to verse by poets like Carlos Pellicer, Carmen Villoro, Adriana Díaz Enciso, Jorge Esquinca, Ramón López Velarde, Miguel García Ascencio, Antonio Deltoro and Raúl Bañuelos, among others, bound together with the prose of Raúl Aceves. In this very readable trip through the vast universe of toys, the poet knows how to stop to discover the secrets hidden in a *balero*,² a wire bicycle or a doll. So, for example, when he gets to balls, he writes, "Balls have stopped bouncing. They sleep spherically and remember the trajectory of their flight, the walls they bounced off, the feet they pounded black and blue, the thorns that flattened their souls."

Toys, because of their beauty or their mystery, demand their poem. Play and poetry give life and voice to objects, place themselves on the side of these things, as Francis Ponge would say. It is almost as if children and poets were the guardians or heirs of some animist cult practiced since the infancy of humanity. Practically in

² A Mexican toy which consists of a stick attached by a string to a block of wood with a hole in it; the object is to swing the block of wood and catch it by the hole on the stick. [Translator's Note.]

secret, they carry out the task of humanizing the world, of infusing spirit into matter, of changing things into our brethren.

A craftsman can transform the seeds of a tree into a doll, but it is the little girl who makes it her daughter, and the poet who hears her call, as Luján says, "A doll beckons me in a bewildering tongue." Paul Valéry wrote that poetry only exists in its state of composition and of diction; that is, it requires someone to read it. In the same way, dolls, says Aceves, "in and of themselves are no more than the beautiful products of the imagination in the process of completion." Listen to the call of the things themselves: the top calls out to be spun; the doll insists on being carried; the pinwheel asks only a life-giving breath. We should listen to them because they need us.

Play and poetry also share their alchemist's transforming nature. They subvert objects' habitual functions in order to

find other, more surprising ones. A craftsman makes marbles so that children can play marbles, but children know that marbles can also dance or make families or be planets that crash into each other. And just as play turns a cardboard box, made expressly to hold things, into a spaceship, a table, a house, poetry alters the habitual function of words. In daily speech, words are a means; in a poem, they are an end in themselves. An adjective can become a noun or the word "bird" can stop referring to a bird and be anything else, or, in the best of cases, nothing at all.

Fantasy, that stuff of invention, is not a prior state, but is itself an element. Together with earth, fire, air and water, fantasy made the world.

"Perhaps we are also another type of fantastic creature," Aceves tells us. He knows



Photo: José Martínez Verrea



Photo: José Martínez Vera

there are no precise limits between that misty region of reality called fantasy and the one called just plain reality. Poetry, play and even toys themselves make it palpable. Little girls may grow up to become “sad dolls, or at least disconcerted ones, who sometimes write verse,” and there are “imaginary arrows and bullets” that “break real windows.”

A GENTLE TING-A-LING...

In the part of the book written by Jorge Elías Luján, each poem goes with the image of the toy it was born of, but

the photographs do not really illustrate the poems, nor do the poems describe the photographs. Rather, words and images strike up unexpected conversations. From the wings on a clay butterfly, Luján can situate himself in “a slanted evening;” a multicolored helicopter is sufficient pretext for “...the clouds to go for a walk/taking the sky with them.”

“A Gentle Ting-A-Ling...” suggests a solitary toy that, suddenly overcoming its habitual timidity, attracts our attention, inviting us, but also reminding us of its own musicality, similar to the tinkling of those little tin mobiles that the wind only just plays upon. Soft sounds that answer each other quietly, words that find echoes in other words, children’s songs that can be heard in a far-off back yard: Luján knows that every word needs silence to be able to occupy its place and that poetry happens, to a great extent, in what is not said. These poems in their brevity frame the silence, charging it with significance.

An almost imperceptible sense of humor permeates these texts; a sense of humor that, without bursting into laughter, makes intelligence—or something similar to intelligence—smile. It is the look of surprise and the ear of surprise:

*In the crystal of one bubble
the whole earth
reflects itself*

*Plop!
Another planet gone³*

Letting oneself be surprised is play, but in order to be surprised, we must be humble before the world and its words. Being quiet and listening; recognizing that everything around us, and in this case toys and language, has something to say. Luján does not describe the game; he turns it into language. In some poems the words play at rhyming; in others, the verses amuse themselves by drawing the similarities with some toy or other, like in the poem written out in the form

³ Jorge Luján’s poems were translated by Rebecca Parfitt and John Oliver Simon.

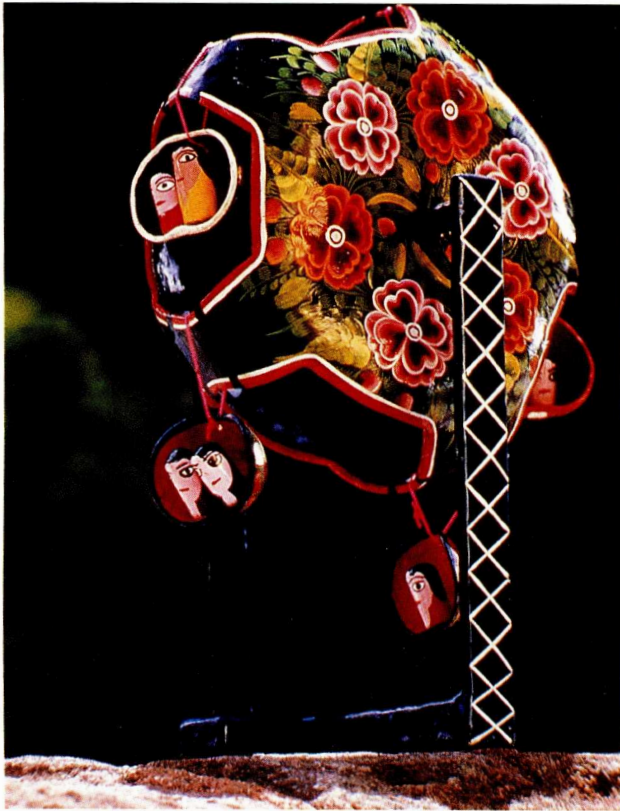


PHOTO: RIGOBERTO MORENO SANTANA

*Toys dwell inside us
but when the season changes
they leave the nest*

*how soon we see them miles away
we
who do not last*

But the time may also come when the toys—or certain toys—disappear forever. As Aceves Piña warns, “The low [sale] price and the time the artisan takes to make traditional toys have a negative effect, creating a tendency for this kind of production to die out.” Their disappearance would mean

of a snake that begins with the child’s tune “A la víbora de la mar” (The Sea Snake). The poet is quiet in the face of the wooden boat, in the face of the clay skull, so that they may insinuate his poem. Just as a child or a puppeteer lend their voices and their movement to the marionettes, but it is the marionettes who speak, who move, the poet lends his voice to the words so that it is the words who speak. “The scribe gathers the words together on the sheet. Does that mean he is the one who makes the design?”

Certain pre-Hispanic reminiscences filter down through these poems, just as they do in the toys: “Rattles there are/Snails resounding/And a layer of arrows bristling the air.” Luminosity and silence predominate, although they are not the only elements in pre-Columbian poetry. Luján takes that poetry on board. Its still unexplored vein in Mexican literature is decanted in his writing, almost without wanting it to be. The feeling of how fleeting life is is there throughout the book. Death, at the end of all the games, is perceived despite the carnival colors of the toys.

Childhood passes; the toys await other children to give them life. It is almost as if the toys carried on their shoulders the advantage of a greater ability for dying and reviving:



PHOTO: JOSÉ MARTÍNEZ VÉREA

Photo: José Martínez Vereá

the end of a form of play and, therefore, of a way of constructing reality. In one of his poems, Luján warns of the threat of extinction of Mexican traditional toys.

*Centuries were needed
To imagine the rainbow*

*Of your shawl
against the night of your skirt*

*Centuries for you to wear them
the last doll of the mountains*

in the future, no trace of you



Photo: Rigoberto Moreno Santana





Faced with the horror that not infrequently seizes the world, a toy, a poem, lose the battle. But sometimes, amidst the horror, the only thing we have to hold on to is a toy, a poem. Luján seeks in toys, in their wooden, wire, cardboard voices, the words that we sometimes cannot find in men. Poetry gives us the possibility of recovering childhood, innocence, even if only while a poem lasts:

*Some carry guns in their hands
you carry a flute
a flute!
oh, little one,
life is savage
outside the jungle*