

The most important stories  
of a major figure in  
twentieth-century literature

# the aleph

and other stories 1933-1969

Jorge Luis Borges

Including an autobiographical essay written especially for this volume,  
and commentaries on the stories by the author □ Edited and translated  
by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with Jorge Luis Borges



## The Aleph and Other Stories

1933-1969

“As sharp as the knives brandished by outlaws. The violence that saturates the tales has a peculiar purity, as if it existed apart from the will of man.

“In a story called *The Meeting*, two youths start quarreling over cards. They are drawn to a cabinet containing the knives of famous duelists of the past. They fight, one is killed, the other breaks down in tears over his senseless deed . . . the knives, not their tools, the men—knew how to fight.

“In *The Challenge*, one gaucho slashes another, then refrains from the fatal thrust. ‘I’m letting you live,’ he tells his antagonist, ‘so you’ll come back looking for me again.’ Life cannot be lived without the dignity of danger [and] there can hardly be a more powerful intimation of union through suffering than Borges’ fiercely compressed parable *The Maker* . . . This 1958 work suggests Borges’ own fate by invoking the life of the blind Homer.”—Time



**THE ALEPH  
AND OTHER STORIES  
1933-1969**

---

**Jorge Luis Borges**

Together with Commentaries  
and an Autobiographical Essay

Edited and translated by  
**NORMAN THOMAS DI GIOVANNI**  
in collaboration with the author



**A NATIONAL GENERAL COMPANY**

This low-priced Bantam Book  
has been completely reset in a type face  
designed for easy reading, and was printed  
from new plates. It contains the complete  
text of the original hard-cover edition.  
NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.



THE ALEPH AND OTHER STORIES 1933-1969  
A Bantam Book / published by arrangement with  
E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

### PRINTING HISTORY

E. P. Dutton edition published November 1970  
2nd printing . . . . January 1971

Certain of the translations in this volume made their first appearances in the following periodicals: BUENOS AIRES HERALD: "The Intruder," "The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)," "The Dead Man," "The Circular Ruins," "The Captive," "The Maker," "Borges and Myself," MUNDUS ARTUM: "Streetcorner Man," "The Rosendo's Tale," THE NEW YORKER: "The Other Death," "The Immortals," "The Man on the Threshold," "In Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Laboratory," "The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths," "The Challenge," "The Meeting," THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS: "Pedro Salcedores," "The Autobiographical Essay" first appeared as a NEW YORKER profile.

Bantam edition published November 1971  
2nd printing

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Grove Press, publishers of FICCIONES, for permission to make new translations of "The Circular Ruins" and "Death and the Compass," and to the University of Texas Press, publishers of DREAMTIGERS, for permission to retranslate "The Captive," "Borges and Myself," and "The Maker."

Assistance for the translation of this volume was given by the Ingram Merrill Foundation.

All rights reserved.  
English translations copyright © 1968, 1969, 1970 by Emecé Editores, S.A., and Norman Thomas di Giovanni; copyright © 1970 by Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy-Casares and Norman Thomas di Giovanni.  
Autobiographical Essay and Commentaries © 1970 by Jorge Luis Borges and Norman Thomas di Giovanni. Original texts copyright, © 1933, 1934, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1960, 1969, 1970 by Emecé Editores, S.A., Buenos Aires; copyright © 1967 by Editorial Losada, S.A., Buenos Aires.

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by  
microfilm or any other means, without permission.  
For information address: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.,  
201 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10003.

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, Inc., a National General company. Its trade-mark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the portrayal of a bantam, is registered in the United States Patent Office and in other countries. Marca Registrada. Bantam Books, Inc., 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10019.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

# Contents

vii Preface

1 The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969

3 The Aleph

18 Streetcorner Man

27 The Approach to al-Mu'tasim

34 The Circular Ruins

41 Death and the Compass

54 The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)

58 The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths

	60	The Dead Man
	67	The Other Death
75		Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth
	85	The Man on the Threshold
	91	The Challenge
	96	The Captive
	98	Borges and Myself
	100	The Maker
	103	The Intruder
	109	The Immortals
	115	The Meeting
	122	Pedro Salvadores
	125	Rosendo's Tale
135		An Autobiographical Essay
	189	Commentaries
	209	Bibliographical Note

# Preface

Since my fame rests on my short stories, it is only natural that we should want to include a selection of them among the several volumes of my writings we are translating for E. P. Dutton. At the same time, one of our aims here has been to make available in English all my previously untranslated older stories, as well as to offer a sampling from my latest work in this form.

Perhaps the chief justification of this book is the translation itself, which we have undertaken in what may be a new way. Working closely together in daily sessions, we have tried to make these stories read as though they had been written in English. We do not consider English and Spanish as compounded of sets of easily interchangeable synonyms; they are two quite different ways of looking at the world, each with a nature of its own. English, for example, is far more physical than Spanish. We have therefore shunned the dictionary as much as possible and done our best to rethink every sentence in English words. This venture does not necessarily mean that we have willfully

*Jorge Luis Borges*

tampered with the original, though in certain cases we have supplied the American reader with those things—geographical, topographical, and historical—taken for granted by any Argentine.

We would have preferred a broader selection that might have included such stories as “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” “Funes el memorioso,” “La secta del Fénix,” and “El Sur” from *Ficciones*, and “Los teólogos,” “Deutsches Requiem,” “La busca de Averroes,” and “El Zahir” from *El Aleph*. However, rights to make our own translations of these stories were denied us, despite the unselfish and unswerving efforts of Dr. Donald Yates on our behalf.

The autobiographical essay and commentaries, prepared especially for this volume, were written directly in English.

J.L.B.

N.T. di G.

Buenos Aires, August 12, 1970

The  
Aleph  
and  
Other  
Stories

1933-1969



# The Aleph

To Estela Canto  
(1945)

O God! I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself  
a King of infinite space. . . .

*Hamlet*, II, 2

But they will teach us that Eternity is the Standing still of the  
Present Time, a *Nunc-stans* (as the Schools call it); which  
neither they, nor any else understand, no more than they  
would a *Hic-stans* for an Infinite greatness of Place.

*Leviathan*, IV, 46

On the burning February morning Beatriz Viterbo died, after braving an agony that never for a single moment gave way to self-pity or fear, I noticed that the sidewalk billboards around Constitution Plaza were advertising some new brand or other of American cigarettes. The fact pained me, for I realized that the wide and ceaseless universe was already slipping away from her and that this slight change was the first of an endless series. The universe may change but not me, I thought with a certain sad vanity. I knew that at times my fruitless devotion had annoyed her; now that she was dead, I could devote myself to her memory, without hope but also without humiliation. I recalled that the thirtieth of April was her birthday; on that day to visit her house on Garay Street and pay my respects to her father and to Carlos Argentino Daneri, her first cousin, would be an irreproachable and perhaps unavoidable act of politeness. Once again I would wait in the twilight of the

*Jorge Luis Borges*

small, cluttered drawing room, once again I would study the details of her many photographs: Beatriz Viterbo in profile and in full color; Beatriz wearing a mask, during the Carnival of 1921; Beatriz at her First Communion; Beatriz on the day of her wedding to Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz soon after her divorce, at a luncheon at the Turf Club; Beatriz at a seaside resort in Quilmes with Delia San Marco Porcel and Carlos Argentino; Beatriz with the Pekinese lapdog given her by Villegas Haedo; Beatriz, front and three-quarter views, smiling, hand on her chin. . . . I would not be forced, as in the past, to justify my presence with modest offerings of books—books whose pages I finally learned to cut beforehand, so as not to find out, months later, that they lay around unopened.

Beatriz Viterbo died in 1929. From that time on, I never let a thirtieth of April go by without a visit to her house. I used to make my appearance at seven-fifteen sharp and stay on for some twenty-five minutes. Each year, I arrived a little later and stayed a little longer. In 1933, a torrential downpour coming to my aid, they were obliged to ask me to dinner. Naturally, I took advantage of that lucky precedent. In 1934, I arrived, just after eight, with one of those large Santa Fe sugared cakes, and quite matter-of-factly I stayed to dinner. It was in this way, on these melancholy and vainly erotic anniversaries, that I came into the gradual confidences of Carlos Argentino Daneri.

Beatriz had been tall, frail, slightly stooped; in her walk there was (if the oxymoron may be allowed) a kind of uncertain grace, a hint of expectancy. Carlos Argentino was pink-faced, overweight, gray-haired, fine-featured. He held a minor position in an unreadable library out on the edge of the Southside of Buenos Aires. He was authoritarian but also unimpressive. Until only recently, he took advantage of his nights and holidays to stay at home. At a remove of two generations, the Italian “S” and demonstrative Italian gestures still survived in him. His mental activity was continuous, deeply felt, far-reaching, and—all in all—meaningless. He dealt in pointless analogies and in trivial

scruples. He had (as did Beatriz) large, beautiful, finely shaped hands. For several months he seemed to be obsessed with Paul Fort—less with his ballads than with the idea of a towering reputation. “He is the Prince of poets,” Daneri would repeat fatuously. “You will belittle him in vain—but no, not even the most venomous of your shafts will graze him.”

On the thirtieth of April, 1941, along with the sugared cake I allowed myself to add a bottle of Argentine cognac. Carlos Argentino tasted it, pronounced it “interesting,” and, after a few drinks, launched into a glorification of modern man.

“I view him,” he said with a certain unaccountable excitement, “in his inner sanctum, as though in his castle tower, supplied with telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, wireless sets, motion-picture screens, slide projectors, glossaries, timetables, handbooks, bulletins. . . .”

He remarked that for a man so equipped, actual travel was superfluous. Our twentieth century had inverted the story of Mohammed and the mountain; nowadays, the mountain came to the modern Mohammed.

So foolish did his ideas seem to me, so pompous and so drawn out his exposition, that I linked them at once to literature and asked him why he didn’t write them down. As might be foreseen, he answered that he had already done so—that these ideas, and others no less striking, had found their place in the Proem, or Augural Canto, or, more simply, the Prologue Canto of the poem on which he had been working for many years now, alone, without publicity, without fanfare, supported only by those twin staffs universally known as work and solitude. First, he said, he opened the floodgates of his fancy; then, taking up hand tools, he resorted to the file. The poem was entitled *The Earth*; it consisted of a description of the planet, and, of course, lacked no amount of picturesque digressions and bold apostrophes.

I asked him to read me a passage, if only a short one. He opened a drawer of his writing table, drew out a thick stack

Jorge Luis Borges

of papers—sheets of a large pad imprinted with the letterhead of the Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur Library—and, with ringing satisfaction, declaimed:

Mine eyes, as did the Greek's, have known men's towns  
and fame,  
The works, the days in light that fades to amber;  
I do not change a fact or falsify a name—  
The *voyage* I set down is . . . *autour de ma chambre*.

“From any angle, a greatly interesting stanza,” he said, giving his verdict. “The opening line wins the applause of the professor, the academician, and the Hellenist—to say nothing of the would-be scholar, a considerable sector of the public. The second flows from Homer to Hesiod (generous homage, at the very outset, to the father of didactic poetry), not without rejuvenating a process whose roots go back to Scripture—enumeration, congeries, conglomeration. The third—baroque? decadent? example of the cult of pure form?—consists of two equal hemistichs. The fourth, frankly bilingual, assures me the unstinted backing of all minds sensitive to the pleasures of sheer fun. I should, in all fairness, speak of the novel rhyme in lines two and four, and of the erudition that allows me—without a hint of pedantry!—to cram into four lines three learned allusions covering thirty centuries packed with literature—first to the *Odyssey*, second to *Works and Days*, and third to the immortal bagatelle bequeathed us by the frolicking pen of the Savoyard, Xavier de Maistre. Once more I've come to realize that modern art demands the balm of laughter, the scherzo. Decidedly, Goldoni holds the stage!”

He read me many other stanzas, each of which also won his own approval and elicited his lengthy explications. There was nothing remarkable about them. I did not even find them any worse than the first one. Application, resignation, and chance had gone into the writing; I saw, however, that Daneri's real work lay not in the poetry but in his invention of reasons why the poetry should be admired. Of

course, this second phase of his effort modified the writing in his eyes, though not in the eyes of others. Daneri's style of delivery was extravagant, but the deadly drone of his metric regularity tended to tone down and to dull that extravagance.\*

Only once in my life have I had occasion to look into the fifteen thousand alexandrines of the *Polyolbion*, that topographical epic in which Michael Drayton recorded the flora, fauna, hydrography, orography, military and monastic history of England. I am sure, however, that this limited but bulky production is less boring than Carlos Argentino's similar vast undertaking. Daneri had in mind to set to verse the entire face of the planet, and, by 1941, had already displaced a number of acres of the State of Queensland, nearly a mile of the course run by the River Ob, a gasworks to the north of Veracruz, the leading shops in the Buenos Aires parish of Concepción, the villa of Mariana Cambaceres de Alvear in the Belgrano section of the Argentine capital, and a Turkish baths establishment not far from the well-known Brighton Aquarium. He read me certain long-winded passages from his Australian section, and at one point praised a word of his own coining, the color "celestewhite," which he felt "actually *suggests* the sky, an element of utmost importance in the landscape of the continent Down Under." But these sprawling, lifeless hexameters lacked even the relative excitement of the so-called Augural Canto. Along about midnight, I left.

Two Sundays later, Daneri rang me up—perhaps for the first time in his life. He suggested we get together at four o'clock "for cocktails in the salon-bar next door, which the forward-looking Zunino and Zungri—my landlords, as you

\* Among my memories are also some lines of a satire in which he lashed out unsparingly at bad poets. After accusing them of dressing their poems in the warlike armor of erudition, and of flapping in vain their unavailing wings, he concluded with this verse:

But they forget, alas, one foremost fact—BEAUTY!

Only the fear of creating an army of implacable and powerful enemies dissuaded him (he told me) from fearlessly publishing this poem.

Jorge Luis Borges

doubtless recall—are throwing open to the public. It's a place you'll really want to get to know."

More in resignation than in pleasure, I accepted. Once there, it was hard to find a table. The "salon-bar," ruthlessly modern, was only barely less ugly than what I had expected; at the nearby tables, the excited customers spoke breathlessly of the sums Zunino and Zungri had invested in furnishings without a second thought to cost. Carlos Argentino pretended to be astonished by some feature or other of the lighting arrangement (with which, I felt, he was already familiar), and he said to me with a certain severity, "Grudgingly, you'll have to admit to the fact that these premises hold their own with many others far more in the public eye."

He then reread me four or five different fragments of the poem. He had revised them following his pet principle of verbal ostentation: where at first "blue" had been good enough, he now wallowed in "azures," "ceruleans," and "ultramarines." The word "milky" was too easy for him; in the course of an impassioned description of a shed where wool was washed, he chose such words as "lacteal," "lactescent," and even made one up—"lactinacious." After that, straight out, he condemned our modern mania for having books prefaced, "a practice already held up to scorn by the Prince of Wits in his own graceful preface to the *Quixote*." He admitted, however, that for the opening of his new work an attention-getting foreword might prove valuable—"an accolade signed by a literary hand of renown." He next went on to say that he considered publishing the initial cantos of his poem. I then began to understand the unexpected telephone call; Daneri was going to ask me to contribute a foreword to his pedantic hodgepodge. My fear turned out unfounded; Carlos Argentino remarked, with admiration and envy, that surely he could not be far wrong in qualifying with the epithet "solid" the prestige enjoyed in every circle by Álvaro Melián Lafinur, a man of letters, who would, if I insisted on it, be only too glad to dash off some charming opening words to the poem. In order to avoid

ignominy and failure, he suggested I make myself spokesman for two of the book's undeniable virtues—formal perfection and scientific rigor—"inasmuch as this wide garden of metaphors, of figures of speech, of elegances, is inhospitable to the least detail not strictly upholding of truth." He added that Beatriz had always been taken with Álvaro.

I agreed—agreed profusely—and explained for the sake of credibility that I would not speak to Álvaro the next day, Monday, but would wait until Thursday, when we got together for the informal dinner that follows every meeting of the Writers' Club. (No such dinners are ever held, but it is an established fact that the meetings do take place on Thursdays, a point which Carlos Argentino Daneri could verify in the daily papers, and which lent a certain reality to my promise.) Half in prophecy, half in cunning, I said that before taking up the question of a preface I would outline the unusual plan of the work. We then said good-bye.

Turning the corner of Bernardo de Irigoyen, I reviewed as impartially as possible the alternatives before me. They were: *a*) to speak to Álvaro, telling him this first cousin of Beatriz' (the explanatory euphemism would allow me to mention her name) had concocted a poem that seemed to draw out into infinity the possibilities of cacophony and chaos: *b*) not to say a word to Álvaro. I clearly foresaw that my indolence would opt for *b*.

But first thing Friday morning, I began worrying about the telephone. It offended me that that device, which had once produced the irrecoverable voice of Beatriz, could now sink so low as to become a mere receptacle for the futile and perhaps angry remonstrances of that deluded Carlos Argentino Daneri. Luckily, nothing happened—except the inevitable spite touched off in me by this man, who had asked me to fulfill a delicate mission for him and then had let me drop.

Gradually, the phone came to lose its terrors, but one day toward the end of October it rang, and Carlos Argentino was on the line. He was deeply disturbed, so much so

Jorge Luis Borges

that at the outset I did not recognize his voice. Sadly but angrily he stammered that the now unrestrainable Zunino and Zungri, under the pretext of enlarging their already outsized “salon-bar,” were about to take over and tear down his house.

“My home, my ancestral home, my old and inveterate Garay Street home!” he kept repeating, seeming to forget his woe in the music of his words.

It was not hard for me to share his distress. After the age of fifty, all change becomes a hateful symbol of the passing of time. Besides, the scheme concerned a house that for me would always stand for Beatriz. I tried explaining this delicate scruple of regret, but Daneri seemed not to hear me. He said that if Zunino and Zungri persisted in this outrage, Doctor Zunni, his lawyer, would sue *ipso facto* and make them pay some fifty thousand dollars in damages.

Zunni’s name impressed me; his firm, although at the unlikely address of Caseros and Tacuarí, was nonetheless known as an old and reliable one. I asked him whether Zunni had already been hired for the case. Daneri said he would phone him that very afternoon. He hesitated, then with that level, impersonal voice we reserve for confiding something intimate, he said that to finish the poem he could not get along without the house because down in the cellar there was an Aleph. He explained that an Aleph is one of the points in space that contains all other points.

“It’s in the cellar under the dining room,” he went on, so overcome by his worries now that he forgot to be pompous. “It’s mine—mine. I discovered it when I was a child, all by myself. The cellar stairway is so steep that my aunt and uncle forbade my using it, but I’d heard someone say there was a world down there. I found out later they meant an old-fashioned globe of the world, but at the time I thought they were referring to the world itself. One day when no one was home I started down in secret, but I stumbled and fell. When I opened my eyes, I saw the Aleph.”

“The Aleph?” I repeated.

“Yes, the only place on earth where all places are—seen

from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending. I kept the discovery to myself and went back every chance I got. As a child, I did not foresee that this privilege was granted me so that later I could write the poem. Zunino and Zungri will not strip me of what's mine—no, and a thousand times no! Legal code in hand, Doctor Zunni will prove that my Aleph is inalienable.”

I tried to reason with him. “But isn't the cellar very dark?” I said.

“Truth cannot penetrate a closed mind. If all places in the universe are in the Aleph, then all stars, all lamps, all sources of light are in it, too.”

“You wait there. I'll be right over to see it.”

I hung up before he could say no. The full knowledge of a fact sometimes enables you to see all at once many supporting but previously unsuspected things. It amazed me not to have suspected until that moment that Carlos Argentino was a madman. As were all the Viterbos, when you came down to it. Beatriz (I myself often say it) was a woman, a child, with almost uncanny powers of clairvoyance, but forgetfulness, distractions, contempt, and a streak of cruelty were also in her, and perhaps these called for a pathological explanation. Carlos Argentino's madness filled me with spiteful elation. Deep down, we had always detested each other.

On Garay Street, the maid asked me kindly to wait. The master was, as usual, in the cellar developing pictures. On the unplayed piano, beside a large vase that held no flowers, smiled (more timeless than belonging to the past) the large photograph of Beatriz, in gaudy colors. Nobody could see us; in a seizure of tenderness, I drew close to the portrait and said to it, “Beatriz, Beatriz Elena, Beatriz Elena Viterbo, darling Beatriz, Beatriz now gone forever, it's me, it's Borges.”

Moments later, Carlos came in. He spoke drily. I could see he was thinking of nothing else but the loss of the Aleph.

“First a glass of pseudo-cognac,” he ordered, “and then

Jorge Luis Borges

down you dive into the cellar. Let me warn you, you'll have to lie flat on your back. Total darkness, total immobility, and a certain ocular adjustment will also be necessary. From the floor, you must focus your eyes on the nineteenth step. Once I leave you, I'll lower the trapdoor and you'll be quite alone. You needn't fear the rodents very much—though I know you will. In a minute or two, you'll see the Aleph—the microcosm of the alchemists and Kabbalists, our true proverbial friend, the *multum in parvo!*”

Once we were in the dining room, he added, “Of course, if you don't see it, your incapacity will not invalidate what I have experienced. Now, down you go. In a short while you can babble with *all* of Beatriz' images.”

Tired of his inane words, I quickly made my way. The cellar, barely wider than the stairway itself, was something of a pit. My eyes searched the dark, looking in vain for the globe Carlos Argentino had spoken of. Some cases of empty bottles and some canvas sacks cluttered one corner. Carlos picked up a sack, folded it in two, and at a fixed spot spread it out.

“As a pillow,” he said, “this is quite threadbare, but if it's padded even a half-inch higher, you won't see a thing, and there you'll lie, feeling ashamed and ridiculous. All right now, sprawl that hulk of yours there on the floor and count off nineteen steps.”

I went through with his absurd requirements, and at last he went away. The trapdoor was carefully shut. The blackness, in spite of a chink that I later made out, seemed to me absolute. For the first time, I realized the danger I was in: I'd let myself be locked in a cellar by a lunatic, after gulping down a glassful of poison! I knew that back of Carlos' transparent boasting lay a deep fear that I might not see the promised wonder. To keep his madness undetected, to keep from admitting that he was mad, *Carlos had to kill me*. I felt a shock of panic, which I tried to pin to my uncomfortable position and not to the effect of a drug. I shut my eyes—I opened them. Then I saw the Aleph.

I arrive now at the ineffable core of my story. And here

begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols: to signify the godhead, one Persian speaks of a bird that somehow is all birds; Alanus de Insulis, of a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere; Ezekiel, of a four-faced angel who at one and the same time moves east and west, north and south. (Not in vain do I recall these inconceivable analogies; they bear some relation to the Aleph.) Perhaps the gods might grant me a similar metaphor, but then this account would become contaminated by literature, by fiction. Really, what I want to do is impossible, for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal. In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive. Nonetheless, I'll try to recollect what I can.

On the back part of the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance. At first I thought it was revolving; then I realized that this movement was an illusion created by the dizzying world it bounded. The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me; I saw in a backyard of Soler Street the same tiles that thirty years before I'd seen in the entrance of a house in Fray Bentos; I

*Jorge Luis Borges*

saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam; I saw convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of sand; I saw a woman in Inverness whom I shall never forget; I saw her tangled hair, her tall figure, I saw the cancer in her breast; I saw a ring of baked mud in a sidewalk, where before there had been a tree; I saw a summer house in Adrogué and a copy of the first English translation of Pliny—Philemon Holland’s—and all at the same time saw each letter on each page (as a boy, I used to marvel that the letters in a closed book did not get scrambled and lost overnight); I saw a sunset in Querétaro that seemed to reflect the color of a rose in Bengal; I saw my empty bedroom; I saw in a closet in Alkmaar a terrestrial globe between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly; I saw horses with flowing manes on a shore of the Caspian Sea at dawn; I saw the delicate bone structure of a hand; I saw the survivors of a battle sending out picture postcards; I saw in a showcase in Mirzapur a pack of Spanish playing cards; I saw the slanting shadows of ferns on a greenhouse floor; I saw tigers, pistons, bison, tides, and armies; I saw all the ants on the planet; I saw a Persian astrolabe; I saw in the drawer of a writing table (and the handwriting made me tremble) unbelievable, obscene, detailed letters, which Beatriz had written to Carlos Argentino; I saw a monument I worshiped in the Chacarita cemetery; I saw the rotted dust and bones that had once deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo; I saw the circulation of my own dark blood; I saw the coupling of love and the modification of death; I saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth; I saw my own face and my own bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon—the unimaginable universe.

I felt infinite wonder, infinite pity.

“Feeling pretty cockeyed, are you, after so much spying into places where you have no business?” said a hated and

joyful voice. "Even if you were to rack your brains, you couldn't pay me back in a hundred years for this revelation. One hell of an observatory, eh, Borges?"

Carlos Argentino's feet were planted on the topmost step. In the sudden dim light, I managed to pick myself up and utter, "One hell of a—yes, one hell of a."

The matter-of-factness of my voice surprised me. Anxiously, Carlos Argentino went on.

"Did you see everything—really clear, in colors?"

At that very moment I found my revenge. Kindly, openly pitying him, distraught, evasive, I thanked Carlos Argentino Daneri for the hospitality of his cellar and urged him to make the most of the demolition to get away from the pernicious metropolis, which spares no one—believe me, I told him, no one! Quietly and forcefully, I refused to discuss the Aleph. On saying goodbye, I embraced him and repeated that the country, that fresh air and quiet were the great physicians.

Out on the street, going down the stairways inside Constitution Station, riding the subway, every one of the faces seemed familiar to me. I was afraid that not a single thing on earth would ever again surprise me; I was afraid I would never again be free of all I had seen. Happily, after a few sleepless nights, I was visited once more by oblivion.

*Postscript of March first, 1943*—Some six months after the pulling down of a certain building on Garay Street, Procrustes & Co., the publishers, not put off by the considerable length of Daneri's poem, brought out a selection of its "Argentine sections." It is redundant now to repeat what happened. Carlos Argentino Daneri won the Second National Prize for Literature.\* First Prize went to Dr. Aita; Third Prize, to Dr. Mario Bonfanti. Unbelievably, my own book *The Sharper's Cards* did not get a single vote. Once

\* "I received your pained congratulations," he wrote me. "You rage, my poor friend, with envy, but you must confess—even if it chokes you!—that this time I have crowned my cap with the reddest of feathers; my turban with the most *caliph* of rubies."

Jorge Luis Borges

again dullness and envy had their triumph! It's been some time now that I've been trying to see Daneri; the gossip is that a second selection of the poem is about to be published. His felicitous pen (no longer cluttered by the Aleph) has now set itself the task of writing an epic on our national hero, General San Martín.

I want to add two final observations: one, on the nature of the Aleph; the other, on its name. As is well known, the Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Its use for the strange sphere in my story may not be accidental. For the Kabbalah, that letter stands for the *En Soph*, the pure and boundless godhead; it is also said that it takes the shape of a man pointing to both heaven and earth, in order to show that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher; for Cantor's *Mengenlehre*, it is the symbol of transfinite numbers, of which any part is as great as the whole. I would like to know whether Carlos Argentino chose that name or whether he read it—applied to another point where all points converge—in one of the numberless texts that the Aleph in his cellar revealed to him. Incredible as it may seem, I believe that the Aleph of Garay Street was a false Aleph.

Here are my reasons. Around 1867, Captain Burton held the post of British Consul in Brazil. In July, 1942, Pedro Henríquez Ureña came across a manuscript of Burton's, in a library at Santos, dealing with the mirror which the Oriental world attributes to Iskander Zu al-Karnayn, or Alexander Bicornis of Macedonia. In its crystal the whole world was reflected. Burton mentions other similar devices—the sevenfold cup of Kai Kosru; the mirror that Tariq ibn-Ziyad found in a tower (*Thousand and One Nights*, 272); the mirror that Lucian of Samosata examined on the moon (*True History*, I, 26); the mirrorlike spear that the first book of Capella's *Satyricon* attributes to Jupiter; Merlin's universal mirror, which was "round and hollow . . . and seem'd a world of glas" (*The Faerie Queene*, III, 2, 19)—and adds this curious statement: "But the aforesaid objects (besides the disadvantage of not existing) are mere optical

instruments. The Faithful who gather at the mosque of Amr, in Cairo, are acquainted with the fact that the entire universe lies inside one of the stone pillars that ring its central court. . . . No one, of course, can actually see it, but those who lay an ear against the surface tell that after some short while they perceive its busy hum. . . . The mosque dates from the seventh century; the pillars come from other temples of pre-Islamic religions, since, as ibn-Khaldun has written: 'In nations founded by nomads, the aid of foreigners is essential in all concerning masonry.'

Does this Aleph exist in the heart of a stone? Did I see it there in the cellar when I saw all things, and have I now forgotten it? Our minds are porous and forgetfulness seeps in; I myself am distorting and losing, under the wearing away of the years, the face of Beatriz.

# Streetcorner Man

*To Enrique Amorim  
(1933)*

Fancy your coming out and asking me, of all people, about the late Francisco Real. Sure, I knew him, even though he wasn't from around here. He was a big shot on the Northside—that whole stretch from the Guadalupe pond to the old Artillery Barracks. I never laid eyes on the guy above three times and these three times were all the same night. But nights like that you don't forget. It was when La Lujanera got it in her head to come around to my shack and bed down with me, and Rosendo Juárez took off from the Maldonado for good. Of course, you're not the kind that name would mean much to. But around Villa Santa Rita, Rosendo Juárez—the Slasher we called him—had a reputation for being pretty tough. He was one of don Nicolás Paredes' boys, the same as Paredes was one of Morel's gang, and he'd earned respect for the way he handled a knife. Sharp dresser too. Always rode up to the whorehouse on a dark horse, his riding gear decked out with silver. There wasn't a man or dog around didn't hold him in regard—and that goes

for the women as well. Everybody knew he had at least a couple of killings to his name. He'd have on one of those soft hats with a narrow brim and tall crown, and it would sit there kind of cocky on his long thick hair he wore slicked straight back. Lady luck smiled on him, like they say, and around Villa all us younger guys used to ape him even to the way he spit. But then one night we got a good look at what this Rosendo was made of.

All this might seem made-up, but the story of what happened that particular night starts when this flashy red-wheeled buggy—jamful of men—comes barreling its way down those hard-packed dirt roads out between the brick kilns and the empty lots. Two guys in black were making a big racket twanging away on guitars, and the driver kept cracking his whip at the stray dogs snapping at the legs of the horse. Sitting all quiet in the middle was one guy wrapped in a poncho. This was the famous Butcher—he'd picked that name up working in the stockyards—and he was out for a good fight and maybe a killing. The night was cool and welcome. A couple of them sat up on the folded hood just like they were parading along some downtown avenue in Carnival. A lot more things happened that night, but it was only later on we got wind of this first part. Our gang was there at Julia's pretty early. This dance hall of hers, between the Gauna road and the river, was really just a big shed made out of sheets of corrugated iron. You could spot the place from two or three blocks off either by the red lamp hanging out front or by the rumpus. Julia, even though she was a darkle, took trouble to run things right—there was always plenty of fiddlers and good booze and dancing partners ready to go all night. But La Lujanera—she was Rosendo's woman—had the others all beat by a mile. She's dead now, and I can tell you years go by when I don't give her a thought anymore. But in her day you ought to have seen her—what eyes she had! One look at her was enough to make a man lose sleep.

The rum, the music, the women, Rosendo with that rough talk pouring out of his mouth and a slap on the back

*Jorge Luis Borges*

for each of us that I tried to take for a sign of real friendship—the thing is, I was happy as they come. I was lucky too. I had me a partner who could follow my steps just like she knew ahead of time which way I was going to turn. The tango took hold of us, driving us along and then splitting us up and then bringing us back together again. There we were in the middle of all this fun, like in some kind of dream, when all of a sudden I feel the music sort of getting louder. Turns out it was those two guitar pickers riding in the buggy, coming closer and closer, their music getting mixed up with ours. Then the breeze shifted, you couldn't hear them anymore, and my mind went back to my own steps and my partner's, and to the ins and outs of the dance. A good half hour later there was this pounding on the door and a big voice calling out like it could have been the cops. Everything went silent. Then somebody out there starts shouldering the door and the next thing we know a guy busts in. Funny thing is he looked exactly like his voice.

To us he wasn't Francisco Real—not yet—but just some big hefty guy. He was all in black from head to toe, except for this reddish-brown scarf draped over one shoulder. I remember his face. There was something Indian and kind of angular about it.

When the door come flying in it smacked right into me. Before I even knew what I was doing I was on top of the guy, throwing him a left square in the teeth while my right goes inside my vest for my knife. But I never got a chance. Steadying himself, he puts his arms out and shoves me aside like he's brushing something out of the way. There I was down on my ass—back of him now—my hand still inside the jacket grabbing for the knife. And him wading forward like nothing happened. Just wading forward, a whole head taller than all these guys he's pushing his way through—and acting like he never even saw them. The first of our guys—bunch of gaping wops—just back out of his way, scared as hell. But only the first. In the next bunch the Redhead was waiting for him, and before the newcomer could lay a hand

on his shoulder, Red's knife was out and he let him have one across the face with the flat of the blade. Soon as they saw that they all jumped the guy. The hall was pretty long, maybe more than nine or ten yards, and they drove him from one end almost to the other—like Christ in one of the Stations—roughing him up, hooting at him, spitting all over him. First they let him have it with their fists, then, seeing he didn't bother shielding the blows, they started slapping him openhanded and flicking the fringes of their scarves at him, mocking him. At the same time they were saving him for Rosendo, who all this time was standing with his back against the far wall and not moving a muscle, not saying a word. All he did was puff on his cigarette, a little worried-looking, like he already knew what came clear to the rest of us only later on. The Butcher, who was hanging on but was beginning to bleed here and there—that whole hooting pack behind him—got pushed closer and closer to Rosendo. Laughed at, lashed at, spit on, he only started talking when the two of them came face to face. Then he looked at Rosendo and, wiping his face on his sleeve, said something like this:

“I'm Francisco Real and I come from the Northside. People call me the Butcher. I let all these punks lay their hands on me just now because what I'm looking for is a man. Word's going around there's someone out in these lousy mudflats supposed to be pretty good with a knife. They call him the Slasher and they say he's pretty tough. I'd like to meet up with the guy. Maybe he can teach a nobody like me how a man with guts handles himself.”

He had his say looking straight at Rosendo, and all at once this big knife he must have had up his sleeve was flashing in his hand. Instead of pressing in, now everyone starts opening up space for a fight—at the same time staring at the two of them in dead silence. Even the thick lips of the blind nigger playing the fiddle were turned that way.

Right then I hear this commotion behind me and in the frame of the door I get me a glimpse of six or seven men who must have been the Butcher's gang. The oldest, a

*Jorge Luis Borges*

leathery-faced guy with a big gray moustache, who looked like a hick, comes in a few steps and, going all goggle-eyed at the women and the lights, takes off his hat, respectful. The rest of them kept their eyes peeled, ready to swing into action if anything underhanded went on.

What was the matter with Rosendo all this time, not bouncing that loudmouth the hell out? He was still keeping quiet, not even raising his eyes. I don't know if he spit his cigarette out or if it fell from his mouth. Finally he manages to come up with a couple of words, but so low the rest of us at the other end of the dance floor didn't get what he said. Francisco Real challenged him again, and again Rosendo refused. At this point, the youngest of the newcomers lets out a whistle. La Lujanera gave the guy a look that went right through him. Then, her hair swinging down over her shoulders, she wedged her way through the crowd and, going up to her man, slips his knife out and hands it to him.

"Rosendo," she says to him, "I think you're going to need this."

Way up under the roof was this kind of long window that opened out over the river. Rosendo took the knife in his two hands and turned it over like he never laid eyes on it before. Then all of a sudden he raises his arms up over his head and flips the knife behind him out the window into the Maldonado. I felt a chill go through me.

"The only reason I don't carve you up is cause you sicken me," the Butcher says then, making to let Rosendo have it. That split second La Lujanera threw her arms around the Butcher's neck, giving him one of those looks of hers, and says to him, mad as hell, "Let the bastard alone—making us think he was a man."

For a minute Francisco Real couldn't figure it out. Then wrapping his arms around her like it was forever, he calls to the musicians to play loud and strong and orders the rest of us to dance. The music went like wildfire from one end of the hall to the other. Real danced sort of stiff but held his partner up tight, and in nothing flat he had her charmed. When they got near the door he shouted, "Make way, boys,

she's all mine now!" and out they went, cheek to cheek, like the tango was floating them off.

I must have turned a little red with shame. I took a couple of turns with some woman, then dropped her cold. On account of the heat and the jam, I told her, then edged my way around the room toward the door. It was a nice night out—but for who? There was their buggy at the corner of the alley with two guitars standing straight up on the seat like men. Boy, it galled me seeing that—it was as much as saying we weren't even good enough to clip a lousy guitar. The thought that we were a bunch of nobodys really had me burned up, and I snatched the carnation from behind my ear and threw it in a puddle. I stood there a while staring at it, trying to take my mind off things. I wished it was already tomorrow—I wished that night were over. Then the next thing I knew there's this elbow shoving me aside and it almost came like a relief. It was Rosendo—all by himself, slinking off.

"You're always getting in the way, kid," he says to me half snarling. I couldn't tell if he was just getting something off his chest or what. He disappeared in the dark toward the Maldonado. I never laid eyes on him again.

I stood there looking at the things I'd seen all my life—the big wide sky, the river going on down there in its own blind way, a horse half asleep, the dirt roads, the kilns—and it came to me that in the middle of this ragweed and all these dump heaps and this whole stinking place, I'd grown up just another weed myself. What else was going to come out of this crap but us—lots of lip but soft inside, all talk but no standing up to anyone? Then I thought no, the worse the neighborhood the tougher it had to be. Crap? Back toward the dance hall the music was still going strong, and on the breeze came a smell of honeysuckle. Nice night, but so what? There were so many stars, some right on top of others, it made you dizzy just looking at them. I tried hard to tell myself that what happened meant nothing to me, but I just couldn't get over Rosendo's yellow streak and the newcomer's plain guts. Real even managed to

*Jorge Luis Borges*

get hold of a woman for the night—for that night and a lot of nights and maybe forever, I thought, because La Lujanera was really something. God knows which way they headed. They couldn't have wandered very far. By then the two of them were probably going at it in some ditch.

When I got back, the dance was in full swing. I slipped into the crowd, quiet as I could, noticing that some of our boys had taken off and that the Northside bunch were dancing along with everyone else. There was no shoving, no rough stuff. Everybody was watching out and on good behavior. The music sounded sleepy, and the girls tangoing away with the outsiders didn't have much to say.

I was on the lookout for something, but not for what happened. Outside there were sounds of a woman crying and then that voice we all knew by then—but real low, almost too low, like somehow it didn't belong to anyone anymore.

“Go on in, you slut,” it was telling her—then more tears. After that the voice sounded desperate.

“Open the door, you understand me? Open it, you lousy tramp. Open it, bitch.”

At that point the shaky door opens and in comes La Lujanera, all alone. Just like someone's herding her.

“Must be a ghost out there behind her,” said the Red-head.

“A dead man, friend.” It was the Butcher, and he staggers in, his face like a drunk's, and in the space we opened up for him he takes a couple of reeling steps—tall, hardly seeing—then all at once goes down like a log. One of his friends rolled him over and fixed him a pillow with his scarf, but all this fussing only got him smeared with blood. We could see there was a big gash in his chest. The blood was welling up and blackening a bright red neckerchief I hadn't noticed before because his scarf covered it. For first aid one of the women brought rum and some scorched rags. The man was in no shape to explain. La Lujanera looked at him in a daze, her arms hanging by her sides. There was one question on everyone's face and finally she got out an

answer. She said after leaving with the Butcher they went to a little field and at that point someone she didn't know turned up and challenged him to fight and then gave him this stab. She swore she didn't know who it was, but that it wasn't Rosendo. Was anyone going to believe that?

The man at our feet was dying. It looked to me like the hand that done the job done it well. Just the same, the man hung on. When he knocked that second time Julia was brewing some matés. The cup went clear around the circle and back to me before he died. When the end came, he said in a low voice, "Cover my face." All he had left was pride and he didn't want us gaping at him while his face went through its agony. Someone put his hat over him and that's how he died—without a sound—under that high black crown. It was only when his chest stopped heaving they dared uncover him. He had that worn-out look dead men have. In his day, from the Artillery Barracks all the way to the Southside, he was one of the scrappiest men around. When I knew he was dead and couldn't talk, I stopped hating him.

"All it takes to die is being alive," says one of the girls in the crowd. And in the same way another one says, "A man's so full of pride and now look—all he's good for is gathering flies."

Right then the Northside gang starts talking to each other in low voices. Then two of them come out together saying, "The woman killed him." After that, in a real loud voice, one of them threw the accusation in her face, and they all swarmed in around her. Forgetting I had to be careful, I was on them like a light. I don't know what kept me from reaching for my knife. There were a lot of eyes watching—maybe everybody's—and I said, putting them down, "Look at this woman's hands. How could she get the strength of the nerve to knife a man?"

Then, kind of offhand, I added, "Whoever would have dreamed the deceased, who—like they say—was a pretty tough guy in his own neck of the woods, would end up this way? And in a place sleepy as this, where nothing ever

*Jorge Luis Borges*

happens till some outsider comes around trying to show us a little fun and for all his pains only gets himself spit on?"

Nobody offered his hide for a whipping.

Right then, in the dead silence, you could make out the approach of riders. It was the law. Everybody—some more, some less—had his own good reason for staying clear of the police. The best thing was to dump the body in the Maldonado. You remember that long window the knife went flying out of? Well, that's where the man in black went. A bunch of guys lifted him up. There were hands stripping him of every cent and trinket he had, and someone even hacked off one of his fingers to steal his ring. They helped themselves, all right—real daring bunch with a poor defenseless stiff once a better guy already straightened him out. One good heave and the current did the rest. To keep him from floating, they maybe even tore out his guts. I don't know—I didn't want to look. The old-timer with the gray moustache never took his eyes off me. Making the best of all the commotion, La Lujanera slipped away.

When the lawmen came in for a look, the dance was going good again. That blind fiddler could really scrape some lively numbers on that violin of his—the kind of thing you never hear anymore. It was beginning to get light outside. The fence posts on a nearby slope seemed to stand alone, the strands of wire still invisible in the early dawn.

Nice and easy, I walked the two or three blocks back to my shack. A candle was burning in the window, then all at once went out. Let me tell you, I hurried when I saw that. Then, Borges, I put my hand inside my vest—here by the left armpit where I always carry it—and took my knife out again. I turned the blade over, real slow. It was as good as new, innocent-looking, and you couldn't see the slightest trace of blood on it.

# The Approach to al-Mu'tasim

(1935)

Philip Guedalla informs us that the novel *The Approach to al-Mu'tasim* by the Bombay barrister Mir Bahadur Ali “is a rather uneasy combination of those Islamic allegories which never fail to impress their own translators, and of that brand of detective stories which inevitably outdoes even Dr. Watson and heightens the horror of human life as it is found in the most respectable boardinghouses of Brighton.” Before him, Mr. Cecil Roberts had blasted Bahadur’s book for “its unaccountable double influence of Wilkie Collins and of the famed twelfth-century Persian, Ferid Eddin Attar”—a simple enough observation which Guedalla merely parrots, though in a more angry jargon. Essentially, both reviewers are in agreement, pointing out the book’s detective-story mechanism and its undercurrent of mysticism. This hybridization may lead us to suspect a certain kinship with Chesterton; we shall presently find out, however, that no such affinity exists.

The first edition of *The Approach to al-Mu'tasim* ap-

peared in Bombay toward the end of 1932. The paper on which the volume was issued, I am told, was almost newsprint; the jacket announced to the purchaser that the book was the first detective novel to be written by a native of Bombay City. Within a few months, four printings of a thousand copies each were sold out. *The Bombay Quarterly Review*, the *Bombay Gazette*, the *Calcutta Review*, the *Hindustani Review* (of Allahabad), and the *Calcutta Englishman* all sang its praises. Bahadur then brought out an illustrated edition, which he retitled *The Conversation with the Man Called al-Mu'tasim* and rather beautifully subtitled *A Game with Shifting Mirrors*. This is the edition which Victor Gollancz has just reissued in London, with a foreword by Dorothy L. Sayers and the omission—perhaps merciful—of the illustrations. It is this edition that I have at hand; I have not been able to obtain a copy of the earlier one, which I surmise may be a better book. I am led to this suspicion by an appendix summarizing the differences between the 1932 and the 1934 editions. Before attempting a discussion of the novel, it might be well to give some idea of the general plot.

Its central figure—whose name we are never told—is a law student in Bombay. Blasphemously, he disbelieves in the Islamic faith of his fathers, but on the tenth night of the moon of Muharram, he finds himself in the midst of a civil disorder between Muslims and Hindus. It is a night of drums and prayers. Among the mob of the heathen, the great paper canopies of the Muslim procession force their way. A hail of Hindu bricks flies down from a roof terrace. A knife is sunk into a belly. Someone—Muslim? Hindu?—dies and is trampled on. Three thousand men are fighting—stick against revolver, obscenity against curse, God the Indivisible against the many Gods. Instinctively, the student freethinker joins in the fighting. With his bare hands, he kills (or thinks he has killed) a Hindu. The Government police—mounted, thunderous, and barely awake—intervene, dealing impartial whiplashes. The student flees, almost under the legs of the horses, heading for the farthest ends of

town. He crosses two sets of railroad tracks, or the same tracks twice. He scales the wall of an unkempt garden at one corner of which rises a circular tower. "A lean and evil mob of mooncoloured hounds" lunges at him from the black rosebushes. Pursued, he seeks refuge in the tower. He climbs an iron ladder—two or three rungs are missing—and on the fiat roof, which has a blackish pit in the middle, comes upon a squalid man in a squatting position, urinating vigorously by the light of the moon. The man confides to him that his profession is stealing gold teeth from the white-shrouded corpses that the Parsis leave on the roof of the tower. He says a number of other vile things and mentions, in passing, that fourteen nights have lapsed since he last cleansed himself with buffalo dung. He speaks with obvious anger of a band of horse thieves from Gujarat, "eaters of dogs and lizards—men, in short, as abominable as the two of us." Day is dawning. In the air there is a low flight of well-fed vultures. The student, in utter exhaustion, lies down to sleep. When he wakes up, the sun is high overhead and the thief is gone. Gone also are a couple of Trichinopoly cigars and a few silver rupees. Threatened by the events of the night before, the student decides to lose himself somewhere within the bounds of India. He knows he has shown himself capable of killing an infidel, but not of knowing with certainty whether the Muslim is more justified in his beliefs than the infidel. The name of Gujarat haunts him, and also the name of a *malka-sansi* (a woman belonging to a caste of thieves) from Palampur, many times favored by the curses and hatred of the despoiler of corpses. He reasons that the anger of a man so thoroughly vile is in itself a kind of praise. He resolves—though rather hopelessly—to find her. He prays and sets out slowly and deliberately on his long journey. So ends the novel's second chapter.

It is hardly possible to outline here the involved adventures that befall him in the remaining nineteen. There is a baffling pullulation of dramatis personae, to say nothing of a biography that seems to exhaust the range of the human

*Jorge Luis Borges*

spirit (running from infamy to mathematical speculation) or of a pilgrimage that covers the vast geography of India. The story begun in Bombay moves on into the lowlands of Palanpur, lingers for an evening and a night before the stone gates of Bikaner, tells of the death of a blind astrologer in a sewer of Benares; the hero takes part in a conspiracy in a mazelike palace in Katmandu, prays and fornicates in the pestilential stench of the Machua Bazaar in Calcutta, sees the day born out of the sea from a law office in Madras, sees evenings die in the sea from a balcony in the state of Travancore, falters and kills in Indapur. The adventure closes its orbit of miles and years back in Bombay itself, only steps away from the garden of the "moon-coloured hounds." The underlying plot is this: a man, the fugitive student freethinker we already know, falls among the lowest class of people and, in a kind of contest of evil-doing, takes up their ways. All at once, with the wonder and terror of Robinson Crusoe upon discovering the footprint of a man in the sand, he becomes aware of a brief and sudden change in that world of ruthlessness—a certain tenderness, a moment of happiness, a forgiving silence in one of his loathsome companions. "It was as though a stranger, a third and more subtle person, had entered into the conversation." The hero knows that the scoundrel with whom he is talking is quite incapable of this sudden turn; from this, he guesses that the man is echoing someone else, a friend, or the friend of a friend. Rethinking the problem, he arrives at the mysterious conclusion that "somewhere on the face of the earth is a man from whom this light has emanated; somewhere on the face of the earth there exists a man who is equal to this light." The student decides to spend his life in search of him.

The story's outline is now plain: the untiring search for a human soul through the barely perceptible reflections cast by this soul in others—in the beginning, the faint trace of a smile or a single word; in the end, the differing and branching splendors of reason, of the imagination, and of righteousness. The nearer to al-Mu'tasim the men he examines

are, the greater is their share of the divine, though it is understood that they are but mirrors. A mathematical analogy may be helpful here. Bahadur's populous novel is an ascendant progression whose last term is the foreshadowed "man called al-Mu'tasim." Al-Mu'tasim's immediate predecessor is a Persian bookseller of striking happiness and politeness; the man before the bookseller, a saint. Finally, after many years, the student comes to a corridor "at whose end is a door and a cheap beaded curtain, and behind the curtain a shining light." The student claps his hands once or twice and asks for al-Mu'tasim. A man's voice—the unimaginable voice of al-Mu'tasim—prays him to enter. The student parts the curtain and steps forward. At this point the novel comes to its end.

If I am not mistaken, the proper handling of such a plot places the writer under two obligations. One, to abound richly in prophetic touches; the other, to make us feel that the person foreshadowed by these touches is more than a mere convention or phantom. Bahadur fulfills the first; how far he achieves the second, I wonder. In other words, the unheard and unseen al-Mu'tasim should leave us with the impression of a real character, not of a clutter of insipid superlatives. In the 1932 version, there are but few supernatural traces; "the man called al-Mu'tasim" is obviously a symbol, though certain personal traits are not lacking. Unfortunately, this literary good conduct did not last. In the 1934 version—the one I have read—the novel declines into allegory. Al-Mu'tasim is God and the hero's various wanderings are in some way the journey of a soul on its ascending steps toward the divine union. There are a few regrettable details: a black Jew from Cochin speaks of al-Mu'tasim as having dark skin; a Christian describes him standing on a height with his arms spread open; a Red lama recalls him seated "like that image of yak butter that I modeled and worshiped in the monastery of Tachilhunpo." These statements seem to suggest a single God who reconciles himself to the many varieties of mankind. In my opinion, the idea is not greatly exciting. I will not say the

same of another idea—the hint that the Almighty is also in search of Someone, and that Someone of Someone above him (or Someone simply indispensable and equal), and so on to the End (or rather, Endlessness) of Time, or perhaps cyclically. Al-Mu'tasim (the name of that eighth Abbasid caliph who was victorious in eight battles, fathered eight sons and eight daughters, left eight thousand slaves, and ruled for a period of eight years, eight moons, and eight days) means etymologically “The Seeker after Help.” In the 1932 version, the fact that the object of the pilgrimage was himself a pilgrim justified well enough the difficulty of finding him. The later version gives way to the quaint theology I have just spoken of. In the twentieth chapter, words attributed by the Persian bookseller to al-Mu'tasim are, perhaps, the mere heightening of others spoken by the hero; this and other hidden analogies may stand for the identity of the Seeker with the Sought. They may also stand for an influence of Man on the Divinity. Another chapter hints that al-Mu'tasim is the Hindu the student believes he has killed. Mir Bahadur Ali, as we have seen, cannot refrain from the grossest temptation of art—that of being a genius.

On reading over these pages, I fear I have not called sufficient attention to the book's many virtues. It includes a number of fine distinctions. For example, a conversation in chapter nineteen in which one of the speakers, who is a friend of al-Mu'tasim, avoids pointing out the other man's sophisms “in order not to be obviously in the right.”

It is considered admirable nowadays for a modern book to have its roots in an ancient one, since nobody (as Dr. Johnson said) likes owing anything to his contemporaries. The many but superficial contacts between Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *Odyssey* go on receiving—I shall never know why—the harebrained admiration of critics. The points of contact between Bahadur's novel and the celebrated *Parliament of Birds* by Farid ud-Din Attar, have awakened the no less mysterious approval of London, and even of Allaha-

bad and Calcutta. As far as I can judge, the points of contact between the two works are not many. Other sources are present. Some inquisitor has listed certain analogies between the novel's opening scene and Kipling's story "On the City Wall." Bahadur admits this, but argues that it would be highly abnormal if two descriptions of the tenth night of Muharram were quite unlike each other. Eliot, more to the point, is reminded of the seventy cantos of the unfinished allegory *The Faerie Queene*, in which the heroine, Gloriana, does not appear even once—a fault previously noted by Richard William Church (*Spenser*, 1879). With due humility, I suggest a distant and possible forerunner, the Jerusalem Kabbalist Isaac Luria, who in the sixteenth century advanced the notion that the soul of an ancestor or a master may, in order to comfort or instruct him, enter into the soul of someone who has suffered misfortune. *Ibbür* is the name given to this variety of metempsychosis.\*

\* In the course of this review, I have referred to the *Mantiq ut-Tair* (Parliament of Birds) by the Persian mystic Farid al-Din Abu Talib Mohamad ibn-Ibrahim Attar, who was killed by the soldiers of Tului, one of Genghis Khan's sons, during the sack of Nishapur. Perhaps it would be useful to summarize the poem. The distant king of birds, the Simurgh, drops one of his splendid feathers somewhere in the middle of China; on learning of this, the other birds, tired of their age-old anarchy, decide to seek him. They know that the king's name means "thirty birds"; they know that his castle lies in the Kaf, the range of mountains that ring the earth. Setting out on the almost endless adventure, they cross seven valleys or seas, the next to last bearing the name Bewilderment, the last, the name Annihilation. Many of the pilgrims desert; the journey takes its toll among the rest. Thirty, made pure by their sufferings, reach the great peak of the Simurgh. At last they behold him; they realize that they are the Simurgh and that the Simurgh is each of them and all of them. (Plotinus [*Enneads*, V, 8, 4] also states a divine extension of the principle of identity: "All things in the intelligible heavens are in all places. Any one thing is all other things. The sun is all the stars, and each star is all the other stars and the sun.") The *Mantiq ut-Tair* has been translated into French by Garcin de Tassy; parts of it into English by Edward FitzGerald. For this footnote, I have consulted the tenth volume of Burton's *Arabian Nights* and Margaret Smith's study *The Persian Mystics: Attar* (1932).

# The Circular Ruins

(1940)

And if he left off dreaming about you. . . .  
*Through the Looking-Glass, IV*

Nobody saw him come ashore in the encompassing night, nobody saw the bamboo craft run aground in the sacred mud, but within a few days everyone knew that the quiet man had come from the south and that his home was among the numberless villages upstream on the steep slopes of the mountain, where the Zend language is barely tainted by Greek and where lepers are rare. The fact is that the gray man pressed his lips to the mud, scrambled up the bank without parting (perhaps without feeling) the brushy thorns that tore his flesh, and dragged himself, faint and bleeding, to the circular opening watched over by a stone tiger, or horse, which once was the color of fire and is now the color of ash. This opening is a temple which was destroyed ages ago by flames, which the swampy wilderness later desecrated, and whose god no longer receives the reverence of men. The stranger laid himself down at the foot of the image.

Wakened by the sun high overhead, he noticed—somehow

without amazement—that his wounds had healed. He shut his pale eyes and slept again, not because of weariness but because he willed it. He knew that this temple was the place he needed for his unswerving purpose; he knew that downstream the encroaching trees had also failed to choke the ruins of another auspicious temple with its own fire-ravaged, dead gods; he knew that his first duty was to sleep. Along about midnight, he was awakened by the forlorn call of a bird. Footprints, some figs, and a water jug told him that men who lived nearby had looked on his sleep with a kind of awe and either sought his protection or else were in dread of his witchcraft. He felt the chill of fear and searched the crumbling walls for a burial niche, where he covered himself over with leaves he had never seen before.

His guiding purpose, though it was supernatural, was not impossible. He wanted to dream a man; he wanted to dream him down to the last detail and project him into the world of reality. This mystical aim had taxed the whole range of his mind. Had anyone asked him his own name or anything about his life before then, he would not have known what to answer. This forsaken, broken temple suited him because it held few visible things, and also because the neighboring villagers would look after his frugal needs. The rice and fruit of their offerings were nourishment enough for his body, whose one task was to sleep and to dream.

At the outset, his dreams were chaotic; later on, they were of a dialectic nature. The stranger dreamed himself at the center of a circular amphitheater which in some way was also the burnt-out temple. Crowds of silent disciples exhausted the tiers of seats; the faces of the farthest of them hung centuries away from him and at a height of the stars, but their features were clear and exact. The man lectured on anatomy, cosmography, and witchcraft. The faces listened, bright and eager, and did their best to answer sensibly, as if they felt the importance of his questions, which would raise one of them out of an existence as a shadow and place him in the real world. Whether asleep or awake, the man pondered the answers of his phantoms

*Jorge Luis Borges*

and, not letting himself be misled by impostors, divined in certain of their quandaries a growing intelligence. He was in search of a soul worthy of taking a place in the world.

After nine or ten nights he realized, feeling bitter over it, that nothing could be expected from those pupils who passively accepted his teaching, but that he might, however, hold hopes for those who from time to time hazarded reasonable doubts about what he taught. The former, although they deserved love and affection, could never become real; the latter, in their dim way, were already real. One evening (now his evenings were also given over to sleeping, now he was only awake for an hour or two at dawn) he dismissed his vast dream-school forever and kept a single disciple. He was a quiet, sallow, and at times rebellious young man with sharp features akin to those of his dreamer. The sudden disappearance of his fellow pupils did not disturb him for very long, and his progress, at the end of a few private lessons, amazed his teacher. Nonetheless, a catastrophe intervened. One day, the man emerged from his sleep as from a sticky wasteland, glanced up at the faint evening light, which at first he confused with the dawn, and realized that he had not been dreaming. All that night and the next day, the hideous lucidity of insomnia weighed down on him. To tire himself out he tried to explore the surrounding forest, but all he managed, there in a thicket of hemlocks, were some snatches of broken sleep, fleetingly tinged with visions of a crude and worthless nature. He tried to reassemble his school, and barely had he uttered a few brief words of counsel when the whole class went awry and vanished. In his almost endless wakefulness, tears of anger stung his old eyes.

He realized that, though he may penetrate all the riddles of the higher and lower orders, the task of shaping the senseless and dizzying stuff of dreams is the hardest that a man can attempt—much harder than weaving a rope of sand or of coining the faceless wind. He realized that an initial failure was to be expected. He then swore he would forget the populous vision which in the beginning had led him

astray, and he sought another method. Before attempting it, he spent a month rebuilding the strength his fever had consumed. He gave up all thoughts of dreaming and almost at once managed to sleep a reasonable part of the day. The few times he dreamed during this period he did not dwell on his dreams. Before taking up his task again, he waited until the moon was a perfect circle. Then, in the evening, he cleansed himself in the waters of the river, worshiped the gods of the planets, uttered the prescribed syllables of an all-powerful name, and slept. Almost at once, he had a dream of a beating heart.

He dreamed it throbbing, warm, secret. It was the size of a closed fist, a darkish red in the dimness of a human body still without a face or sex. With anxious love he dreamed it for fourteen lucid nights. Each night he perceived it more clearly. He did not touch it, but limited himself to witnessing it, to observing it, to correcting it now and then with a look. He felt it, he lived it from different distances and from many angles. On the fourteenth night he touched the pulmonary artery with a finger and then the whole heart, inside and out. The examination satisfied him. For one night he deliberately did not dream; after that he went back to the heart again, invoked the name of a planet, and set out to envision another of the principal organs. Before a year was over he came to the skeleton, the eyelids. The countless strands of hair were perhaps the hardest task of all. He dreamed a whole man, a young man, but the young man could not stand up or speak, nor could he open his eyes. Night after night, the man dreamed him asleep.

In the cosmogonies of the Gnostics, the demiurges mold a red Adam who is unable to stand on his feet; as clumsy and crude and elementary as that Adam of dust was the Adam of dreams wrought by the nights of the magician. One evening the man was at the point of destroying all his handiwork (it would have been better for him had he done so), but in the end he restrained himself. Having exhausted his prayers to the gods of the earth and river, he threw himself down at the feet of the stone image that may have

*Jorge Luis Borges*

been a tiger or a stallion, and asked for its blind aid. That same evening he dreamed of the image. He dreamed it alive, quivering; it was no unnatural cross between tiger and stallion but at one and the same time both these violent creatures and also a bull, a rose, a thunderstorm. This manifold god revealed to him that its earthly name was Fire, that there in the circular temple (and in others like it) sacrifices had once been made to it, that it had been worshiped, and that through its magic the phantom of the man's dreams would be wakened to life in such a way that—except for Fire itself and the dreamer—every being in the world would accept him as a man of flesh and blood. The god ordered that, once instructed in the rites, the disciple should be sent downstream to the other ruined temple, whose pyramids still survived, so that in that abandoned place some human voice might exalt him. In the dreamer's dream, the dreamed one awoke.

The magician carried out these orders. He devoted a period of time (which finally spanned two years) to initiating his principle into the riddles of the universe and the worship of Fire. Deep inside, it pained him to say goodbye to his creature. Under the pretext of teaching him more fully, each day he drew out the hours set aside for sleep. Also, he reshaped the somewhat faulty right shoulder. From time to time, he was troubled by the feeling that all this had already happened, but for the most part his days were happy. On closing his eyes he would think, "Now I will be with my son." Or, less frequently, "The son I have begotten awaits me and he will not exist if I do not go to him."

Little by little, he was training the young man for reality. On one occasion he commanded him to set up a flag on a distant peak. The next day, there on the peak, a fiery pennant shone. He tried other, similar exercises, each bolder than the one before. He realized with a certain bitterness that his son was ready—and perhaps impatient—to be born. That night he kissed him for the first time and sent him down the river to the other temple, whose whitened ruins were still to be glimpsed over miles and miles of impenetra-

ble forest and swamp. At the very end (so that the boy would never know he was a phantom, so that he would think himself a man like all men), the magician imbued his disciple with total oblivion of his long years of apprenticeship.

His triumph and his peace were blemished by a touch of weariness. In the morning and evening dusk, he prostrated himself before the stone idol, perhaps imagining that his unreal son was performing the same rites farther down the river in other circular ruins. At night he no longer dreamed, or else he dreamed the way all men dream. He now perceived with a certain vagueness the sounds and shapes of the world, for his absent son was taking nourishment from the magician's decreasing consciousness. His life's purpose was fulfilled; the man lived on in a kind of ecstasy. After a length of time that certain tellers of the story count in years and others in half-decades, he was awakened one midnight by two rowers. He could not see their faces, but they spoke to him about a magic man in a temple up north who walked on fire without being burned. The magician suddenly remembered the god's words. He remembered that of all the creatures in the world, Fire was the only one who knew his son was a phantom. This recollection, comforting at first, ended by tormenting him. He feared that his son might wonder at this strange privilege and in some way discover his condition as a mere appearance. Not to be a man but to be the projection of another man's dreams—what an unparalleled humiliation, how bewildering! Every father cares for the child he has begotten—he has allowed—in some moment of confusion or happiness. It is understandable, then, that the magician should fear for the future of a son thought out organ by organ and feature by feature over the course of a thousand and one secret nights.

The end of these anxieties came suddenly, but certain signs foretold it. First (after a long drought), a far-off cloud on a hilltop, as light as a bird; next, toward the south, the sky, which took on the rosy hue of a leopard's gums; then, the pillars of smoke that turned the metal of the nights to

*Jorge Luis Borges*

rust; finally, the headlong panic of the forest animals. For what had happened many centuries ago was happening again. The ruins of the fire god's shrine were destroyed by fire. In a birdless dawn the magician saw the circling sheets of flame closing in on him. For a moment, he thought of taking refuge in the river, but then he realized that death was coming to crown his years and to release him from his labors. He walked into the leaping pennants of flame. They did not bite into his flesh, but caressed him and flooded him without heat or burning. In relief, in humiliation, in terror, he understood that he, too, was an appearance, that someone else was dreaming him.

# Death and the Compass

*To Mandie Molina Vedia  
(1942)*

Of the many problems ever to tax Erik Lönnrot's rash mind, none was so strange—so methodically strange, let us say—as the intermittent series of murders which came to a culmination amid the incessant odor of eucalyptus trees at the villa Triste-le-Roy. It is true that Lönnrot failed to prevent the last of the murders, but it is undeniable that he foresaw it. Neither did he guess the identity of Yarmolinsky's ill-starred killer, but he did guess the secret shape of the evil series of events and the possible role played in those events by Red Scharlach, also nicknamed Scharlach the Dandy. The gangster (like so many others of his ilk) had sworn on his honor to get Erik Lönnrot, but Lönnrot was not intimidated. Lönnrot thought of himself as a pure logician, a kind of Auguste Dupin, but there was also a streak of the adventurer and even of the gambler in him.

The first murder took place in the Hôtel du Nord—that tall prism which overlooks the estuary whose broad waters are the color of sand. To that tower (which, as everyone

*Jorge Luis Borges*

knows, brings together the hateful blank white walls of a hospital, the numbered chambers of a cell block, and the overall appearance of a brothel) there arrived on the third of December Rabbi Marcel Yarmolinsky, a gray-bearded, gray-eyed man, who was a delegate from Podolsk to the Third Talmudic Congress. We shall never know whether the Hôtel du Nord actually pleased him or not, since he accepted it with the ageless resignation that had made it possible for him to survive three years of war in the Carpathians and three thousand years of oppression and pogroms. He was given a room on floor R, across from the suite occupied—not without splendor—by the Tetrarch of Galilee.

Yarmolinsky had dinner, put off until the next day a tour of the unfamiliar city, arranged in a closet his many books and his few suits of clothes, and before midnight turned off his bed lamp. (So said the Tetrarch's chauffeur, who slept in the room next door.) On the fourth of December, at three minutes past eleven in the morning, an editor of the *Jüdische Zeitung* called him by telephone. Rabbi Yarmolinsky did not answer; soon after, he was found in his room, his face already discolored, almost naked under a great old-fashioned cape. He lay not far from the hall door. A deep knife wound had opened his chest. A couple of hours later, in the same room, in the throng of reporters, photographers, and policemen, Inspector Treviranus and Lönnrot quietly discussed the case.

"We needn't lose any time here looking for three-legged cats," Treviranus said, brandishing an imperious cigar. "Everyone knows the Tetrarch of Galilee owns the world's finest sapphires. Somebody out to steal them probably found his way in here by mistake. Yarmolinsky woke up and the thief was forced to kill him. What do you make of it?"

"Possible, but not very interesting," Lönnrot answered. "You'll say reality is under no obligation to be interesting. To which I'd reply that reality may disregard the obligation but that we may not. In your hypothesis, chance plays a

large part. Here's a dead rabbi. I'd much prefer a purely rabbinical explanation, not the imagined mistakes of an imagined jewel thief."

"I'm not interested in rabbinical explanations," Treviranus replied in bad humor; "I'm interested in apprehending the man who murdered this unknown party."

"Not so unknown," corrected Lönnrot. "There are his complete works." He pointed to a row of tall books on a shelf in the closet. There were a *Vindication of the Kabbalah*, a *Study of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd*, a literal translation of the *Sefer Yeçirah*, a *Biography of the Baal Shem*, a *History of the Hasidic Sect*, a treatise (in German) on the Tetragrammaton, and another on the names of God in the Pentateuch. The Inspector stared at them in fear, almost in disgust. Then he burst into laughter.

"I'm only a poor Christian," he said. "You may cart off every last tome if you feel like it. I have no time to waste on Jewish superstitions."

"Maybe this crime belongs to the history of Jewish superstitions," Lönnrot grumbled.

"Like Christianity," the editor from the *Jüdische Zeitung* made bold to add. He was nearsighted, an atheist, and very shy.

Nobody took any notice of him. One of the police detectives had found in Yarmolinsky's small typewriter a sheet of paper on which these cryptic words were written:

*The first letter of the Name has been uttered*

Lönnrot restrained himself from smiling. Suddenly turning bibliophile and Hebraic scholar, he ordered a package made of the dead man's books and he brought them to his apartment. There, with complete disregard for the police investigation, he began studying them. One royal-octavo volume revealed to him the teachings of Israel Baal Shem Tobh, founder of the sect of the Pious; another, the magic and the terror of the Tetragrammaton, which is God's unspeakable name; a third, the doctrine that God has a secret name in which (as in the crystal sphere that the

Jorge Luis Borges

Persians attribute to Alexander of Macedonia) His ninth attribute, Eternity, may be found—that is to say, the immediate knowledge of everything under the sun that will be, that is, and that was. Tradition lists ninety-nine names of God; Hebrew scholars explain that imperfect cipher by a mystic fear of even numbers; the Hasidim argue that the missing term stands for a hundredth name—the Absolute Name.

It was out of this bookworming that Lönnrot was distracted a few days later by the appearance of the editor from the *Jüdische Zeitung*, who wanted to speak about the murder. Lönnrot, however, chose to speak of the many names of the Lord. The following day, in three columns, the journalist stated that Chief Detective Erik Lönnrot had taken up the study of the names of God in order to find out the name of the murderer. Lönnrot, familiar with the simplifications of journalism, was not surprised. It also seemed that one of those tradesmen who have discovered that any man is willing to buy any book was peddling a cheap edition of Yarmolinsky's *History of the Hasidic Sect*.

The second murder took place on the night of January third out in the most forsaken and empty of the city's western reaches. Along about daybreak, one of the police who patrol this lonely area on horseback noticed on the doorstep of a dilapidated paint and hardware store a man in a poncho laid out flat. A deep knife wound had ripped open his chest, and his hard features looked as though they were masked in blood. On the wall, on the shop's conventional red and yellow diamond shapes, were some words scrawled in chalk. The policeman read them letter by letter. That evening, Treviranus and Lönnrot made their way across town to the remote scene of the crime. To the left and right of their car the city fell away in shambles; the sky grew wider and houses were of much less account than brick kilns or an occasional poplar. They reached their forlorn destination, an unpaved back alley with rose-colored walls that in some way seemed to reflect the garish sunset. The dead man had already been identified. He turned out

to be Daniel Simon Azevedo, a man with a fair reputation in the old northern outskirts of town who had risen from teamster to electioneering thug and later degenerated into a thief and an informer. (The unusual manner of his death seemed to them fitting, for Azevedo was the last example of a generation of criminals who knew how to handle a knife but not a revolver.) The words chalked up on the wall were these:

*The second letter of the Name has been uttered*

The third murder took place on the night of February third. A little before one o'clock, the telephone rang in the office of Inspector Treviranus. With pointed secrecy, a man speaking in a guttural voice said his name was Ginzberg (or Ginsburg) and that he was ready—for a reasonable consideration—to shed light on the facts surrounding the double sacrifice of Azevedo and Yarmolinsky. A racket of whistles and tin horns drowned out the informer's voice. Then the line went dead. Without discounting the possibility of a practical joke (they were, after all, at the height of Carnival), Treviranus checked and found that he had been phoned from a sailors' tavern called Liverpool House on the Rue de Toulon—that arcaded waterfront street in which we find side by side the wax museum and the dairy bar, the brothel and the Bible seller. Treviranus called the owner back. The man (Black Finnegan by name, a reformed Irish criminal concerned about and almost weighed down by respectability) told him that the last person to have used the telephone was one of his roomers, a certain Gryphius, who had only minutes before gone out with some friends. At once Treviranus set out for Liverpool House. There the owner told him the following story:

Eight days earlier, Gryphius had taken a small room above the bar. He was a sharp-featured man with a misty gray beard, shabbily dressed in black. Finnegan (who used that room for a purpose Treviranus immediately guessed) had asked the roomer for a rent that was obviously steep, and Gryphius paid the stipulated sum on the spot. Hardly

*Jorge Luis Borges*

ever going out, he took lunch and supper in his room; in fact, his face was hardly known in the bar. That night he had come down to use the telephone in Finnegan's office. A coupé had drawn up outside. The coachman had stayed on his seat; some customers recalled that he wore the mask of a bear. Two harlequins got out of the carriage. They were very short men and nobody could help noticing that they were very drunk. Bleating their horns, they burst into Finnegan's office, throwing their arms around Gryphius, who seemed to know them but who did not warm to their company. The three exchanged a few words in Yiddish—he in a low, guttural voice, they in a piping falsetto—and they climbed the stairs up to his room. In a quarter of an hour they came down again, very happy. Gryphius, staggering, seemed as drunk as the others. He walked in the middle, tall and dizzy, between the two masked harlequins. (One of the women in the bar remembered their costumes of red, green, and yellow lozenges.) Twice he stumbled; twice the harlequins held him up. Then the trio climbed into the coupé and, heading for the nearby docks (which enclosed a string of rectangular bodies of water), were soon out of sight. Out front, from the running board, the last harlequin had scrawled an obscene drawing and certain words on one of the market slates hung from a pillar of the arcade.

Treviranus stepped outside for a look. Almost predictably, the phrase read:

*The last letter of the Name has been uttered*

He next examined Gryphius-Ginzberg's tiny room. On the floor was a star-shaped spatter of blood; in the corners, cigarette butts of a Hungarian brand; in the wardrobe, a book in Latin—a 1739 edition of Leusden's *Philologus Hebraeo-Graecus*—with a number of annotations written in by hand. Treviranus gave it an indignant look and sent for Lönnrot. While the Inspector questioned the contradictory witnesses to the possible kidnapping, Lönnrot, not even bothering to take off his hat, began reading. At four o'clock they left. In the twisted Rue de Toulon, as they were stepping

over last night's tangle of streamers and confetti," Treviranus remarked, "And if tonight's events were a put-up job?"

Erik Lönnrot smiled and read to him with perfect gravity an underlined passage from the thirty-third chapter of the *Philologus*: " 'Dies Judaeorum incipit a solis occasu usque ad solis occasum diei sequentis.' Meaning," he added, " 'the Jewish day begins at sundown and ends the following sundown.' "

The other man attempted a bit of irony. "Is that the most valuable clue you've picked up tonight?" he said.

"No. Far more valuable is one of the words Ginzberg used to you on the phone."

The evening papers made a great deal of these recurrent disappearances. *La Croix de l'Épée* contrasted the present acts of violence with the admirable discipline and order observed by the last Congress of Hermits. Ernst Palast, in *The Martyr*, condemned "the unbearable pace of this unauthorized and stinting pogrom, which has required three months for the liquidation of three Jews." The *Jüdische Zeitung* rejected the ominous suggestion of an anti-Semitic plot, "despite the fact that many penetrating minds admit of no other solution to the threefold mystery." The leading gunman of the city's Southside, Dandy Red Scharlach, swore that in his part of town crimes of that sort would never happen, and he accused Inspector Franz Treviranus of criminal negligence.

On the night of March first, Inspector Treviranus received a great sealed envelope. Opening it, he found it contained a letter signed by one "Baruch Spinoza" and, evidently torn out of a Baedeker, a detailed plan of the city. The letter predicted that on the third of March there would not be a fourth crime because the paint and hardware store on the Westside, the Rue de Toulon tavern, and the Hôtel du Nord formed "the perfect sides of an equilateral and mystical triangle." In red ink the map demonstrated that the three sides of the figure were exactly the same length. Treviranus read this Euclidean reasoning

*Jorge Luis Borges*

with a certain weariness and sent the letter and map to Erik Lönnrot—the man, beyond dispute, most deserving of such cranky notions.

Lönnrot studied them. The three points were, in fact, equidistant. There was symmetry in time (December third, January third, February third); now there was symmetry in space as well. All at once he felt he was on the verge of solving the riddle. A pair of dividers and a compass completed his sudden intuition. He smiled, pronounced the word Tetragrammaton (of recent acquisition) and called the Inspector on the phone.

“Thanks for the equilateral triangle you sent me last night,” he told him. “It has helped me unravel our mystery. Tomorrow, Friday, the murderers will be safely behind bars; we can rest quite easy.”

“Then they aren’t planning a fourth crime?”

“Precisely because they *are* planning a fourth crime we can rest quite easy.”

Lönnrot hung up the receiver. An hour later, he was traveling on a car of the Southern Railways on his way to the deserted villa Triste-le-Roy. To the south of the city of my story flows a dark muddy river, polluted by the waste of tanneries and sewers. On the opposite bank is a factory suburb where, under the patronage of a notorious political boss, many gunmen thrive. Lönnrot smiled to himself, thinking that the best-known of them—Red Scharlach—would have given anything to know about this sudden excursion of his. Azevedo had been a henchman of Scharlach’s. Lönnrot considered the remote possibility that the fourth victim might be Scharlach himself. Then he dismissed it. He had practically solved the puzzle; the mere circumstances—reality (names, arrests, faces, legal and criminal proceedings)—barely held his interest now. He wanted to get away, to relax after three months of desk work and of snail-pace investigation. He reflected that the solution of the killings lay in an anonymously sent triangle and in a dusty Greek word. The mystery seemed almost crystal clear. He felt ashamed for having spent close to a hundred days on it.

The train came to a stop at a deserted loading platform. Lönnrot got off. It was one of those forlorn evenings that seem as empty as dawn. The air off the darkening prairies was damp and cold. Lönnrot struck out across the fields. He saw dogs, he saw a flatcar on a siding, he saw the line of the horizon, he saw a pale horse drinking stagnant water out of a ditch. Night was falling when he saw the rectangular mirador of the villa Triste-le-Roy, almost as tall as the surrounding black eucalyptus trees. He thought that only one more dawn and one more dusk (an ancient light in the east and another in the west) were all that separated him from the hour appointed by the seekers of the Name.

A rusted iron fence bounded the villa's irregular perimeter. The main gate was shut. Lönnrot, without much hope of getting in, walked completely around the place. Before the barred gate once again, he stuck a hand through the palings—almost mechanically—and found the bolt. The squeal of rusted iron surprised him. With clumsy obedience, the whole gate swung open.

Lönnrot moved forward among the eucalyptus trees, stepping on the layered generations of fallen leaves. Seen from up close, the house was a clutter of meaningless symmetries and almost insane repetitions: one icy Diana in a gloomy niche matched another Diana in a second niche; one balcony appeared to reflect another; double outer staircases crossed at each landing. A two-faced Hermes cast a monstrous shadow. Lönnrot made his way around the house as he had made his way around the grounds. He went over every detail; below the level of the terrace he noticed a narrow shutter.

He pushed it open. A few marble steps went down into a cellar. Lönnrot, who by now anticipated the architect's whims, guessed that in the opposite wall he would find a similar sets of steps. He did. Climbing them, he lifted his hands and raised a trapdoor.

A stain of light led him to a window. He opened it. A round yellow moon outlined two clogged fountains in the unkempt garden. Lönnrot explored the house. Through serv-

*Jorge luís Borges*

ing pantries and along corridors he came to identical courtyards and several times to the same courtyard. He climbed dusty stairways to circular anterooms, where he was multiplied to infinity in facing mirrors. He grew weary of opening or of peeping through windows that revealed, outside, the same desolate garden seen from various heights and various angles; and indoors he grew weary of the rooms of furniture, each draped in yellowing slipcovers, and the crystal chandeliers wrapped in tarlatan. A bedroom caught his attention—in it, a single flower in a porcelain vase. At a touch, the ancient petals crumbled to dust. On the third floor, the last floor, the house seemed endless and growing. The house is not so large, he thought. This dim light, the sameness, the mirrors, the many years, my unfamiliarity, the loneliness are what make it large.

By a winding staircase he reached the mirador. That evening's moon streamed in through the diamond-shaped panes; they were red, green, and yellow. He was stopped by an awesome, dizzying recollection.

Two short men, brutal and stocky, threw themselves on him and disarmed him: another, very tall, greeted him solemnly and told him, "You are very kind. You've saved us a night and a day."

It was Red Scharlach. The men bound Lönnrot's wrists. After some seconds, Lönnrot at last heard himself saying, "Scharlach, are you after the Secret Name?"

Scharlach remained standing, aloof. He had taken no part in the brief struggle and had barely held out his hand for Lönnrot's revolver. He spoke. Lönnrot heard in his voice the weariness of final triumph, a hatred the size of the universe, a sadness as great as that hatred.

"No," said Scharlach. "I'm after something more ephemeral, more frail. I'm after Erik Lönnrot. Three years ago, in a gambling dive on the Rue de Toulon, you yourself arrested my brother and got him put away. My men managed to get me into a coupé before the shooting was over, but I had a cop's bullet in my guts. Nine days and nine nights I went through hell, here in this deserted villa,

racked with fever. The hateful two-faced Janus that looks on the sunsets and the dawns filled both my sleep and my wakefulness with its horror. I came to loathe my body, I came to feel that two eyes, two hands, two lungs, are as monstrous as two faces. An Irishman, trying to convert me to the faith of Jesus, kept repeating to me the saying of the *goyim*—All roads lead to Rome. At night, my fever fed on that metaphor. I felt the world was a maze from which escape was impossible since all roads, though they seemed to be leading north or south, were really leading to Rome, which at the same time was the square cell where my brother lay dying and also this villa, Triste-le-Roy. During those nights, I swore by the god who looks with two faces and by all the gods of fever and of mirrors that I would weave a maze around the man who sent my brother to prison. Well, I have woven it and it's tight. Its materials are a dead rabbi, a compass, an eighteenth-century sect, a Greek word, a dagger, and the diamond-shaped patterns on a paint-store wall."

Lönnrot was in a chair now, with the two short men at his side.

"The first term of the series came to me by pure chance," Scharlach went on. "With some associates of mine—among them Daniel Azevedo—I'd planned the theft of the Tetrarch's sapphires. Azevedo betrayed us. He got drunk on the money we advanced him and tried to pull the job a day earlier. But there in the hotel he got mixed up and around two in the morning blundered into Yarmolinsky's room. The rabbi, unable to sleep, had decided to do some writing. In all likelihood, he was preparing notes or a paper on the Name of God and had already typed out the words 'The first letter of the Name has been uttered.' Azevedo warned him not to move. Yarmolinsky reached his hand toward the buzzer that would have wakened all the hotel staff; Azevedo struck him a single blow with his knife. It was probably a reflex action. Fifty years of violence had taught him that the easiest and surest way is to kill. Ten days later, I found out through the *Jüdische*

Jorge Luis Borges

*Zeitung* that you were looking for the key to Yarmolinsky's death in his writings. I read his *History of the Hasidic Sect*. I learned that the holy fear of uttering God's Name had given rise to the idea that that Name is secret and all-powerful. I learned that some of the Hasidim, in search of that secret Name, had gone as far as to commit human sacrifices. The minute I realized you were guessing that the Hasidim had sacrificed the rabbi, I did my best to justify that guess. Yarmolinsky died the night of December third. For the second Sacrifice' I chose the night of January third. The rabbi had died on the Northside; for the second 'sacrifice' we wanted a spot on the Westside. Daniel Azevedo was the victim we needed. He deserved death—he was impulsive, a traitor. If he'd been picked up, it would have wiped out our whole plan. One of my men stabbed him; in order to link his corpse with the previous one, I scrawled on the diamonds of the paint-store wall 'The second letter of the Name has been uttered.' ”

Scharlach looked his victim straight in the face, then continued. "The third 'crime' was staged on the third of February. It was, as Treviranus guessed, only a plant. Gryphius-Ginzberg-Ginsburg was me. I spent an interminable week (rigged up in a false beard) in that flea-ridden cubicle on the Rue de Toulon until my friends came to kidnap me. From the running board of the carriage, one of them wrote on the pillar, 'The last letter of the Name has been uttered.' That message suggested that the series of crimes was *threefold*. That was how the public understood it. I, however, threw in repeated clues so that you, Erik Lönnrot the reasoner, might puzzle out that the crime was *fourfold*. A murder in the north, others in the east and west, demanded a fourth murder in the south. The Tetragrammaton—the Name of God, JHVH—is made up of *four* letters; the harlequins and the symbol on the paint store also suggest *four* terms. I underlined a certain passage in Leusden's handbook. That passage makes it clear that the Jews reckoned the day from sunset to sunset; that passage makes it understood that the deaths occurred on the *fourth*

of each month. I was the one who sent the triangle to Treviranus, knowing in advance that you would supply the missing point—the point that determines the perfect rhombus, the point that fixes the spot where death is expecting you. I planned the whole thing, Erik Lönnrot, so as to lure you to the loneliness of Triste-le-Roy.”

Lönnrot avoided Scharlach’s eyes. He looked off at the trees and the sky broken into dark diamonds of red, green, and yellow. He felt a chill and an impersonal, almost anonymous sadness. It was night now; from down in the abandoned garden came the unavailing cry of a bird. Lönnrot, for one last time, reflected on the problem of the patterned, intermittent deaths.

“In your maze there are three lines too many,” he said at last. “I know of a Greek maze that is a single straight line. Along this line so many thinkers have lost their way that a mere detective may very well lose his way. Scharlach, when in another incarnation you hunt me down, stage (or commit) a murder at A, then a second murder at B, eight miles from A, then a third murder at C, four miles from A and B, halfway between the two. Lay in wait for me then at D, two miles from A and C, again halfway between them. Kill me at D, the way you are going to kill me here at Triste-le-Roy.”

“The next time I kill you,” said Scharlach, “I promise you such a maze, which is made up of a single straight line and which is invisible and unending.”

He moved back a few steps. Then, taking careful aim, he fired.

# The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)

(1944)

I'm looking for the face I had  
Before the world was made.

Yeats, *A Woman Young and Old*

On the sixth of February, 1829, a troop of gaucho militia, harried all day by Lavalle on their march north to join the army under the command of López, made a halt some nine or ten miles from Pergamino at a ranch whose name they did not know. Along about dawn, one of the men had a haunting nightmare and, in the dim shadows of a shed where he lay sleeping, his confused outcry woke the woman who shared his bed. Nobody ever knew what he dreamed, for around four o'clock that afternoon the gauchos were routed by a detachment of Suárez' cavalry in a chase that went on for over twenty miles and ended, in thickening twilight, in tall swamp grasses, where the man died in a ditch, his skull split by a saber that had seen service in the Peruvian and Brazilian wars. The woman's name was Isidora Cruz. The son born to her was given the name Tadeo Isidoro.

My aim here is not to recount his whole personal history. Of the many days and nights that make up his life, only a

single night concerns me; as to the rest, I shall tell only what is necessary to that night's full understanding. The episode belongs to a famous poem—that is to say, to a poem which has come to mean “all things to all men” (I Corinthians 9:22), since almost endless variations, versions, and perversions have been read into its pages. Those who have theorized about Tadeo Isidoro's story—and they are many—lay stress upon the influence of the wide-open plains on his character, but gauchos exactly like him were born and died along the wooded banks of the Paraná and in the hilly back country of Uruguay. He lived, it must be admitted, in a world of unrelieved barbarism. When he died, in 1874, in an outbreak of smallpox, he had never laid eyes on a mountain or a gas jet or a windmill pump. Nor on a city. In 1849, he went to Buenos Aires on a cattle drive from the ranch of Francisco Xavier Acevedo. The other drovers went into town on a spending spree; Cruz, somewhat wary, did not stray far from a shabby inn in the neighborhood of the stockyards. There he spent several days, by himself, sleeping on the ground, brewing his maté, getting up at daybreak, and going to bed at dusk. He realized (beyond words and even beyond understanding) that he could not cope with the city. One of the drovers, having drunk too much, began poking fun at him. Cruz ignored him, but several times on the way home, at night around the campfire, the other man kept on with his gibes, and Cruz (who up till then had shown neither anger nor annoyance) laid him out with his knife.

On the run, Cruz was forced to hide out in a marshy thicket. A few nights later, the cries of a startled plover warned him he had been ringed in by the police. He tested his knife in a thick clump of grass and, to keep from entangling his feet, took off his spurs. Choosing to fight it out rather than be taken, he got himself wounded in the forearm, in the shoulder, and in the left hand. When he felt the blood dripping between his fingers; he fought harder than ever, badly wounding the toughest members of the search party. Toward daybreak, weak with loss of blood, he

*Jorge Luis Borges*

was disarmed. The army in those days acted as a kind of penal institution; Cruz was sent off to serve in an outpost on the northern frontier. As a common soldier, he took part in the civil wars, sometimes fighting for the province of his birth, sometimes against. On the twenty-third of January, 1856, in the Cardoso marshes, he was one of thirty white men who, led by Sergeant Major Eusebio Laprida, fought against two hundred Indians. In this action he was wounded by a spear.

The dim and hardy story of his life is full of gaps. Around 1868, we hear of him once more in Pergamino, married or living with a woman, father of a son, and owner of a small holding of land. In 1869, he was appointed sergeant of the local police. He had made up for his past and, in those days, may have thought of himself as a happy man, though deep down he wasn't. (What lay in wait for him, hidden in the future, was a night of stark illumination—the night in which at last he glimpsed his own face, the night in which at last he heard his name. Fully understood, that night exhausts his story; or rather, one moment in that night, one deed, since deeds are our symbols.) Any life, no matter how long or complex it may be, is made up essentially *of a single moment*—the moment in which a man finds out, once and for all, who he is. It has been said that Alexander the Great saw his iron future in the fabled story of Achilles, and Charles XII of Sweden, his in the story of Alexander. To Tadeo Isidoro Cruz, who did not know how to read, this revelation was not given by a book; it was in a manhunt and in the man he was hunting that he learned who he was. The thing happened in this way:

During the last days of the month of June, 1870, he received orders to capture an outlaw who had killed two men. The man was a deserter from the forces of Colonel Benito Machado on the southern frontier; he had killed a Negro in a drunken brawl in a whorehouse and, in another brawl, a man from the district of Rojas. The report added that he had last been seen near the Laguna Colorada. This was the same place where the troop of gaucho militia had

*The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829—1874)*

gathered, some forty years earlier, before starting out on the misadventure that gave their flesh to the vultures and dogs. Out of this spot had come Manuel Mesa, who was later made to stand before a firing squad in the central square of Buenos Aires while the drums rolled in order to drown out his last words; out of this spot had come the unknown man who fathered Cruz and died in a ditch, his skull split by a saber that had seen action on the battlefields of Peru and Brazil. Cruz had forgotten the name of the place. Now, after a vague and puzzling uneasiness, it came to him.

Pursued by the soldiers and shuttling back and forth on horseback, the hunted man had woven a long maze, but nonetheless, on the night of July twelfth, the troops tracked him down. He had taken shelter in a growth of tall reeds. The darkness was nearly impenetrable; Cruz and his men, stealthily and on foot, advanced toward the clumps in whose swaying center the hidden man lay in wait or asleep. A startled plover let out a cry. Tadeo Isidoro Cruz had the feeling of having lived this moment before. The hunted man came out of his hiding place to fight them in the open. Cruz made out the hideous figure—his overgrown hair and gray beard seemed to eat away his face. An obvious reason keeps me from describing the fight that followed. Let me simply point out that the deserter badly wounded or killed several of Cruz's men. Cruz, while he fought in the dark (while his body fought in the dark), began to understand. He understood that one destiny is no better than another, but that every man must obey what is within him. He understood that his shoulder braid and his uniform were now in his way. He understood that his real destiny was as a lone wolf, not a gregarious dog. He understood that the other man was himself. Day dawned over the boundless plain. Cruz threw down his kepi, called out that he would not be party to the crime of killing a brave man, and began fighting against his own soldiers, shoulder to shoulder with Martín Fierro, the deserter.

# The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths

(1946)

*[This is the story the Reverend Allaby tells from the pulpit  
in "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth."*

*See page 77]*

Chroniclers worthy of trust have recorded (but only Allah is All-Knowing) that in former times there was a king of the isles of Babylon who called together his architects and his wizards and set them to build him a labyrinth so intricate that no wise man would dare enter inside, and so subtle that those who did would lose their way. This undertaking was a blasphemy, for confusion and marvels belong to God alone and not to man. With the passage of time there came to his court a king of the Arabs, and the king of Babylon (wishing to mock his guest's simplicity) allowed him to set foot in his labyrinth, where he wandered in humiliation and bewilderment until the coming of night. It was then that the second king implored the help of God and soon after came upon the door. He suffered his lips to utter no complaint, but he told the king of Babylon that he, too, had a labyrinth in his land and that, God willing, he would one day take pleasure in showing it to his host. Then he returned to Arabia, gathered his captains and his

*The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths*

armies, and overran the realms of Babylon with so fair a fortune that he ravaged its castles, broke its peoples, and took captive the king himself. He bound him onto a swift camel and brought him into the desert. Three days they rode, and then the captor said, "O king of time and crown of the century! In Babylon you lured me into a labyrinth of brass cluttered with many stairways, doors, and walls; now the Almighty has brought it to pass that I show you mine, which has no stairways to climb, nor doors to force, nor unending galleries to wear one down, nor walls to block one's way."

He then loosened the bonds of the first king and left him in the heart of the desert to die of thirst and hunger. Glory be to the Living, who dieth not.

# The Dead Man

(1946)

That a man from the outlying slums of a city like Buenos Aires, that a sorry hoodlum with little else to his credit than a passion for recklessness, should find his way into that wild stretch of horse country between Brazil and Uruguay and become the leader of a band of smugglers, seems on the face of it unbelievable. To those who think so, I'd like to give an account of what happened to Benjamín Otálora, of whom perhaps not a single memory lingers in the neighborhood where he grew up, and who died a fitting death, struck down by a bullet, somewhere on the border of Rio Grande do Sul. Of the details of his adventures I know little; should I ever be given the facts, I shall correct and expand these pages. For the time being, this outline may prove of some use.

Benjamín Otálora, along about 1891, is a strapping young man of nineteen. He has a low forehead, candid blue eyes, and that country-boy appearance that goes with Basque ancestry. A lucky blow with a knife has made clear

to him that he is also brave; his opponent's death causes him no concern, nor does his need to flee the country. The political boss of the district gives him a letter of introduction to a certain Azevedo Bandeira, in Uruguay. Otálora books passage; the crossing is stormy and the ship pitches and creaks. The next day, he wanders the length and breadth of Montevideo, with unacknowledged or perhaps unsuspected homesickness. He does not find Azevedo Bandeira. Getting on toward midnight, in a small saloon out on the northern edge of town, he witnesses a brawl between some cattle drovers. A knife flashes. Otálora has no idea who is in the right or wrong, but the sheer taste of danger lures him, just as cards or music lure other men. In the confusion, he blocks a lunging knife thrust that one off the gauchos aims at a man wearing a rough countryman's poncho and, oddly, the dark derby of a townsman. The man turns out to be Azevedo Bandeira. (As soon as he finds this out, Otálora destroys the letter, preferring to be under no one's obligation.) Azevedo Bandeira, though of stocky build, gives the unaccountable impression of being somehow misshapen. In his large face, which seems always to be too close, are the Jew, the Negro, and the Indian; in his bearing, the tiger and the ape. The scar that cuts across his cheek is one ornament more, like his bristling black moustache.

A fantasy or a mistake born of drunkenness, the fight ends as quickly as it broke out. Otálora takes a drink with the drovers and then goes along with them to an all-night party and after that—the sun high in the sky by now—to a rambling house in the Old Town. Inside, on the bare ground of the last patio, the men lay out their sheepskin saddle blankets to sleep. Dimly, Otálora compares this past night with the night before; here he is, on solid ground now, among friends. A pang of remorse for not missing his Buenos Aires nags at him, however. He sleeps until night-fall, when he is wakened by the same gaucho who, blind drunk, had tried to knife Bandeira. (Otálora recalls that the man has shared the high-spirited night with the rest of

*Jorge Luis Borges*

them, and that Bandeira had seated him at his right hand and forced him to go on drinking.) The man says the boss has sent for him. In a kind of office opening into the entrance passage (Otálora has never before seen an entrance with doors opening into it from the sides), Azevedo Bandeira, in the company of an aloof and showy red-haired woman, is waiting for him. Bandeira praises him up and down, offers him a shot of rum, tells him he has the makings of a man of guts, suggests that he go up north with the others to bring back a large cattle herd. Otálora agrees; toward dawn they are on the road, heading for Tacuarembó.

For Otálora a new kind of life opens up, a life of far-flung sunrises and long days in the saddle, reeking of horses. It is an untried and at times unbearable life, but it's already in his blood, for just as the men of certain countries worship and feel the call of the sea, we Argentines in turn (including the man who weaves these symbols) yearn for the boundless plains that ring under a horse's hooves. Otálora has grown up in a neighborhood of teamsters and liverymen. In under a year, he makes himself into a gaucho. He learns to handle a horse, to round up and slaughter cattle, to throw a rope for holding an animal fast or bolas for bringing it down, to fight off sleep, to weather storms and frosts and sun, to drive a herd with whistles and hoots. Only once during this whole apprenticeship does he set eyes on Azevedo Bandeira, but he has him always in mind because to be one of Bandeira's men is to be looked up to and feared, and because after any feat or hard job the gauchos always say Bandeira does it better. Somebody has it that Bandeira was born on the Brazilian side of the Cuareim, in Rio Grande do Sul; this, which should lower him in Otálora's eyes, somehow—with its suggestion of dense forests and of marshes and of inextricable and almost endless distances—only adds to him. Little by little, Otálora comes to realize that Bandeira's interests are many and that chief among them is smuggling. To be a cattle drover is to be a servant; Otálora decides to work himself up to the

level of smuggler. One night, as two of his companions are about to go over the border to bring back a consignment of rum, Otálora picks a fight with one of them, wounds him, and takes his place. He is driven by ambition and also by a dim sense of loyalty. The man (he thinks) will come to find out that I'm worth more than all his Uruguayans put together.

Another year goes by before Otálora sees Montevideo again. They come riding through the outskirts and into the city (which to Otálora now seems enormous); reaching the boss's house, the men prepare to bed down in the last patio. The days pass, and Otálora still has not laid eyes on Bandeira. It is said, in fear, that he is ailing; every afternoon a Negro goes up to Bandeira's room with a kettle and maté. One evening, the job is assigned to Otálora. He feels vaguely humiliated, but at the same time gratified.

The bedroom is bare and dark. There's a balcony that faces the sunset, there's a long table with a shining disarray of riding crops, bullwhips, cartridge belts, firearms, and knives. On the far wall there's a mirror and the glass is faded. Bandeira lies face up, dreaming and muttering in his sleep; the sun's last rays outline his features. The big white bed seems to make him smaller, darker. Otálora notes his graying hair, his exhaustion, his weakness, the deep wrinkles of his years. It angers him being mastered by this old man. He thinks that a single blow would be enough to finish him. At this moment, he glimpses in the mirror that someone has come in. It's the woman with the red hair; she is barefoot and only half-dressed, and looks at him with cold curiosity. Bandeira sits up in bed; while he speaks of business affairs of the past two years and drinks maté after maté, his fingers toy with the woman's braided hair. In the end, he gives Otálora permission to leave.

A few days later, they get orders to head north again. There, in a place that might be anywhere on the face of the endless plains, they come to a forlorn ranch. Not a single tree or a brook. The sun's first and last rays beat down on

it. There are stone fences for the lean longhorn cattle. This rundown set of buildings is called "The Last Sigh."

Sitting around the fire with the ranch hands, Otálora hears that Bandeira will soon be on his way from Montevideo. He asks what for, and someone explains that there's an outsider turned gaucho among them who's giving too many orders. Otálora takes this as a friendly joke and is flattered that the joke can be made. Later on, he finds out that Bandeira has had a falling out with one of the political bosses, who has withdrawn his support. Otálora likes this bit of news.

Crates of rifles arrive; a pitcher and washbasin, both of silver, arrive for the woman's bedroom; intricately figured damask draperies arrive; one morning, from out of the hills, a horseman arrives—a sullen man with a full beard and a poncho. His name is Ulpiano Suárez and he is Azevedo Bandeira's strong-arm man, or bodyguard. He speaks very little and with a thick Brazilian accent. Otálora does not know whether to put down his reserve to unfriendliness, or to contempt, or to mere backwoods manners. He realizes, however, that to carry out the scheme he is hatching he must win the other man's friendship.

Next into Benjamín Otálora's story comes a black-legged bay horse that Azevedo Bandeira brings from the south, and that carries a fine saddle worked with silver and a saddle blanket trimmed with a jaguar skin. This spirited horse is a token of Bandeira's authority and for this reason is coveted by the young man, who comes also—with a desire bordering on spite—to hunger for the woman with the shining hair. The woman, the saddle, and the big bay are attributes or trappings of a man he aspires to bring down.

At this point the story takes another turn. Azevedo Bandeira is skilled in the art of slow intimidation, in the diabolical trickery of leading a man on, step by step, shifting from sincerity to mockery. Otálora decides to apply this ambiguous method to the hard task before him. He decides to replace Azevedo Bandeira, but to take his time over it. During days of shared danger, he gains Suárez'

friendship. He confides his plan to him; Suárez pledges to help. Then a number of things begin happening of which I know only a few. Otálora disobeys Bandeira's orders; he takes to overlooking them, changing them, defying them. The whole world seems to conspire with him, hastening events. One noontime, somewhere around Tacuarembó, there is an exchange of gunfire with a gang from Brazil; Otálora takes Bandeira's place and shouts out orders to the Uruguayans. A bullet hits him in the shoulder, but that afternoon Otálora rides back to "The Last Sigh" on the boss's horse, and that evening some drops of his blood stain the jaguar skin, and that night he sleeps with the woman with the shining hair. Other accounts change the order of these events, denying they happened all in the same day.

Bandeira, nevertheless, remains nominally the boss. He goes on giving orders which are not carried out. Benjamín Otálora leaves him alone, out of mixed reasons of habit and pity.

The closing scene of the story coincides with the commotion of the closing night of the year 1894. On this night, the men of "The Last Sigh" eat freshly slaughtered meat and fall into quarreling over their liquor; someone picks out on the guitar, over and over again, a *milonga* that gives him a lot of trouble. At the head of the table, Otálora, feeling his drink, piles exultation upon exultation, boast upon boast; this dizzying tower is a symbol of his irresistible destiny. Bandeira, silent amid the shouting, lets the night flow noisily on. When the clock strikes twelve, he gets up like a man just remembering he has something to do. He gets up and softly knocks at the woman's door. She opens at once, as though waiting to be called. She steps out barefoot and half-dressed. In an almost feminine, soft-spoken drawl, Bandeira gives her an order.

"Since you and the Argentine care so much for each other," he says, "you're going to kiss him right now in front of everyone."

He adds an obscene detail. The woman tries to resist, but two men have taken her by the arms and fling her upon

*Jorge Luis Borges*

Otálora. Brought to tears, she kisses his face and chest, Ulpiano Suárez has his revolver out. Otálora realizes, before dying, that he has been betrayed from the start, that he has been sentenced to death—that love and command and triumph have been accorded him because his companions already thought of him as a dead man, because to Bandeira he already was a dead man.

Suárez, almost in contempt, fires the shot.

# The Other Death

(1948)

I have mislaid the letter, but a couple of years or so ago Gannon wrote me from his ranch up in Gualeguaychú saying he would send me a translation, perhaps the very first into Spanish, of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "The Past," and adding in a P.S. that don Pedro Damián, whom I might recall, had died of a lung ailment a few nights earlier. The man (Gannon went on), wasted by fever, had in his delirium relived the long ordeal of the battle of Masoller. It seemed to me there was nothing unreasonable or out of the ordinary about this news since don Pedro, when he was nineteen or twenty, had been a follower of the banners of Aparicio Saravia. Pedro Damián had been working as a hand up north on a ranch in Río Negro or Paysandú when the 1904 revolution broke out. Although he was from Gualeguaychú, in the province of Entre Ríos, he went along with his friends and, being as cocky and ignorant as they were, joined the rebel army. He fought in one or two skirmishes and in the final battle. Returned

*Jorge Luis Borges*

home in 1905, *Damián*, with a kind of humble stubbornness, once more took up his work as a cowhand. For all I know, he never left his native province again. He spent his last thirty years living in a small lonely cabin eight or ten miles from *Ñancay*. It was in that out-of-the-way place that I spoke with him one evening (that *Í* tried to speak with him one evening) back around 1942; he was a man of few words, and not very bright. *Masoller*, it turned out, was the whole of his personal history. And so I was not surprised to find out that he had lived the sound and fury of that battle over again at the hour of his death. When I knew I would never see *Damián* another time, I wanted to remember him, but so poor is my memory for faces that all I could recall was the snapshot *Gannon* had taken of him. There is nothing unusual in this fact, considering that I saw the man only once at the beginning of 1942, but had looked at his picture many times. *Gannon* sent me the photograph and it, too, has been misplaced. I think now that if I were to come across it, I would feel afraid.

The second episode took place in *Montevideo*, months later. *Don Pedro's* fever and his agony gave me the idea for a tale of fantasy based on the defeat at *Masoller*; *Emir Rodríguez Monegal*, to whom I had told the plot, wrote me an introduction to *Colonel Dionisio Tabares*, who had fought in that campaign. The *Colonel* received me one evening after dinner. From a rocking chair out in the side yard, he recalled the old days with great feeling but at the same time with a faulty sense of chronology. He spoke of ammunition that never reached him and of reserves of horses that arrived worn out, of sleepy dust-covered men weaving labyrinths of marches, of *Saravia*, who might have ridden into *Montevideo* but who passed it by "because the gaucho has a fear of towns," of throats hacked from ear to ear, of a civil war that seemed to me less a military operation than the dream of a cattle thief or an outlaw. Names of battles kept coming up: *Illescas*, *Tupambaé*, *Masoller*. The *Colonel's* pauses were so effective and his manner so vivid that I realized he had told and retold these

same things many times before, and I feared that behind his words almost no true memories remained. When he stopped for a breath, I managed to get in *Damián's* name.

"*Damián?* *Pedro Damián?*" said the Colonel. "He served with me. A little half-breed. I remember the boys used to call him *Daymán*—after the river." The Colonel let out a burst of loud laughter, then cut it off all at once. I could not tell whether his discomfort was real or put on.

In another voice, he stated that war, like women, served as a test of men, and that nobody knew who he really was until he had been under fire. A man might think himself a coward and actually be brave. And the other way around, too, as had happened to that poor *Damián*, who bragged his way in and out of saloons with his white ribbon marking him as a *Blanco*, and later on lost his nerve at *Masoller*. In one exchange of gunfire with the regulars, he handled himself like a man, but then it was something else again when the two armies met face to face and the artillery began pounding away and every man felt as though there were five thousand other men out there grouping to kill him. That poor kid. He'd spent his life on a farm dipping sheep, and then all of a sudden he gets himself dragged along and mixed up in the grim reality of war. . . .

For some absurd reason *Tabares'* version of the story made me uncomfortable. I would have preferred things to have happened differently. Without being aware of it, I had made a kind of idol out of old *Damián*—a man I had seen only once on a single evening many years earlier. *Tabares'* story destroyed everything. Suddenly the reasons for *Damián's* aloofness and his stubborn insistence on keeping to himself were clear to me. They had not sprung from modesty but from shame. In vain, I told myself that a man pursued by an act of cowardice is more complex and more interesting than one who is merely courageous. The gaucho *Martín Fierro*, I thought, is less memorable than *Lord Jim* or *Razumov*. Yes, but *Damián*, as a gaucho, should have been *Martín Fierro*—especially in the presence of *Uruguayan gauchos*. In what *Tabares* left unsaid, I felt his assumption

*Jorge Luis Borges*

(perhaps undeniable) that Uruguay is more primitive than Argentina and therefore physically braver. I remember we said goodbye to each other that night with a cordiality that was a bit marked.

During the winter, the need of one or two details for my story (which somehow was slow in taking shape) sent me back to Colonel Tabares again. I found him with another man of his own age, a Dr. Juan Francisco Amaro from Paysandú, who had also fought in Saravia's revolution. They spoke, naturally, of Masoller.

Amaro told a few anecdotes, then slowly added, in the manner of someone who is thinking aloud, "We camped for the night at Santa Irene, I recall, and some of the men from around there joined us. Among them a French veterinarian, who died the night before the battle, and a boy, a sheepshearer from Entre Ríos. Pedro Damián was his name."

I cut him off sharply. "Yes, I know," I said. "The Argentine who couldn't face the bullets."

I stopped. The two of them were looking at me, puzzled.

"You are mistaken, sir," Amaro said after a while. "Pedro Damián died as any man might wish to die. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. The regular troops had dug themselves in on the top of a hill and our men charged them with lances. Damián rode at the head, shouting, and a bullet struck him square in the chest. He stood up in his stirrups, finished his shout, and then rolled to the ground, where he lay under the horses' hooves. He was dead, and the whole last charge of Masoller trampled over him. So fearless, and barely twenty."

He was speaking, doubtless, of another Damián, but something made me ask what it was the boy had shouted.

"Filth," said the Colonel. "That's what men shout in action."

"Maybe," said Amaro, "but he also cried out, 'Long live Urquiza!'"

We were silent. Finally the Colonel murmured, "Not as if we were fighting at Masoller, but at Cagancha or India

Muerta a hundred years ago.” He added, genuinely bewildered, “I commanded those troops, and I could swear it’s the first time I’ve ever heard of this *Damián*.”

We had no luck in getting the Colonel to remember him.

Back in Buenos Aires, the amazement that his forgetfulness produced in me repeated itself. Browsing through the eleven pleasurable volumes of Emerson’s works in the basement of Mitchell’s, the English bookstore, I met Patricio Gannon one afternoon. I asked him for his translation of “The Past.” He told me that he had no translation of it in mind, and that, besides, Spanish literature was so boring it made Emerson quite superfluous. I reminded him that he had promised me the translation in the same letter in which he wrote me of *Damián*’s death. He asked me who was *Damián*. I told him in vain. With rising terror, I noticed that he was listening to me very strangely, and I took refuge in a literary discussion on the detractors of Emerson, a poet far more complex, far more skilled, and truly more extraordinary than the unfortunate Poe.

I must put down some additional facts. In April, I had a letter from Colonel Dionisio Tabares; his mind was no longer vague and now he remembered quite well the boy from Entre Ríos who spearheaded the charge at Masoller and whom his men buried that night in a grave at the foot of the hill. In July, I passed through Gualaguaychú; I did not come across *Damián*’s cabin, and nobody there seemed to remember him now. I wanted to question the foreman Diego Abaroa, who saw *Damián* die, but Abaroa had passed away himself at the beginning of the winter. I tried to call to mind *Damián*’s features; months later, leafing through some old albums, I found that the dark face I had attempted to evoke really belonged to the famous tenor Tamberlik, playing the role of Othello.

Now I move on to conjectures. The easiest, but at the same time the least satisfactory, assumes two *Damián*s: the coward who died in Entre Ríos around 1946, and the man of courage who died at Masoller in 1904. But this falls apart in its inability to explain what are really the puzzles:

Jorge Luis Borges

the strange fluctuations of Colonel Tabares' memory, for one, and the general forgetfulness, which in so short a time could blot out the image and even the name of the man who came back. (I cannot accept, I do not want to accept, a simpler possibility—that of my having dreamed the first man.) Stranger still is the supernatural conjecture thought up by Ulrike von Kühlmann. Pedro Damián, said Ulrike, was killed in the battle and at the hour of his death asked God to carry him back to Entre Ríos. God hesitated a moment before granting the request, but by then the man was already dead and had been seen by others to have fallen. God, who cannot unmake the past but can affect its images, altered the image of Damián's violent death into one of falling into a faint. And so it was the boy's ghost that came back to his native province. Came back, but we must not forget that it did so as a ghost. It lived in isolation without a woman and without friends; it loved and possessed everything, but from a distance, as from the other side of a mirror; ultimately it "died" and its frail image just disappeared, like water in water. This conjecture is faulty, but it may have been responsible for pointing out to me the true one (the one I now believe to be true), which is at the same time simpler and more unprecedented. In a mysterious way I discovered it in the treatise *De Omnipotentia* by Pier Damiani, after having been referred to him by two lines in Canto XXI of the *Paradiso*, in which the problem of Damiani's identity is brought up. In the fifth chapter of that treatise, Pier Damiani asserts—against Aristotle and against Fredegarius de Tours—that it is within God's power to make what once was into something that has never been. Reading those old theological discussions, I began to understand don Pedro Damián's tragic story.

This is my solution. Damián handled himself like a coward on the battlefield at Masoller and spent the rest of his life setting right that shameful weakness. He returned to Entre Ríos; he never lifted a hand against another man, he never cut anyone up, he never sought fame as a man of

courage. Instead, living out there in the hill country of Ñancay and struggling with the backwoods and with wild cattle, he made himself tough, hard. Probably without realizing it, he was preparing the way for the miracle. He thought from his innermost self, If destiny brings me another battle, I'll be ready for it. For forty years he waited and waited, with an inarticulate hope, and then, in the end, at the hour of his death, fate brought him his battle. It came in the form of delirium, for, as the Greeks knew, we are all shadows of a dream. In his final agony he lived his battle over again, conducted himself as a man, and in heading the last charge he was struck by a bullet in the middle of the chest. And so, in 1946, through the working out of a long, slow-burning passion, Pedro Damián died in the defeat at Masoller, which took place between winter and spring in 1904.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, it is denied that God can unmake the past, but nothing is said of the complicated concatenation of causes and effects which is so vast and so intimate that perhaps it might prove impossible to annul a *single* remote fact, insignificant as it may seem, without invalidating the present. To modify the past is not to modify a single fact; it is to annul the consequences of that fact, which tend to be infinite. In other words, it involves the creation of two universal histories. In the first, let us say, Pedro Damián died in Entre Ríos in 1946; in the second, at Masoller in 1904. It is this second history that we are living now, but the suppression of the first was not immediate and produced the odd contradictions that I have related. It was in Colonel Dionisio Tabares that the different stages took place. At first, he remembered that Damián acted as a coward; next, he forgot him entirely; then he remembered Damián's fearless death. No less illuminating is the case of the foreman Abaroa; he had to die, as I understand it, because he held too many memories of don Pedro Damián.

As for myself, I do not think I am running a similar risk. I have guessed at and set down a process beyond man's

*Jorge Luis Borges*

understanding, a kind of exposure of reason; but there are certain circumstances that lessen the dangers of this privilege of mine. For the present, I am not sure of having always written the truth. I suspect that in my story there are a few false memories. It is my suspicion that Pedro Damián (if he ever existed) was not called Pedro Damián and that I remember him by that name so as to believe someday that the whole story was suggested to me by Pier Damiani's thesis. Something similar happens with the poem I mentioned in the first paragraph, which centers around the irrevocability of the past. A few years from now, I shall believe I made up a fantastic tale, and I will actually have recorded an event that was real, just as some two thousand years ago in all innocence Virgil believed he was setting down the birth of a man and foretold the birth of Christ.

Poor Damián! Death carried him off at the age of twenty in a local battle of a sad and little-known war, but in the end he got what he longed for in his heart, and he was a long time getting it, and perhaps there is no greater happiness.

# Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth (1949)

. . . like the spider, which  
builds itself a feeble house.  
The Koran, xxix, 40

“This,” said Dunraven with a sweeping gesture that did not fail to embrace the misty stars while it took in the bleak moor, the sea, the dunes, and an imposing, tumbledown building that somehow suggested a stable long since fallen into disrepair, “this is the land of my forebears.”

Unwin, his companion, drew the pipe out of his mouth and made some faint sounds of approval. It was the first summer evening of 1914; weary of a world that lacked the dignity of danger, the two friends set great value on these far reaches of Cornwall. Dunraven cultivated a dark beard and thought of himself as the author of a substantial epic, which his contemporaries would barely be able to scan and whose subject had not yet been revealed to him; Unwin had published a paper on the theory supposed to have been written by Fermat in the margin of a page of Diophantus. Both men—need it be said?—were young, dreamy, and passionate.

“It’s about a quarter of a century ago now,” said Dun-

*Jorge Luis Borges*

raven, "that Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, chief or king of I don't know what Nilotic tribe, died in the central room of this house at the hands of his cousin Zaid. After all these years, the facts surrounding his death are still unclear."

Unwin, as was expected of him, asked why.

"For several reasons," was the answer. "In the first place, this house is a labyrinth. In the second place, it was watched over by a slave and a lion. In the third place, a hidden treasure vanished. In the fourth place, the murderer was dead when the murder happened. In the fifth place—"

Tired out, Unwin stopped him.

"Don't go on multiplying the mysteries," he said. "They should be kept simple. Bear in mind Poe's purloined letter, bear in mind Zangwill's locked room."

"Or made complex," replied Dunraven. "Bear in mind the universe."

Climbing the steep dunes, they had reached the labyrinth. It seemed to them, up close, a straight and almost endless wall of unplastered brick, barely higher than a man's head. Dunraven said that the building had the shape of a circle, but so wide was this circle that its curve was almost invisible. Unwin recollected Nicholas of Cusa, to whom a straight line was the arc of an infinite circle. They walked on and on, and along about midnight discovered a narrow opening that led into a blind, unsafe passage. Dunraven said that inside the house were many branching ways but that, by turning always to the left, they would reach the very center of the network in little more than an hour. Unwin assented. Their cautious footsteps resounded off the stone-paved floor; the corridor branched into other, narrower corridors. The roof was very low, making the house seem to want to imprison them, and they had to walk one behind the other through the complex dark. Unwin went ahead, forced to slacken the pace because of the rough masonry and the many turns. The unseen wall flowed on by his hand, endlessly. Unwin, slow in the blackness, heard from his friend's lips the tale of the death of Ibn Hakkan.

"Perhaps the oldest of my memories," Dunraven said, "is

the one of Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari in the port of Pentreath. At his heels followed a black man with a lion— unquestionably they were the first black man and the first lion my eyes had ever seen, outside of engravings from the Bible. I was a boy then, but the beast the color of the sun and the man the color of night impressed me less than Ibn Hakkan himself. To me, he seemed very tall; he was a man with sallow skin, half-shut black eyes, an insolent nose, fleshy lips, a saffron-colored beard, a powerful chest, and a way of walking that was self-assured and silent. At home, I said, 'A king has come on a ship.' Later, when the bricklayers were at work here, I broadened his title and dubbed him King of Babel.

"The news that this stranger would settle in Pentreath was received with welcome, but the scale and shape of his house aroused disapproval and bewilderment. It was not right that a house should consist of a single room and of miles and miles of corridors. 'Among foreigners such houses might be common,' people said, 'but hardly here in England.' Our rector, Mr. Allaby, a man with out-of-the-way reading habits, exhumed an Eastern story of a king whom the Divinity had punished for having built a labyrinth, and he told this story from the pulpit. The very next day, Ibn Hakkan paid a visit to the rectory; the circumstances of the brief interview were not known at the time, but no further sermon alluded to the sin of pride, and the Moor was able to go on contracting masons. Years afterward, when Ibn Hakkan was dead, Allaby stated to the authorities the substance of their conversation.

"Ibn Hakkan, refusing a chair, had told him these or similar words: 'No man can place judgment upon what I am doing now. My sins are such that were I to invoke for hundreds upon hundreds of years the Ultimate Name of God, this would be powerless to set aside the least of my torments; my sins are such that were I to kill you, Reverend Allaby, with these very hands, my act would not increase even slightly the torments that Infinite Justice holds in store for me. There is no land on earth where my

*Jorge Luis Borges*

name is unknown. I am Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, and in my day I ruled over the tribes of the desert with a rod of iron. For years and years, with the help of my cousin Zaid, I trampled them underfoot until God heard their outcry and suffered them to rebel against me. My armies were broken and put to the sword; I succeeded in escaping with the wealth I had accumulated during my reign of plunder. Zaid led me to the tomb of a holy man, at the foot of a stone hill. I ordered my slave to watch the face of the desert. Zaid and I went inside with our chest of gold coins and slept, utterly worn out. That night, I believed that a tangle of snakes had trapped me. I woke up in horror. By my side, in the dawn, Zaid lay asleep; a spider web against my flesh had made me dream that dream. It pained me that Zaid, who was a coward, should be sleeping so restfully. I reflected that the wealth was not infinite and that Zaid might wish to claim part of it for himself. In my belt was my silver-handled dagger; I slipped it from its sheath and pierced his throat with it. In his agony, he muttered words I could not make out. I looked at him. He was dead, but, fearing that he might rise up, I ordered my slave to obliterate the dead man's face with a heavy rock. Then we wandered under the sun, and one day we spied a sea. Very tall ships plowed a course through it. I thought that a dead man would be unable to make his way over such waters, and I decided to seek other lands. The first night after we sailed, I dreamed that I killed Zaid. Everything was exactly the same, but this time I understood his words. He said: "As you now kill me, I shall one day kill you, wherever you may hide." I have sworn to avert that threat. I shall bury myself in the heart of a labyrinth so that Zaid's ghost will lose its way.'

"After having said this, he went away. Allaby did his best to think that the Moor was mad and that his absurd labyrinth was a symbol and a clear mark of his madness. Then he reflected that this explanation agreed with the extravagant building and with the extravagant story but not with the strong impression left by the man Ibn Hakkan.

Who knew whether such tales might not be common in the sand wastes of Egypt, who knew whether such queer things corresponded (like Pliny's dragons) less to a person than to a culture? On a visit to London, Allaby combed back numbers of the *Times*; he verified the fact of the uprising and of the subsequent downfall of al-Bokhari and of his vizier, whose cowardice was well known.

"Al-Bokhari, as soon as the bricklayers had finished, installed himself in the center of the labyrinth. He was not seen again in the town; at times, Allaby feared that Zaid had caught up with the king and killed him. At night, the wind carried to us the growling of the lion, and the sheep in their pens pressed together with an ancient fear.

"It was customary for ships from Eastern ports, bound for Cardiff or Bristol, to anchor in the little bay. The slave used to go down from the labyrinth (which at that time, I remember, was not its present rose color but was crimson) and exchanged guttural-sounding words with the ships' crews, and he seemed to be looking among the men for the vizier's ghost. It was no secret that these vessels carried cargoes of contraband, and if of alcohol or of forbidden ivories, why not of dead men as well?

"Some three years after the house was finished, the *Rose of Sharon* anchored one October morning just under the bluffs. I was not among those who saw this sailing ship, and perhaps the image of it I hold in my mind is influenced by forgotten prints of Aboukir or of Trafalgar, but I believe it was among that class of ships so minutely detailed that they seem less the work of a shipbuilder than of a carpenter, and less of a carpenter than of a cabinetmaker. It was (if not in reality, at least in my dreams) polished, dark, fast, and silent, and its crew was made up of Arabs and Malayans.

"It anchored at dawn, and in the late afternoon of that same day Ibn Hakkan burst into the rectory to see Allaby. He was dominated—completely dominated—by a passion of fear, and was scarcely able to make it clear that Zaid had entered the labyrinth and that his slave and his lion had

*Jorge Luis Borges*

already been killed. He asked in all seriousness whether the authorities might be able to help him. Before Allaby could say a word, al-Bokhari was gone—as if torn away by the same terror that had brought him for the second and last time to the rectory. Alone in his library, Allaby reflected in amazement that this fear-ridden man had kept down Sudanese tribes by the knife, knew what a battle was, and knew what it was to kill. Allaby found out the next day that the boat had already set sail (bound for the Red Sea port of Suakin, he later learned). Feeling it was his duty to verify the death of the slave, he made his way up to the labyrinth. Al-Bokhari's breathless tale seemed to him utterly fantastic, but at one turn of the corridor he came upon the lion, and the lion was dead, and at another turn there was the slave, who was also dead, and in the central room he found al-Bokhari—with his face obliterated. At the man's feet was a small chest inlaid with mother-of-pearl; the lock had been forced, and not a single coin was left."

Dunraven's final sentences, underlined by rhetorical pauses, were meant to be impressive; Unwin guessed that his friend had gone over them many times before, always with the same confidence—and with the same flatness of effect. He asked, in order to feign interest, "How were the lion and the slave killed?"

The relentless voice went on with a kind of gloomy satisfaction, "Their faces were also bashed in."

A muffled sound of rain was now added to the sound of the men's steps. Unwin realized that they would have to spend the night in the labyrinth, in the central chamber, but that in time this uncomfortable experience could be looked back on as an adventure. He kept silent. Dunraven could not restrain himself, and asked, in the manner of one who wants to squeeze the last drop, "Can this story be explained?"

Unwin answered, as though thinking aloud, "I have no idea whether it can be explained or not. I only know it's a lie."

Dunraven broke out in a torrent of strongly flavored

language and said that all the population of Pentreath could bear witness to the truth of what he had told and that if he had to make up a story, he was a writer after all and could easily have invented a far better one. No less astonished than Dunraven, Unwin apologized. Time in the darkness seemed more drawn out; both men began to fear they had gone astray, and were feeling their tiredness when a faint gleam of light from overhead revealed the lower steps of a narrow staircase. They climbed up and came to a round room that lay in ruin. Two things were left that attested to the fear of the ill-starred king: a slit of a window that looked out onto the moors and the sea, and a trapdoor in the floor that opened above the curve of the stairway. The room, though spacious, had about it something of a prison cell.

Less because of the rain than because of a wish to have a ready anecdote for friends, the two men spent the night in the labyrinth. The mathematician slept soundly; not so the poet, who was hounded by verses that his judgment knew to be worthless:

Faceless the sultry and overpowering lion,  
Faceless the stricken slave, faceless the king.

Unwin felt that the story of al-Bokhari's death had left him indifferent, but he woke up with the conviction of having unraveled it. All that day, he was preoccupied and unsociable, trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, and two nights later he met Dunraven in a pub back in London and said to him these or similar words: "In Cornwall, I said your story was a lie. The *facts* were true, or could be thought of as true, but told the way you told them they were obviously lies. I will begin with the greatest lie of all—with the unbelievable labyrinth. A fugitive does not hide himself in a maze. He does not build himself a labyrinth on a bluff overlooking the sea, a crimson labyrinth that can be sighted from afar by any ship's crew. He has no need to erect a labyrinth when the whole world already is one.

*Jorge Luis Borges*

For anyone who really wants to hide away, London is a better labyrinth than a lookout tower to which all the corridors of a building lead. The simple observation I have just propounded to you came to me the night before last while we were listening to the rain on the roof and were waiting for sleep to fall upon us. Under its influence, I chose to put aside your absurdities and to think about something sensible.”

“About the theory of series, say, or about a fourth dimension of space?” asked Dunraven.

“No,” said Unwin, serious. “I thought about the labyrinth of Crete. The labyrinth whose center was a man with the head of a bull.”

Dunraven, steeped in detective stories, thought that the solution of a mystery is always less impressive than the mystery itself. Mystery has something of the supernatural about it, and even of the divine; its solution, however, is always tainted by sleight of hand. He said, to put off the inevitable, “On coins and in sculpture the Minotaur has a bull’s head. Dante imagined it as having the body of a bull and a man’s head.”

“That version also fits my solution,” Unwin agreed. “What matters is that both the dwelling and the dweller be monstrous. The Minotaur amply justifies its maze. The same can hardly be said of a threat uttered in a dream. The Minotaur’s image once evoked (unavoidably, of course, in a mystery in which there is a labyrinth), the problem was virtually solved. Nonetheless, I confess I did not fully understand that this ancient image held the key, but in your story I found a detail I could use—the spider web.”

“The spider web?” repeated Dunraven, baffled.

“Yes. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if the spider web (the Platonic spider web—let’s keep this straight) may have suggested to the murderer (for there is a murderer) his crime. You remember that al-Bokhari, in the tomb, dreamed about a tangle of snakes, and upon waking found that a spider web had prompted his dream. Let us go back to that night in which al-Bokhari had that dream. The de-

feated king and the vizier and the slave are escaping over the desert with treasure. They take shelter for the night in a tomb. The vizier, whom we know to be a coward, sleeps; the king, whom we know to be a brave man, does not sleep. In order not to share the treasure, the king knifes the vizier. Several nights later, the vizier's ghost threatens the king in a dream. All this is unconvincing. To my understanding, the events took place in another way. That night, the king, the brave man, slept, and Zaid, the coward, lay awake. To sleep is to forget all things, and this particular forgetfulness is not easy when you know you are being hunted down with drawn swords. Zaid, greedy, bent over the sleeping figure of his king. He thought about killing him (maybe he even played with his dagger), but he did not dare. He woke the napping slave, they buried part of the treasure in the tomb, and they fled to Suakin and to England. Not to hide themselves from al-Bokhari but to lure him and to kill him, they built—like the spider its web—the crimson labyrinth on the high dunes in sight of the sea. The vizier knew that ships would carry to Nubian ports the tale of the red-bearded man, of the slave, and of the lion, and that sooner or later al-Bokhari would come in search of them in their labyrinth. In the last passageway of the maze, the trap lay waiting. Al-Bokhari had always underrated Zaid, and now did not lower himself to take the slightest precaution. At last, the wished-for day came; Ibn Hakkān landed in England, went directly to the door of the maze, made his way into its blind corridors, and perhaps had already set foot on the first steps when his vizier killed him—I don't know whether with a bullet—from the trapdoor in the ceiling. The slave would finish off the lion and another bullet would finish off the slave. Then Zaid crushed the three faces with a rock. He had to do it that way; one dead man with his face bashed in would have suggested a problem of identity, but the beast, the black man, and the king formed a series, and, given the first two terms, the last one would seem natural. It is not to be wondered at that he was driven by fear when he spoke to Allaby; he had just

Jorge Luis Borges

finished his awful job and was about to flee England and unearth the treasure.”

A thoughtful silence, or disbelief, followed Unwin’s words. Dunraven asked for another tankard before giving his judgment.

“I admit,” he said, “that my Ibn Hakkan could have been Zaid. Such metamorphoses are classic rules of the game, are accepted *conventions* demanded by the reader. What I am unwilling to admit is your conjecture that a part of the treasure remained in the Sudan. Remember that Zaid fled from the king and from the king’s enemies both; it is easier to picture him stealing the whole hoard than taking the time to bury a portion of it. At the very end, perhaps no coins were found in the chest because no coins were left. The bricklayers would have eaten up a fortune that, unlike the red gold of the Nibelungs, was not inexhaustible. And so we have Ibn Hakkan crossing the seas in order to recover a treasure already squandered.”

“I shouldn’t say squandered,” Unwin said. “The vizier invested it, putting together on an island of infidels a great circular trap made of brick and destined not only to lure a king but to be his grave. Zaid, if your guess is correct, acted out of hate and fear, and not out of greed. He stole the treasure, and only later found that he was really after something else. He really wanted to see Ibn Hakkan dead. He pretended to be Ibn Hakkan, he killed Ibn Hakkan, and in the end he *became* Ibn Hakkan.”

“Yes,” agreed Dunraven. “He was a good-for-nothing who, before becoming a nobody in death, wanted one day to look back on having been a king or having been taken for a king.”

# The Man on the Threshold

(1952)

Bioy-Casares brought back with him from London a strange dagger with a triangular blade and a hilt in the shape of an H; a friend of ours, Christopher Dewey of the British Council, told us that such weapons were commonly used in India. This statement prompted him to mention that he had held a job in that country between the two wars. (“*Ultra Auroram et Gangem*,” I recall his saying in Latin, misquoting a line from Juvenal.) Of the stories he entertained us with that night, I venture to set down the one that follows. My account will be faithful; may Allah deliver me from the temptation of adding any circumstantial details or of weighing down the tale’s Oriental character with interpolations from Kipling. It should be remarked that the story has a certain ancient simplicity that it would be a pity to lose—something perhaps straight out of the *Arabian Nights*.

The precise geography [Dewey said] of the events I am going to relate is of little importance. Besides, what would

*Jorge Luis Borges*

the names of Amritsar or Oudh mean in Buenos Aires? Let me only say, then, that in those years there were disturbances in a Muslim city and that the central government sent out one of their best people to restore order. He was a Scotsman from an illustrious clan of warriors, and in his blood he bore a tradition of violence. Only once did I lay eyes on him, but I shall not forget his deep black hair, the prominent cheekbones, the somehow avid nose and mouth, the broad shoulders, the powerful set of a Viking. David Alexander Glencairn is what he'll be called in my story tonight; the names are fitting, since they belonged to kings who ruled with an iron scepter. David Alexander Glencairn (as I shall have to get used to calling him) was, I suspect, a man who was feared; the mere news of his coming was enough to quell the city. This did not deter him from putting into effect a number of forceful measures. A few years passed. The city and the outlying district were at peace; Sikhs and Muslims had laid aside their ancient enmities, and suddenly Glencairn disappeared. Naturally enough, there was no lack of rumors that he had been kidnapped or murdered.

These things I learned from my superior, for the censorship was strict and the newspapers made no comment on (nor did they even record, for all I recall) Glencairn's disappearance. There's a saying that India is larger than the world; Glencairn, who may have been all powerful in the city to which he was destined by a signature scrawled across the bottom of some document, was no more than a cog in the administration of Empire. The inquiries of the local police turned up nothing; my superior felt that a civilian might rouse less suspicion and achieve greater results. Three or four days later (distances in India are generous), I was appointed to my mission and was working my way without hope of success through the streets of the commonplace city that had somehow whisked away a man.

I felt, almost at once, the invisible presence of a conspiracy to keep Glencairn's fate hidden. There's not a soul in this city (I suspected) who is not in on the secret and who is

not sworn to keep it. Upon being questioned, most people professed an unbounded ignorance; they did not know who Glencairn was, had never seen him, had never heard anyone speak of him. Others, instead, had caught a glimpse of him only a quarter of an hour before talking to So-and-So, and they even accompanied me to the house the two had entered and in which nothing was known of them, or which they had just that moment left. Some of those meticulous liars I went so far as to knock down. Witnesses approved my outbursts, and made up other lies. I did not believe them, but neither did I dare ignore them. One afternoon, I was handed an envelope containing a slip of paper on which there was an address.

The sun had gone down when I got there. The quarter was poor but not rowdy; the house was quite low; from the street I caught a glimpse of a succession of unpaved inner courtyards, and somewhere at the far end an opening. There, some kind of Muslim ceremony was being held; a blind man entered with a lute made of a reddish wood.

At my feet, motionless as an object, an old, old man squatted on the threshold. I'll tell what he was like, for he is an essential part of the story. His many years had worn him down and polished him as smooth as water polishes a stone, or as the generations of men polish a sentence. Long rags covered him, or so it seemed to me, and the cloth he wore wound around his head was one rag more. In the dusk, he lifted a dark face and a white beard. I began speaking to him without preamble, for by now I had given up all hope of ever finding David Alexander Glencairn. The old man did not understand me (perhaps he did not hear me), and I had to explain that Glencairn was a judge and that I was looking for him. I felt, on speaking these words, the pointlessness of questioning this old man for whom the present was hardly more than a dim rumor. This man might give me news of the Mutiny or of Akbar (I thought) but not of Glencairn. What he told me confirmed this suspicion.

"A judge!" he cried with weak surprise. "A judge who

*Jorge Luis Borges*

has got himself lost and is being searched for. That happened when I was a boy. I have no memory for dates, but Nikal Seyn (Nicholson) had not yet been killed before the wall of Delhi. Time that has passed stays on in memory; I may be able to summon back what happened then. God, in his wrath, had allowed people to fall into corruption; the mouths of men were full of blasphemy and of deceit and of fraud. Yet not all were evil, and when it was known that the queen was about to send a man who would carry out in this land the law of England, those who were less evil were cheered, for they felt that law is better than disorder. The Christian came to us, but it was not long before he too was deceiving and oppressing us, concealing abominable crimes, and selling decisions. We did not blame him in the beginning; the English justice he administered was not familiar to anyone, and the apparent excesses of the new judge may have obeyed certain valid arcane reasoning. Everything must have a justification in his book, we wished to think, but his kinship with all evil judges the world over was too obvious to be overlooked, and at last we were forced to admit that he was simply a wicked man. He turned out to be a tyrant, and the unfortunate people (in order to avenge themselves for the false hopes they had once placed in him) began to toy with the idea of kidnapping him and submitting him to judgment. To talk was not enough; from plans they had to move to action. Nobody, perhaps, save the very foolish or the very young, believed that that rash scheme could be carried out, but thousands of Sikhs and Muslims kept their word and one day they executed—incredulous—what to each of them had seemed impossible. They sequestered the judge and held him prisoner in a farmhouse beyond the outskirts of the town. Then they called together all those who had been wronged by him, or, in some cases, orphans and widows, for during those years the executioner's sword had not rested. In the end—this was perhaps the most difficult—they sought and named a judge to judge the judge.”

At this point, the old man was interrupted by some

women who were entering the house. Then he went on, slowly.

“It is well known that there is no generation that does not include in it four upright men who are the secret pillars of the world and who justify it before the Lord: one of these men would have made the perfect judge. But where are they to be found if they themselves wander the world lost and nameless, and do not know each other when they meet, and are unaware of the high destiny that is theirs? Someone then reasoned that if fate forbade us wise men, we should seek out the witless. This opinion prevailed. Students of the Koran, doctors of law, Sikhs who bear the name of lions and who worship one God, Hindus who worship a multitude of gods, Mahavira monks who teach that the shape of the universe is that of a man with his legs spread apart, worshipers of fire, and black Jews made up the court, but the final ruling was entrusted to a madman.”

Here he was interrupted by people who were leaving the ceremony.

“To a madman,” he repeated, “so that God’s wisdom might speak through his mouth and shame human pride. His name has been forgotten, or was never known, but he went naked through the streets, or was clothed in rags, counting his fingers with a thumb and mocking at the trees.”

My common sense rebelled. I said that to hand over the verdict to a madman was to nullify the trial.

“The defendant accepted the judge,” was his answer, “seeing, perhaps, that because of the risk the conspirators would run if they set him free, only from a man who was mad might he not expect a sentence of death. I heard that he laughed when he was told who the judge was. The trial lasted many days and nights, drawn out by the swelling of the number of witnesses.”

The old man stopped. Something was troubling him. In order to bridge the lapse, I asked him how many days.

“At least nineteen,” he replied.

People who were leaving the ceremony interrupted him

*Jorge Luis Borges*

again; wine is forbidden to Muslims, but the faces and voices were those of drunkards. One, on passing, shouted something to the old man.

“Nineteen days—exactly,” he said, setting matters straight. “The faithless dog heard sentence passed, and the knife feasted on his throat.”

He had spoken fiercely, joyfully. With a different voice now he brought the story to an end. “He died without fear; In the most vile of men there is some virtue.”

“Where did all this happen?” I asked him, “In a farmhouse?”

For the first time, he looked into my eyes. Then he made things clear, slowly, measuring his words. “I said that he had been confined in a farmhouse, not that he was tried there. He was tried in this city, in a house like any other, like this one. One house differs little from another; what is important to know is whether the house is built in hell or in heaven.”

I asked him about the fate of the conspirators.

“I don’t know,” he told me patiently. “These things took place and were forgotten many years ago now. Maybe what they did was condemned by men, but not by the Lord.”

Having said this, he got up. I felt his words as a dismissal, and from that moment I no longer existed for him. Men and women from all the corners of the Punjab swarmed over us, praying and intoning, and nearly swept us away. I wondered how, from courtyards so narrow they were little more than long passageways, so many persons could be pouring out. Others were coming from the neighboring houses; it seems they had leaped over the walls. By shoving and cursing, I forced my way inside. At the heart of the innermost courtyard I came upon a naked man, crowned with yellow flowers, whom everyone kissed and caressed, with a sword in his hand. The sword was stained, for it had dealt Glencairn his death. I found his mutilated body in the stables out back.

# The Challenge

(1952)

All over the Argentine runs a story that may belong to legend or to history or (which may be just another way of saying it belongs to legend) to both things at once. Its best recorded versions are to be found in the unjustly forgotten novels about outlaws and desperadoes written in the last century by Eduardo Gutiérrez; among its oral versions, the first one I heard came from a neighborhood of Buenos Aires bounded by a penitentiary, a river, and a cemetery, and nicknamed Tierra del Fuego. The hero of this version was Juan Muraña, a wagon driver and knife fighter to whom are attributed all the stories of daring that still survive in what were once the outskirts of the city's Northside. That first version was quite simple. A man from the Stockyards or from Barracas, knowing about Muraña's reputation (but never having laid eyes on him), sets out all the way across town from the Southside to take him on. He picks the fight in a corner saloon, and the two move into the street to have

Jorge Luis Borges

it out. Each is wounded, but in the end Muraña slashes the other man's face and tells him, "I'm letting you live so you'll come back looking for me again."

What impressed itself in my mind about the duel was that it had no ulterior motive. In conversation thereafter (my friends know this only too well), I grew fond of retelling the anecdote. Around 1927, I wrote it down, giving it the deliberately laconic title "Men Fought." Years later, this same anecdote helped me work out a lucky story—though hardly a good one—called "Streetcorner Man." Then, in 1950, Adolfo Bioy-Casares and I made use of it again to plot a film script that the producers turned down and that would have been called *On the Outer Edge*. It was about hard-bitten men like Muraña who lived on the outskirts of Buenos Aires before the turn of the century. I thought, after such extensive labors, that I had said farewell to the story of the disinterested duel. Then, this year, out in Chivilcoy, I came across a far better version. I hope this is the true one, although since fate seems to take pleasure in a thing's happening many times over, both may very well be authentic. Two quite bad stories and a script that I still think of as good came out of the poorer first version; out of the second, which is complete and perfect, nothing can come. Without working in metaphors or details of local color, I shall tell it now as it was told to me. The story took place to the west, in the district of Chivilcoy, sometime back in the 1870's.

The hero's name is Wenceslao Suárez. He earns his wages braiding ropes and making harnesses, and lives in a small adobe hut. Forty or fifty years old, he's a man who has won a reputation for courage, and it is quite likely (given the facts of the story) that he has a killing or two to his credit. But these killings, because they were in fair fights, neither trouble his conscience nor tarnish his good name. One evening, something out of the ordinary happens in the routine life of this man: at a crossroads saloon, he is told that a letter has come for him. Don Wenceslao does

not know how to read; the saloonkeeper puzzles out word by word an epistle certainly not written by the man who sent it. In the name of certain friends, who value dexterity and true composure, an unknown correspondent sends his compliments to don Wenceslao, whose renown has crossed over the Arroyo del Medio into the Province of Santa Fe, and extends him the hospitality of his humble home in a town of the said province. Wenceslao Suárez dictates a reply to the saloonkeeper. Thanking the other man for his expression of friendship, and explaining that he dare not leave his mother—who is well along in years—alone, he invites the other man to his own place in Chivilcoy, where a barbecue and a bottle or so of wine may be looked forward to. The months drag by, and one day a man riding a horse harnessed and saddled in a style unknown in the area inquires at the saloon for the way to Suárez' house. Suárez, who has come to the saloon to buy meat, overhears the question and tells the man who he is. The stranger reminds him of the letters they exchanged some time back. Suárez shows his pleasure that the other man has gone to the trouble of making the journey; then the two of them go off into a nearby field and Suárez prepares the barbecue. They eat and drink and talk at length. About what? I suspect about subjects involving blood and cruelty—but with each man on his guard, wary.

They have eaten, and the oppressive afternoon heat weighs over the land when the stranger invites don Wenceslao to join in a bit of harmless knife play. To say no would dishonor the host. They fence, and at first they only play at fighting, but it's not long before Wenceslao feels that the stranger is out to kill him. Realizing at last what lay behind the ceremonious letter, Wenceslao regrets having eaten and drunk so much. He knows he will tire before the other man, on whom he has a good nine or ten years. Out of scorn or politeness, the stranger offers him a short rest. Don Wenceslao agrees and, as soon as they take up their dueling again, he allows the other man to wound him on the left

Jorge Luis Borges

hand, in which he holds his rolled poncho.\* The knife slices through his wrist, the hand dangles loose. Suárez, springing back, lays the bleeding hand on the ground, clamps it down under his boot, tears it off, feints a thrust at the amazed stranger's chest, then rips open his belly with a solid stab. So the story ends, except that, according to one teller, the man from Santa Fe is left lifeless, while to another (who withholds from him the dignity of death) he rides back to his own province. In this latter version, Suárez gives him first aid with the rum remaining from their lunch.

In this feat of Manco (One Hand) Wenceslao—as Suárez is now known to fame—certain touches of mildness or politeness (his trade as harness and rope maker, his qualms about leaving his mother alone, the exchange of flowery letters, the two men's leisurely conversation, the lunch) happily tone down and make the barbarous tale more effective. These touches lend it an epic and even chivalrous quality that we hardly find, for example—unless we have made up our minds to do so—in the drunken brawls of *Martín Fierro* or in the closely related but poorer story of Juan Muraña and the man from the Southside. A trait common to the two may, perhaps, be significant. In both of them, the challenger is defeated. This may be due to the mere and unfortunate necessity for the local champion to triumph, but also (and this is preferable) to a tacit disapproval of aggression, or (which would be best of all) to the dark and tragic suspicion that man is the worker of his own downfall, like Ulysses in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno* or like that other doomed captain in *Moby Dick*.

\* Montaigne (*Essays*, I, 49) says that this manner of fighting with cloak and dagger is very old, and quotes Caesar's finding, "*Sinistras sagis involvunt, gladiosque dstringunt*"—"They wrapped their cloaks around their left arms and drew their swords" (*Civil War*, I, 75). Lugones, in *El payador* (1916), quotes these verses from a sixteenth-century *romance* of Bernardo del Carpio:

*Revolviendo el manto al brazo,  
la espada fuera a sacar.*

[Wrapping the cape round his arm, he drew his sword.]

*The Challenge*

Something fundamental in the brutal story just told saves it from falling into unalloyed barbarousness—an episode out of *La Terre* or Hemingway. I speak of a religious core. “His beliefs,” said the poet Lugones of the gaucho, “could be reduced to a few superstitions, which had no great bearing on his everyday life.” He then adds, “The one thing he respected was courage, which he cultivated with a chivalrous passion.” I would say that the gaucho, without realizing it, forged a religion—the hard and blind religion of courage—and that this faith (like all others) had its ethic, its mythology, and its martyrs. On the plains and out on the raw edges of the city, men who led extremely elementary lives—herders, stockyard workers, drovers, outlaws, and pimps—rediscovered in their own way the age-old cult of the gods of iron. In a thirteenth-century saga, we read:

“Tell me, what do you believe in?” said the earl.

“I believe in my own strength,” said Sigmund.

Wenceslao Suárez and his nameless antagonist, and many others whom myth has forgotten or has absorbed in these two, doubtless held this manly faith, and in all likelihood it was no mere form of vanity but rather an awareness that God may be found in any man.

# The Captive

(1956)

This story is told out in one of the old frontier towns—either Junín or Tapalquén. A boy was missing after an Indian raid; it was said that the marauders had carried him away. The boy's parents searched for him without any luck; years later, a soldier just back from Indian territory told them about a blue-eyed savage who may have been their son. At long last they traced him (the circumstances of the search have not come down to us and I dare not invent what I don't know) and they thought they recognized him. The man, marked by the wilderness and by primitive life, no longer understood the words of the language he spoke in childhood, but he let himself be led, uncurious and willing, to his old house. There he stopped—maybe because the others stopped. He stared at the door as though not understanding what it was. All of a sudden, ducking his head, he let out a cry, cut through the entranceway and the two long patios on the run, and burst into the kitchen. Without a second's pause, he buried his arm in the soot-blackened

oven chimney and drew out the small knife with the horn handle that he had hidden there as a boy. His eyes lit up with joy and his parents wept because they had found their lost child.

Maybe other memories followed upon this one, but the Indian could not live indoors and one day he left to go back to his open spaces. I would like to know what he felt in that first bewildering moment in which past and present merged; I would like to know whether in that dizzying instant the lost son was born again and died, or whether he managed to recognize, as a child or a dog might, his people and his home.

# Borges and Myself

(1956)

It's to the other man, to Borges, that things happen. I walk along the streets of Buenos Aires, stopping now and then—perhaps out of habit—to look at the arch of an old entrance-way or a grillwork gate; of Borges I get news through the mail and glimpse his name among a committee of professors or in a dictionary of biography. I have a taste for hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the roots of words, the smell of coffee, and Stevenson's prose; the other man shares these likes, but in a showy way that turns them into stagy mannerisms. It would be an exaggeration to say that we are on bad terms; I live, I let myself live, so that Borges can weave his tales and poems, and those tales and poems are my justification. It is not hard for me to admit that he has managed to write a few worthwhile pages, but these pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good no longer belongs to anyone—not even the other man—but rather to speech or tradition. In any case, I am fated to become lost once and for all, and only some moment of

myself will survive in the other man. Little by little, I have been surrendering everything to him, even though I have evidence of his stubborn habit of falsification and exaggerating. Spinoza held that all things try to keep on being themselves; a stone wants to be a stone and the tiger, a tiger. I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is so that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in those of others or than in the laborious tuning of a guitar. Years ago, I tried ridding myself of him and I went from myths of the outlying slums of the city to games with time and infinity, but those games are now part of Borges and I will have to turn to other things. And so, my life is a running away, and I lose everything and everything is left to oblivion or to the other man.

Which of us is writing this page I don't know.

# The Maker

(1958)

Until then, he had never dwelled on the pleasures of memory. Impressions had always washed over him, fleeting and vivid. A potter's design in vermilion; the vault of heaven clustered with stars that were also gods; the moon, from which a lion had fallen; the smoothness of marble under one's lingering fingertips; the taste of boar meat, which he liked to strip with quick flashing bites; a Phoenician word; the black shadow cast by a spear on yellow sand; the nearness of the sea or of women; the heavy wine whose roughness he cut with honey—any of these could wholly encompass the range of his mind. He was acquainted with fear as well as with anger and courage, and once he was the first to scale an enemy wall. Eager, curious, unquestioning, following no other law than to enjoy things and forget them, he wandered over many lands and, on one side or the other of the sea, looked on the cities of men and their palaces. In bustling marketplaces or at the foot of a mountain whose hidden peak may have sheltered satyrs, he had

heard entangled stories, which he accepted as he accepted reality, without attempting to find out whether they were true or imaginary.

Little by little, the beautiful world began to leave him; a persistent mist erased the lines of his hand, the night lost its multitude of stars, the ground became uncertain beneath his steps. Everything grew distant and blurred. When he knew he was going blind, he cried out; stoic fortitude had not yet been invented, and Hector could flee from Achilles without dishonor. I shall no longer look upon the sky and its mythological dread (he felt), nor this face which the years will transform. Days and nights passed over these fears of his body, but one morning he awoke, looked (without astonishment now) at the dim things around him, and unexplainably felt—the way one recognizes a strain of music or a voice—that all this had already happened to him and that he had faced it with fear, but also with joy, hope, and curiosity. Then he went deep into his past, which seemed to him bottomless, and managed to draw out of that dizzying descent the lost memory that now shone like a coin under the rain, maybe because he had never recalled it before except in some dream.

This was the memory. Another boy had wronged him and he had gone to his father and told him the story. His father, letting him speak, appeared not to listen or understand, and took down from the wall a bronze dagger, beautiful and charged with power, which in secret the boy had coveted. Now it lay in his hands and the suddenness of possession wiped out the injury he had suffered, but his father's voice was telling him, "Let them know you're a man," and in that voice was a command. Night blinded the paths. Clasp the dagger, in which he felt a magic power, he scrambled down the steep hillside that surrounded the house and ran to the edge of the sea, thinking of himself as Ajax and Perseus, and peopling with wounds and battles the dark salt air. The exact taste of that moment was what he now sought. The rest mattered little to him—the insults

*Jorge Luis Borges*

leading to the challenge, the clumsy fight, the way home with the blade dripping blood.

Another memory, also involving night and an expectation of adventure, sprang out of that one. A woman, the first to be given him by the gods, had waited for him in the shadow of a crypt until he reached her through galleries that were like nets of stone and down slopes that sank into darkness. Why did these memories come back to him and why without bitterness, as if foretelling of things about to happen?

With slow amazement he understood. In this nighttime of his mortal eyes into which he was now descending, love and danger were also in wait for him—Ares and Aphrodite—because he already divined (because he was already ringed in by) a rumor of hexameters and glory, a rumor of men defending a shrine which the gods would not save and of black ships roaming the seas in search of a loved island, the rumor of the Odysseys and the Iliads it was his destiny to sing and to leave resounding forever in mankind's hollow memory. These things we know, but not what he felt when he went down into his final darkness.

# The Intruder

(1966)

. . . passing the love of women.  
2 Samuel 1: 26

People say (but this is unlikely) that the story was first told by Eduardo, the younger of the Nelsons, at the wake of his elder brother Cristián, who died in his sleep some time back in the nineties out in the district of Morón. The fact is that someone got it from someone else during the course of that drawn-out and now dim night, between one sip of maté and the next, and told it to Santiago Dabove, from whom I heard it. Years later, in Turdera, where the story had taken place, I heard it again. The second and more elaborate version closely followed the one Santiago told, with the usual minor variations and discrepancies. I set down the story now because I see in it, if I'm not mistaken, a brief and tragic mirror of the character of those hard-bitten men living on the edge of Buenos Aires before the turn of the century. I hope to do this in a straightforward way, but I see in advance that I shall give in to the writer's temptation of emphasizing or adding certain details.

*Jorge Luis Borges*

In Turdera, where they lived, they were called the Nilsens. The priest there told me that his predecessor remembered having seen in the house of these people—somewhat in amazement—a worn Bible with a dark binding and black-letter type; on the back flyleaf he caught a glimpse of names and dates written in by hand. It was the only book in the house—the roaming chronicle of the Nilsens, lost as one day all things will be lost. The rambling old house, which no longer stands, was of unplastered brick; through the arched entranceway you could make out a patio paved with red tiles and beyond it a second one of hard-packed earth. Few people, at any rate, ever set foot inside; the Nilsens kept to themselves. In their almost bare rooms they slept on cots. Their extravagances were horses, silver-trimmed riding gear, the short-bladed dagger, and getting dressed up on Saturday nights, when they blew their money freely and got themselves into boozy brawls. They were both tall, I know, and wore their red hair long. Denmark or Ireland, which they probably never heard of, ran in the blood of these two Argentine brothers. The neighborhood feared the Redheads; it is likely that one of them, at least, had killed his man. Once, shoulder to shoulder, they tangled with the police. It is said that the younger brother was in a fight with Juan Iberra in which he didn't do too badly, and that, according to those in the know, is saying something. They were drovers, teamsters, horse thieves, and, once in a while, professional gamblers. They had a reputation for stinginess, except when drink and card-playing turned them into spenders. Of their relatives or where they themselves came from, nothing is known. They owned a cart and a yoke of oxen.

Their physical makeup differed from that of the rest of the toughs who gave the Costa Brava its unsavory reputation. This, and a lot that we don't know, helps us understand the close ties between them. To fall out with one of them was to reckon with two enemies.

The Nilsens liked carousing with women, but up until then their amorous escapades had always been carried out

in darkened passageways or in whorehouses. There was no end of talk, then, when Cristián brought Juliana Burgos to live with him. Admittedly, in this way he gained a servant, but it is also true that he took to squandering his money buying her the most hideous junk jewelry and showing her off at parties. At those dingy parties held in tenements, where suggestive dance steps were strictly forbidden and where, at that time, partners still danced with a good six inches of light showing between them. Juliana was a dark girl and her eyes had a slight slant to them; all anyone had to do was look at her and she'd break into a smile. For a poor neighborhood, where drudgery and neglect wear women out, she was not bad-looking.

In the beginning, Eduardo went places with them. Later, at one point, he set out on a journey north to Arrecifes on some business or other, returning home with a girl he had picked up along the way. But after a few days he threw her out. He turned more sullen; he took to drinking alone at the corner saloon and kept completely to himself. He had fallen in love with Cristián's woman. The whole neighborhood, which may have realized it before he did, maliciously and cheerfully looked forward to the enmity about to break out between the two brothers.

Late one night, on coming home from the corner, Eduardo saw Cristián's horse, a big bay, tied to the hitching post. Inside in the patio, dressed in his Sunday best, his older brother was waiting for him. The woman shuttled in and out serving maté. Cristián said to Eduardo, "I'm on my way over to Farias' place, where they're throwing a party. Juliana stays here with you; if you want her, use her."

His tone was half commanding, half friendly. Eduardo stood there a while staring at him, not knowing what to do. Cristián got up, said goodbye—to his brother, not to Juliana, who was no more than an object—mounted his horse, and rode off at a jog, casually.

From that night on they shared her. Nobody will ever know the details of this strange partnership which outraged

even the Costa Brava's sense of decency. The arrangement went well for several weeks, but it could not last. Between them the brothers never mentioned her name, not even to call her, but they kept looking for, and finding, reasons to be at odds. They argued over the sale of some hides, but what they were really arguing about was something else. Cristián took to raising his voice, while Eduardo kept silent. Without knowing it, they were watching each other. In tough neighborhoods a man never admits to anyone—not even to himself—that a woman matters beyond lust and possession, but the two brothers were in love. This, in some way, made them feel ashamed.

One afternoon, in the square in Lomas, Eduardo ran into Juan Iberra, who congratulated him on this beauty he'd got hold of. It was then, I believe, that Eduardo let him have it. Nobody—not to *his* face—was going to poke fun at Cristián.

The woman attended both men's wants with an animal submission, but she was unable to keep hidden a certain preference, probably for the younger man, who had not refused sharing her but who had not proposed it either.

One day, they ordered Juliana to bring two chairs out into the first patio and then not show her face for a while because they had things to talk over. Expecting a long session between them, she lay down for a nap, but before very long they woke her up. She was to fill a sack with all her belongings, including her glass-bead rosary and the tiny crucifix her mother had left her. Without any explanation, they lifted her onto the oxcart and set out on a long, tiresome, and silent journey. It had rained; the roads were heavy with mud, and it was nearly daybreak before they reached Morón. There they sold her to the woman who ran the whorehouse. The terms had already been agreed to; Cristián pocketed the money and later on split it with his brother.

Back in Turdera, the Nilsens, up till then trapped in the web (which was also a routine) of this monstrous love

affair, tried to take up their old life of men among men. They went back to cardplaying, to cockfights, to their Saturday night binges. At times, perhaps, they felt they were saved, but they often indulged—each on his own—in unaccountable or only too accountable absences. A little before the year was out, the younger brother said he had business in the city. Immediately, Cristián went off to Morón; at the hitching post of the whorehouse he recognized Eduardo's piebald. Cristián walked in; there was his brother, sure enough, waiting his turn. It is said that Cristián told him, "If we go on this way, we'll wear out the horses. We'd be better off keeping her close at hand."

He spoke with the owner of the place, drew a handful of coins out of his money belt, and they took the girl away. Juliana rode with Cristián. Eduardo dug his spurs into his horse, not wanting to see them together.

They went back to what has already been told. Their solution had ended in failure, for the two had fallen into cheating. Cain was on the loose here, but the affection between the Nilsens was great—who knows what hard times and what dangers they may have faced together!—and they preferred taking their feelings out on others. On strangers, on the dogs, on Juliana, who had set this wedge between them.

The month of March was coming to a close and there was no sign of the heat's letting up. One Sunday (oh Sundays people go to bed early), Eduardo, on his way home from the corner saloon, saw that Cristián was yoking the oxen. Cristián said to him, "Come on. We have to leave some hides off at Pardo's place. I've already loaded them; let's make the best of the night air."

Pardo's warehouse lay, I believe, farther south; they took the old cattle trail, then turned down a side road. As night fell, the countryside seemed wider and wider.

They skirted a growth of tall reeds; Cristián threw down the cigar he had just lit and said evenly, "Let's get busy, brother. In a while the buzzards will take over. This

*Jorge Luis Borges*

afternoon I killed her. Let her stay here with all her trinkets, she won't cause us any more harm."

They threw their arms around each other, on the verge of tears. One more link bound them now—the woman they had cruelly sacrificed and their common need to forget her.

# The Immortals

*With Adolfo Bioy-Casares*  
(1966)

*And see, no longer blinded by our eyes.*  
Rupert Brooke

Whoever could have foreseen, way back in that innocent summer of 1923, that the novelette *The Chosen One* by Camilo N. Huergo, presented to me by the author with his personal inscription on the flyleaf (which I had the decorum to tear out before offering the volume for sale to successive men of the book trade), hid under the thin varnish of fiction a prophetic truth. Huergo's photograph, in an oval frame, adorns the cover. Each time I look at it, I have the impression that the snapshot is about to cough, a victim of that lung disease which nipped in the bud a promising career. Tuberculosis, in short, denied him the happiness of acknowledging the letter I wrote him in one of my characteristic outbursts of generosity.

The epigraph prefixed to this thoughtful essay has been taken from the aforementioned novelette; I requested Dr. Montenegro, of the Academy, to render it into Spanish, but the results were negative. To give the unprepared reader

Jorge Luis Borges

the gist of the matter, I shall now sketch, in condensed form, an outline of Huergo's narrative, as follows:

The storyteller pays a visit, far to the south in Chubut, to the English rancher don Guillermo Blake, who devotes his energies not only to the breeding of sheep but also to the ramblings of the world-famous Plato and to the latest and more freakish experiments in the field of surgical medicine. On the basis of his reading, don Guillermo concludes that the five senses obstruct or deform the apprehension of reality and that, could we free ourselves of them, we would see the world as it is—endless and timeless. He comes to think that the eternal models of things lie in the depths of the soul and that the organs of perception with which the Creator has endowed us are, *grosso modo*, hindrances. They are no better than dark spectacles that blind us to what exists outside, diverting our attention at the same time from the splendor we carry within us.

Blake begets a son by one of the farm girls so that the boy may one day become acquainted with reality. To anesthetize him for life, to make him blind and deaf and dumb, to emancipate him from the senses of smell and taste, were the father's first concerns. He took, in the same way, all possible measures to make the chosen one unaware of his own body. As to the rest, this was arranged with contrivances designed to take over respiration, circulation, nourishment, digestion, and elimination. It was a pity that the boy, fully liberated, was cut off from all human contact.

Owing to the press of practical matters, the narrator goes away. After ten years, he returns. Don Guillermo has died; his son goes on living after his fashion, with natural breathing, heart regular, in a dusty shack cluttered with mechanical devices. The narrator, about to leave for good, drops a cigarette butt that sets fire to the shack and he never quite knows whether this act was done on purpose or by pure chance. So ends Huergo's story, strange enough for its time but now, of course, more than outstripped by the rockets and astronauts of our men of science.

Having dashed off this disinterested compendium of the

tale of a now dead and forgotten author—from whom I have nothing to gain—I steer back to the heart of the matter. Memory restores to me a Saturday morning in 1964 when I had an appointment with the eminent gerontologist Dr. Raúl Narbono. The sad truth is that we young bloods of yesteryear are getting on; the thick mop begins to thin, one or another ear stops up, the wrinkles collect grime, molars grow hollow, a cough takes root, the backbone hunches up, the foot trips on a pebble, and, to put it plainly, the paterfamilias falters and withers. There was no doubt about it, the moment had come to see Dr. Narbono for a general checkup, particularly considering the fact that he specialized in the replacement of malfunctioning organs.

Sick at heart because that afternoon the Palermo Juniors and the Spanish Sports were playing a return match and maybe I could not occupy my place in the front row to bolster my team, I betook myself to the clinic on Corrientes Avenue near Pasteur. The clinic, as its fame betrays, occupies the fifteenth floor of the Adamant Building. I went up by elevator (manufactured by the Electra Company). Eye to eye with Narbono's brass shingle, I pressed the bell, and at long last, taking my courage in both hands, I slipped through the partly open door and entered into the waiting room proper. There, alone with the latest issues of the *Ladies' Companion* and *Jumbo*, I whiled away the passing hours until a cuckoo clock struck twelve and sent me leaping from my armchair. At once, I asked myself, What happened? Planning my every move now like a sleuth, I took a step or two toward the next room, peeped in, ready, admitted, to fly the coop at the slightest sound. From the streets far below came the noise of horns and traffic, the cry of a newspaper hawker, the squeal of brakes sparing some pedestrian, but, all around me, a reign of silence. I crossed a kind of laboratory, or pharmaceutical back room, furnished with instruments and flasks of all sorts. Stimulated by the aim of reaching the men's room, I pushed open a door at the far end of the lab.

Inside, I saw something that my eyes did not understand.

The small enclosure was circular, painted white, with a low ceiling and neon lighting, and without a single window to relieve the sense of claustrophobia. The room was inhabited by four personages, or pieces of furniture. Their color was the same as the walls, their material wood, their form cubic. On each cube was another small cube with a latticed opening and below it a slot as in a mailbox. Carefully scrutinizing the grilled opening, you noted with alarm that from the interior you were being watched by something like eyes. The slots emitted, from time to time, a chorus of sighs or whisperings that the good Lord himself could not have made head or tail of. The placement of these cubes was such that they faced each other in the form of a square, composing a kind of conclave. I don't know how many minutes lapsed. At this point, the doctor came in and said to me, "My pardon, Bustos, for having kept you waiting. I was just out getting myself an advance ticket for today's match between the Palermo Juniors and the Spanish Sports." He went on, indicating the cubes, "Let me introduce you to Santiago Silberman, to retired clerk-of-court Ludueña, to Aquiles Molinari, and to Miss Bugard."

Out of the furniture came faint rumbling sounds. I quickly reached out a hand and, without the pleasure of shaking theirs, withdrew in good order, a frozen smile on my lips. Reaching the vestibule as best I could, I managed to stammer, "A drink. A stiff drink."

Narbondo came out of the lab with a graduated beaker filled with water and dissolved some effervescent drops into it. Blessed concoction—the wretched taste brought me to my senses. Then, the door to the small room closed and locked tight, came the explanation:

'I'm glad to see, my dear Bustos, that my immortals have made quite an impact on you. Whoever would have thought that *Homo sapiens*, Darwin's barely human ape, could achieve such perfection? This, my house, I assure you, is the only one in all Indo-America where Dr. Eric Stapledon's methodology has been fully applied. You recall, no doubt, the consternation that the death of the late

lamented doctor, which took place in New Zealand, occasioned in scientific circles. I flatter myself, furthermore, for having implemented his precursory labors with a few Argentinean touches. In itself, the thesis—Newton's apple all over again—is fairly simple. The death of the body is a result, always, of the failure of some organ or other, call it the kidney, lungs, heart, or what you like. With the replacement of the organism's various components, in themselves perishable, with other corresponding stainless or polyethylene parts, there is no earthly reason whatever why the soul, why you yourself—Bustos Domecq—should not be immortal. None of your philosophical niceties here; the body can be vulcanized and from time to time recaulked, and so the mind keeps going. Surgery brings immortality to mankind. Life's essential aim has been attained—the mind lives on without fear of cessation. Each of our immortals is comforted by the certainty, backed by our firm's guarantee, of being a witness in *aeternum*. The brain, refreshed night and day by a system of electrical charges, is the last organic bulwark in which ball bearings and cells collaborate. The rest is Formica, steel, plastics. Respiration, alimentation, generation, mobility—elimination itself!—belong to the past. Our immortal is real estate. One or two minor touches are still missing, it's true. Oral articulation, dialogue, may still be improved. As for the cost, you need not worry yourself. By means of a procedure that circumvents legal red tape, the candidate transfers his property to us, and the Narbondo Company, Inc.—I, my son, his descendants—guarantees your upkeep, *in statu quo*, to the end of time. And, I might add, a money-back guarantee."

It was then that he laid a friendly hand on my shoulder. I felt his will taking power over me. "Ha-ha! I see I've whetted your appetite, I've tempted you, dear Bustos. You'll need a couple of months or so to get your affairs in order and to have your stock portfolio signed over to us. As far as the operation goes, naturally, as a friend, I want to save you a little something. Instead of our usual fee of ten thousand dollars, for you, ninety-five hundred—in cash, of

*Jorge Luis Borges*

course. The rest is yours. It goes to pay your lodging, care, and service. The medical procedure in itself is painless. No more than a question of amputation and replacement. Nothing to worry about. On the eve, just keep yourself calm, untroubled. Avoid heavy meals, tobacco, and alcohol, apart from your accustomed and imported, I hope, Scotch or two. Above all, refrain from impatience.”

“Why two months?” I asked him. “One’s enough, and then some. I come out of the anesthesia and I’m one more of your cubes. You have my address and phone number. We’ll keep in touch. I’ll be back next Friday at the latest.”

At the escape hatch he handed me the card of Nemirovski, Nemirovski, & Nemirovski, Counsellors at Law, who would put themselves at my disposal for all the details of drawing up the will. With perfect composure I walked to the subway entrance, then took the stairs at a run. I lost no time. That same night, without leaving the slightest trace behind, I moved to the New Impartial, in whose register I figure under the assumed name of Aquiles Silberman. Here, in my bedroom at the far rear of this modest hotel, wearing a false beard and dark spectacles, I am setting down this account of the facts.

# The Meeting

*To Susana Bombal  
(1969)*

Anyone leafing his way through the morning paper does so either to escape his surroundings or to provide himself with small talk for later in the day, so it is not to be wondered at that no one any longer remembers—or else remembers as in a dream—the famous and once widely discussed case of Maneco Uriarte and of Duncan. The event took place, furthermore, back around 1910, the year of the comet and the Centennial, and since then we have had and have lost so many things. Both protagonists are now dead; those who witnessed the episode solemnly swore silence. I, too, raised my hand for the oath, feeling the importance of the ritual with all the romantic seriousness of my nine or ten years. I do not know whether the others noticed that I had given my word; I do not know whether they kept theirs. Anyway, here is the story, with all the inevitable variations brought about by time and by good or bad writing.

My cousin Lafinur took me to a barbecue that evening at a country house called The Laurels, which belonged to some

Jorge Luis Borges

friends of his. I cannot fix its exact location; let us take any of those suburban towns lying just to the north, shaded and quiet, that slope down to the river and that have nothing in common with sprawling Buenos Aires and its surrounding prairie. The journey by train lasted long enough to seem endless to me, but time for children—as is well known—flows slowly. It was already dark when we passed through the villa's main gate. Here, I felt, were all the ancient, elemental things: the smell of meat cooking golden brown, the trees, the dogs, the kindling wood, and the fire that brings men together.

The guests numbered about a dozen; all were grown-ups. The eldest, I learned later, was not yet thirty. They were also—this I was soon to find out—well versed in matters about which I am still somewhat backward: race horses, the right tailors, motorcars, and notoriously expensive women. No one ruffled my shyness, no one paid any attention to me. The lamb, slowly and skillfully prepared by one of the hired men, kept us a long time in the big dining room. The dates of vintages were argued back and forth. There was a guitar; my cousin, if I remember correctly, sang a couple of Elías Regules' ballads about gauchos in the back country of Uruguay and some verses in dialect, in the incipient *lunfardo* of those days, about a knife fight in a brothel on Junín Street. Coffee and Havana cigars were brought in. Not a word about getting back. I felt (in the words of the poet Lugones) the fear of what is suddenly too late. I dared not look at the clock. In order to disguise my boyish loneliness among grown-ups, I put away—not really liking it—a glass or two of wine. Uriarte, in a loud voice, proposed to Duncan a two-handed game of poker. Someone objected that that kind of play made for a poor game and suggested a hand of four. Duncan agreed, but Uriarte, with a stubbornness that I did not understand and that I did not try to understand, insisted on the first scheme. Outside of *truco*—a game whose real aim is to pass time with mischief and verses—and of the modest mazes of solitaire, I never enjoyed cards. I slipped away without anyone's noticing. A

rambling old house, unfamiliar and dark (only in the dining room was there light), means more to a boy than a new country means to a traveler. Step by step, I explored the rooms; I recall a billiard room, a long gallery with rectangular and diamond-shaped panes, a couple of rocking chairs, and a window from which you could just make out a summerhouse. In the darkness I lost my way; the owner of the house, whose name, as I recall after all these years, may have been Acevedo or Acebal, finally came across me somehow. Out of kindness or perhaps out of a collector's vanity, he led me to a display cabinet. On lighting a lamp, I saw the glint of steel. It was a collection of knives that had once been in the hands of famous fighters. He told me that he had a bit of land somewhere to the north around Pergamino, and that he had been picking up these things on his travels back and forth across the province. He opened the cabinet and, without looking at what was written on the tags, he began giving me accounts of each item; they were more or less the same except for dates and place names. I asked him whether among the weapons he might have the dagger of Juan Moreira, who was in that day the archetype of the gaucho, as later Martín Fierro and Don Segundo Sombra would be. He had to confess that he hadn't but that he could show me one like it, with a U-shaped cross-piece in the hilt. He was interrupted by the sound of angry voices. At once he shut the cabinet and turned to leave; I followed him.

Uriarte was shouting that his opponent had tried to cheat him. All the others stood around the two players. Duncan, I remember, was a taller man than the rest of the company, and was well built, though somewhat round-shouldered; his face was expressionless, and his hair was so light it was almost white. Maneco Uriarte was nervous, dark, with perhaps a touch of Indian blood, and wore a skimpy, petulant moustache. It was obvious that everybody was drunk; I do not know whether there were two or three emptied bottles on the floor or whether an excess of movies suggests this false memory to me. Uriarte's insults did not let up; at first

*Jorge Luis Borges*

sharp, they now grew obscene. Duncan appeared not to hear, but finally, as though weary, he got up and threw a punch. From the floor, Uriarte snarled that he was not going to take this outrage, and he challenged Duncan to fight.

Duncan said no, and added, as though to explain, "The trouble is I'm afraid of you."

Everybody howled with laughter.

Uriarte, picking himself up, answered, "I'm going to have it out with you, and right now."

Someone—may he be forgiven for it—remarked that weapons were not lacking.

I do not know who went and opened the glass cabinet. Maneco Uriarte picked out the showiest and longest dagger, the one with the U-shaped crosspiece; Duncan, almost absentmindedly, picked a wooden-handled knife with the stamp of a tiny tree on the blade. Someone else said it was just like Maneco to play it safe, to choose a sword. It astonished no one that his hand began shaking; what was astonishing is that the same thing happened with Duncan.

Tradition demands that men about to fight should respect the house in which they are guests, and step outside. Half on a spree, half seriously, we all went out into the damp night. I was not drunk—at least, not on wine—but I was reeling with adventure; I wished very hard that someone would be killed, so that later I could tell about it and always remember it. Maybe at that moment the others were no more adult than I was, I also had the feeling that an overpowering current was dragging us on and would drown us. Nobody believed the least bit in Maneco's accusation; everyone saw it as the fruit of an old rivalry, exacerbated by the wine.

We pushed our way through a clump of trees, leaving behind the summerhouse. Uriarte and Duncan led the way, wary of each other. The rest of us strung ourselves out around the edge of an opening of lawn. Duncan had stopped there in the moonlight and said, with mild authority, "This looks like the right place."

The two men stood in the center, not quite knowing what to do. A voice rang out: "Let go of all that hardware and use your hands!"

But the men were already fighting. They began clumsily, almost as if they were afraid of hurting each other; they began by watching the blades, but later their eyes were on one another. Uriarte had laid aside his anger, Duncan his contempt or aloofness. Danger, in some way, had transfigured them; these were now two men fighting, not boys. I had imagined the fight as a chaos of steel; instead, I was able to follow it, or almost follow it, as though it were a game of chess. The intervening years may, of course, have exaggerated or blurred what I saw. I do not know how long it lasted; there are events that fall outside the common measure of time.

Without ponchos to act as shields, they used their forearms to block each lunge of the knife. Their sleeves, soon hanging in shreds, grew black with blood. I thought that we had gone wrong in supposing that they knew nothing about this kind of fencing. I noticed right off that they handled themselves in different ways. Their weapons were unequal. Duncan, in order to make up for his disadvantage, tried to stay in close to the other man; Uriarte kept stepping back to be able to lunge out with long, low thrusts. The same voice that had called attention to the display cabinet shouted out now: "They're killing each other! Stop them!"

But no one dared break it up. Uriarte had lost ground; Duncan charged him. They were almost body to body now. Uriarte's weapon sought Duncan's face. Suddenly the blade seemed shorter, for it was piercing the taller man's chest. Duncan lay stretched out on the grass. It was at this point that he said, his voice very low, "How strange. All this is like a dream."

He did not shut his eyes, he did not move, and I had seen a man kill another man.

Maneco Uriarte bent over the body, sobbing openly, and begged to be forgiven. The thing he had just done was

*Jorge Luis Borges*

beyond him. I know now that he regretted less having committed a crime than having carried out a senseless act.

I did not want to look anymore. What I had wished for so much had happened, and it left me shaken. Lafinur told me later that they had had to struggle hard to pull out the weapon. A makeshift council was formed. They decided to lie as little as possible and to elevate this duel with knives to a duel with swords. Four of them volunteered as seconds, among them Acebal. In Buenos Aires anything can be fixed; someone always has a friend.

On top of the mahogany table where the men had been playing, a pack of English cards and a pile of bills lay in a jumble that nobody wanted to look at or to touch.

In the years that followed, I often considered revealing the story to some friend, but always I felt that there was a greater pleasure in being the keeper of a secret than in telling it. However, around 1929, a chance conversation suddenly moved me one day to break my long silence. The retired police captain, don José Olave, was recalling stories about men from the tough riverside neighborhood of the Retiro who had been handy with their knives; he remarked that when they were out to kill their man, scum of this kind had no use for the rules of the game, and that before all the fancy playing with daggers that you saw now on the stage, knife fights were few and far between. I said I had witnessed one, and gave him an account of what had happened nearly twenty years earlier.

He listened to me with professional attention, then said, "Are you sure Uriarte and What's-His-Name never handled a knife before? Maybe they had picked up a thing or two around their fathers' ranches."

"I don't think so," I said. "Everybody there that night knew one another pretty well, and I can tell you they were all amazed at the way the two men fought."

Olave went on in his quiet manner, as if thinking aloud, "One of the weapons had a U-shaped crosspiece in the handle. There were two daggers of that kind which became

quite famous—Moreira's and Juan Almada's. Almada was from down south, in Tapalquén."

Something seemed to come awake in my memory. Olave continued. "You also mentioned a knife with a wooden handle, one with the Little Tree brand. There are thousands of them, but there was one—"

He broke off for a moment, then said, "Señor Acevedo had a big property up around Pergamino. There was another of these famous tough, from up that way—Juan Almanza was his name. This was along about the turn of the century. When he was fourteen, he killed his first man with one of these knives. From then on, for luck, he stuck to the same one. Juan Almanza and Juan Almada had it in for each other, jealous of the fact that many people confused the two. For a long time they searched high and low for one another, but they never met. Juan Almanza was killed by a stray bullet during some election brawl or other. The other man, I think, died a natural death in a hospital bed in Las Flores."

Nothing more was said. Each of us was left with his own conclusions.

Nine or ten men, none of whom is any longer living, saw what my eyes saw—that sudden stab and the body under the night sky—but perhaps what we were really seeing was the end of another story, an older story. I began to wonder whether it was Maneco Uriarte who killed Duncan or whether in some uncanny way it could have been the weapons, not the men, which fought. I still remember how Uriarte's hand shook when he first gripped his knife, and the same with Duncan, as though the knives were coming awake after a long sleep side by side in the cabinet. Even after their gauchos were dust, the knives—the knives, not their tools, the men—knew how to fight. And that night they fought well.

Things last longer than people; who knows whether these knives will meet again, who knows whether the story ends here.

# Pedro Salvadores

*To Juan Murchison  
(1969)*

I want to leave a written record (perhaps the first to be attempted) of one of the strangest and grimmest happenings in Argentine history. To meddle as little as possible in the telling, to abstain from picturesque details or personal conjectures is, it seems to me, the only way to do this.

A man, a woman, and the overpowering shadow of a dictator are the three characters. The man's name was Pedro Salvadores; my grandfather Acevedo saw him days or weeks after the dictator's downfall in the battle of Caseros. Pedro Salvadores may have been no different from anyone else, but the years and his fate set him apart. He was a gentleman like many other gentlemen of his day. He owned (let us suppose) a ranch in the country and, opposed to the tyranny, was on the Unitarian side. His wife's family name was Planes; they lived together on Suipacha Street near the corner of Temple in what is now the heart of Buenos Aires. The house in which the event took place was much like any other, with its street door, long arched

entranceway, inner grillwork gate, its rooms, its row of two or three patios. The dictator, of course, was Rosas.

One night, around 1842, Salvadores and his wife heard the growing, muffled sound of horses' hooves out on the unpaved street and the riders shouting their drunken vivas and their threats. This time Rosas' henchmen did not ride on. After the shouts came repeated knocks at the door; while the men began forcing it, Salvadores was able to pull the dining-room table aside, lift the rug, and hide himself down in the cellar. His wife dragged the table back in place. The *mazorca* broke into the house; they had come to take Salvadores. The woman said her husband had run away to Montevideo. The men did not believe her; they flogged her, they smashed all the blue chinaware (blue was the Unitarian color), they searched the whole house, but they never thought of lifting the rug. At midnight they rode away, swearing that they would soon be back.

Here is the true beginning of Pedro Salvadores' story. He lived nine years in the cellar. For all we may tell ourselves that years are made of days and days of hours and that nine years is an abstract term and an impossible sum, the story is nonetheless gruesome. I suppose that in the darkness, which his eyes somehow learned to decipher, he had no particular thoughts, not even of his hatred or his danger. He was simply there—in the cellar—with echoes of the world he was cut off from sometimes reaching him from overhead: his wife's footsteps, the bucket clanging against the lip of the well, a heavy rainfall in the patio. Every day of his imprisonment, for all he knew, could have been the last.

His wife let go all the servants, who could possibly have informed against them, and told her family that Salvadores was in Uruguay. Meanwhile, she earned a living for them both sewing uniforms for the army. In the course of time, she gave birth to two children; her family turned from her, thinking she had a lover. After the tyrant's fall, they got down on their knees and begged to be forgiven.

What was Pedro Salvadores? Who was he? Was it his fear, his love, the unseen presence of Buenos Aires, or—in

*Jorge Luis Borges*

the long run—habit that held him prisoner? In order to keep him with her, his wife would make up news to tell him about whispered plots and rumored victories. Maybe he was a coward and she loyally hid it from him that she knew. I picture him in his cellar perhaps without a candle, without a book. Darkness probably sank him into sleep. His dreams, at the outset, were probably of that sudden night when the blade sought his throat, of the streets he knew so well, of the open plains. As the years went on, he would have been unable to escape even in his sleep; whatever he dreamed would have taken place in the cellar. At first, he may have been a man hunted down, a man in danger of his life; later (we will never know for certain), an animal at peace in its burrow or a sort of dim god.

All this went on until that summer day of 1852 when Rosas fled the country. It was only then that the secret man came out into the light of day; my grandfather spoke with him. Flabby, overweight, Salvadores was the color of wax and could not speak above a low voice. He never got back his confiscated lands; I think he died in poverty.

As with so many things, the fate of Pedro Salvadores strikes us as a symbol of something we are about to understand, but never quite do.

# Rosendo's Tale

(1969)

It was about eleven o'clock at night; I had entered the old grocery store-bar (which today is just a plain bar) at the corner of Bolívar and Venezuela. From off on one side a man signaled me with a "psst." There must have been something forceful in his manner because I heeded him at once. He was seated at one of the small tables in front of an empty glass, and I somehow felt he had been sitting there for a long time. Neither short nor tall, he had the appearance of a common working man or maybe an old farmhand. His thin moustache was graying. Fearful of his health, like most people in Buenos Aires, he had not taken off the scarf that draped his shoulders. He asked me to have a drink with him. I sat down and we chatted. All this took place sometime back in the early thirties. This is what the man told me.

You don't know me except maybe by reputation, but I know who you are. I'm Rosendo Juárez. The late Paredes

*Jorge Luis Borges*

must have told you about me. The old man could pull the wool over people's eyes and liked to stretch a point—not to cheat anybody, mind you, but just in fun. Well, seeing you and I have nothing better to do, I'm going to tell you exactly what happened that night. The night the Butcher got killed. You put all that down in a storybook, which I'm not equipped to pass judgment on, but I want you to know the truth about all that trumped-up stuff.

Things happen to you and it's only years later you begin understanding them. What happened to me that night really had its start a long time back. I grew up in the neighborhood of the Maldonado, way out past Floresta. The Maldonado was just a ditch then, a kind of sewer, and it's a good thing they've covered it over now. I've always been of the opinion that the march of progress can't be held back—not by anybody. Anyway, a man's born where he's born. It never entered my head to find out who my father was. Clementina Juárez—that was my mother—was a decent woman who earned a living doing laundry. As far as I know, she was from Entre Ríos or Uruguay; anyhow, she always talked about her relatives from Concepción del Uruguay. I grew up like a weed. I first learned to handle a knife the way everyone else did, fencing with a charred stick. If you jabbed your man, it left a mark. Soccer hadn't taken us over yet—it was still in the hands of the English.

One night at the corner bar a young guy named Garmendia began taunting me, trying to pick a fight. I played deaf, but this other guy, who'd had a few, kept it up. We stepped out. Then from the sidewalk he swung open the door and said back inside to the people, "Don't anybody worry, I'll be right back."

I somehow got hold of a knife. We went off toward the brook, slow, our eyes on each other. He had a few years on me. We'd played at that fencing game a number of times together, and I had the feeling he was going to cut me up in ribbons. I went down the right-hand side of the road and he went down the left. He stumbled on some dry clods of mud. That moment was all I needed. I got the jump on

him, almost without thinking, and opened a slice in his face. We got locked in a clinch, there was a minute when anything might have happened, and in the end I got my knife in and it was all over. Only later on did I find out I'd been cut up, too. But only a few scratches. That night I saw how easy it was to kill a man or to get killed. The water in the brook was pretty low; stalling for time, I half hid him behind one of the brick kilns. Fool that I was, I went and slipped off that fancy ring of his that he always wore with the nice stone in it. I put it on, I straightened my hat, and I went back to the bar. I walked in nonchalant, saying to them, "Looks like the one who came back was me."

I asked for a shot of rum and, to tell the truth, I needed it bad. It was then somebody noticed the blood on my sleeve.

I spent that whole night tossing and turning on my cot, and it was almost light outside before I dropped off and slept. Late the next day two cops came looking for me. My mother (may she rest in peace) began shrieking. They herded me along just like I was some kind of criminal. Two nights and two days I had to wait there in the cooler. Nobody came to see me, either, outside of Luis Irala—a real friend—only they wouldn't let him in. Then the third morning the police captain sent for me. He sat there in his chair, not even looking at me, and said, "So you're the one who took care of Garmendia, are you?"

"If that's what you say," I answered.

"You call me *sir*. And don't get funny or try beating around the bush. Here are the sworn statements of witnesses and the ring that was found in your house. Just sign this confession and get it over with."

He dipped the pen in the inkwell and handed it to me.

"Let me do some thinking, Captain sir," I came out with.

"I'll give you twenty-four hours where you can do some hard thinking—in the cooler. I'm not going to rush you. If you don't care to see reason, you can get used to the idea of a little vacation up on Las Heras—the penitentiary."

As you can probably imagine, I didn't understand.

*Jorge Luis Borges*

“Look,” he said, “if you come around, all you’ll get is a few days. Then I’ll let you go, and don Nicolás Paredes has already given me his word he’ll straighten things out for you.”

Actually, it was ten days. Then at last they remembered me. I signed what they wanted, and one of the two cops took me around to Paredes’ house on Cabrera Street.

Horses were tied to the hitching post, and in the entranceway and inside the place there were more people than around a whorehouse. It looked to me like the party headquarters. Don Nicolás, who was sipping his maté, finally got around to me. Taking his good time, he told me he was sending me out to Morón, where they were getting ready for the elections. He was putting me in touch with Mr. Laferrer, who would try me out. He had the letter written by some kid all dressed in black, who, from what I heard, made up poems about tenements and filth—stuff that no refined public would dream of reading. I thanked Paredes for the favor and left. When I got to the corner, the cop wasn’t tailing me any more.

Providence knows what it’s up to; everything had turned out for the best. Garmendia’s death, which at first had caused me a lot of worry, now opened things up for me. Of course, the law had me in the palm of their hands. If I was no use to the party they’d clap me back inside, but I felt pretty good and was counting on myself.

Mr. Laferrer warned me I was going to have to walk the straight and narrow with him, and said if I did I might even become his bodyguard. I came through with what was expected of me. In Morón, and later on in my part of town, I earned the trust of my bosses. The cops and the party kept on building up my reputation as a tough guy. I turned out to be pretty good at organizing the vote around the polls here in the capital and out in the province. I won’t take up your time going into details about brawls and bloodletting, but let me tell you, in those days elections were lively affairs. I could never stand the Radicals, who down to this day are still hanging onto the beard of their

chief Alem. There wasn't a soul around who didn't hold me in respect. I got hold of a woman, La Lujanera, and a fine-looking sorrel. For years I tried to live up to the part of the outlaw Moreira, who, in his time—the way I figure it—was probably trying to play the part of some other gaucho outlaw. I took to cards and absinthe.

An old man has a way of rambling on and on, but now I'm coming to the part I want you to hear. I wonder if I've already mentioned Luis Irala. The kind of friend you don't find every day. Irala was a man already well along in years. He never was afraid of work, and he took a liking to me. In his whole life he never had anything to do with politics. He was a carpenter by trade. He never caused anyone trouble and never allowed anyone to cause him trouble. One morning he came to see me and he said, "Of course, you've heard by now that Casilda's left me. Rufino Aguilera took her away from me."

I'd known that customer around Morón. I answered, "Yes, I know all about him. Of all the Aguileras, he's the least rotten."

"Rotten or not, now he'll have to reckon with me."

I thought that over for a while and told him, "Nobody takes anything away from anybody. If Casilda left you, it's because she cares for Rufino and you mean nothing to her."

"And what are people going to say? That I'm a coward?"

"My advice is don't get yourself mixed up in gossip about what people might say or about a woman who has no use for you."

"It's not her I'm worried about. A man who thinks five minutes straight about a woman is no man, he's a queer. Casilda has no heart. The last night we spent together she told me I wasn't as young as I used to be."

"Maybe she was telling you the truth."

"That's what hurts. What matters to me now is Rufino."

"Be careful there. I've seen Rufino in action around the polls in Merlo. He's a flash with a knife."

"You think I'm afraid of him?"

*Jorge Luis Borges*

“I know you’re not afraid of him, but think it over. One of two things—if you kill him, you get put away; if he kills you, you go six feet under.”

“Maybe so. What would you do in my shoes?”

“I don’t know, but my own life isn’t exactly a model. I’m only a guy who became a party strong-arm man trying to cheat a jail sentence.”

“I’m not going to the strong-arm guy for any party, I’m only out to settle a debt.”

“So you’re going to risk your peace and quiet for a man you don’t know and a woman you don’t love any more?”

He wouldn’t hear me out. He just left. The next day the news came that he challenged Rufino in a saloon in Morón, and Rufino killed him. He was out to kill, and he got killed—but a fair fight, man to man. I’d given him my honest advice as a friend, but somehow I felt guilty just the same.

A few days after the wake, I went to a cockfight. I’d never been very big on cockfights, and that Sunday, to tell the truth, I had all I could do to stomach the thing. What is it in these animals, I kept thinking, that makes them gouge each other’s eyes like that?

The night of my story, the night of the end of my story, I had told the boys I’d show up at Blackie’s for the dance. So many years ago now, and that dress with the flowers my woman was wearing still comes back to me. The party was out in the backyard. Of course, there was the usual drunk or two trying to raise hell, but I took good care to see that things went off the way they ought to. It wasn’t twelve yet when these strangers put in an appearance. One of them—the one they called the Butcher and who got himself stabbed in the back that same night—stood us all to a round of drinks. The odd thing was that the two of us looked a lot alike. Something was in the air; he drew up to me and began praising me up and down. He said he was from the Northside, where he’d heard a thing or two about me. I let him go on, but I was already sizing him up. He wasn’t letting the gin alone, either, maybe to work up his courage,

and finally he came out and asked me to fight. Then something happened that nobody ever understood. In that big loudmouth I saw myself, the same as in a mirror, and it made me feel ashamed. I wasn't scared; maybe if I'd been scared I'd have fought with him. I just stood there as if nothing happened. This other guy, with his face just inches away from mine, began shouting so everyone could hear, "The trouble is you're nothing but a coward."

"Maybe so," I said. "I'm not afraid of being taken for a coward. If it makes you feel good, why don't you say you've called me a son of a bitch, too, and that I've let you spit all over me. Now—are you any happier?"

La Lujanera took out the knife I always carried in my vest lining and, burning up inside, she shoved it into my hand. To clinch it, she said, "Rosendo, I think you're going to need this."

I let it drop and walked out, but not hurrying. The boys made way for me. They were stunned. What did it matter to me what they thought.

To make a clean break with that life, I took off for Uruguay, where I found myself work as a teamster. Since coming back to Buenos Aires I've settled around here. San Telmo always was a respectable neighborhood.



# An Auto- biographical Essay

*With Norman Thomas  
di Giovanni*



# An Auto- biographical Essay

## Family and Childhood

I cannot tell whether my first memories go back to the eastern or to the western bank of the muddy, slow-moving Río de la Plata—to Montevideo, where we spent long, lazy holidays in the villa of my uncle Francisco Haedo, or to Buenos Aires. I was born there, in the very heart of that city, in 1899, on Tucumán Street, between Suipacha and Esmeralda, in a small, unassuming house belonging to my maternal grandparents. Like most of the houses of that day, it had a flat roof; a long, arched entranceway, called a *zaguán*; a cistern, where we got our water; and two patios. We must have moved out to the suburb of Palermo quite soon, because there I have my first memories of another house with two patios, a garden with a tall windmill pump, and, on the other side of the garden, an empty lot. Palermo at that time—the Palermo where we lived, Serrano and Guatemala—was on the shabby northern outskirts of town,

Jorge Luis Borges

and many people, ashamed of saying they lived there, spoke in a dim way of living on the Northside. We lived in one of the few two-story homes on our street; the rest of the neighborhood was made up of low houses and vacant lots. I have often spoken of this area as a slum, but I do not quite mean that in the American sense of the word. In Palermo lived shabby, genteel people as well as more undesirable sorts. There was also a Palermo of hoodlums, called *compadritos*, famed for their knife fights, but this Palermo was only later to capture my imagination, since we did our best—our successful best—to ignore it. Unlike our neighbor Evaristo Carriego, however, who was the first Argentine poet to explore the literary possibilities that lay there at hand. As for myself, I was hardly aware of the existence of *compadritos*, since I lived essentially indoors.

My father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, worked as a lawyer. He was a philosophical anarchist—a disciple of Spencer—and also a teacher of psychology at the Normal School for Modern Languages, where he gave his course in English, using as his text William James's shorter book of psychology. My father's English came from the fact that his mother, Frances Haslam, was born in Staffordshire of Northumbrian stock. A rather unlikely set of circumstances brought her to South America. Fanny Haslam's elder sister married an Italian-Jewish engineer named Jorge Suárez, who brought the first horse-drawn tramcars to Argentina, where he and his wife settled and sent for Fanny. I remember an anecdote concerning this venture. Suárez was a guest at General Urquiza's "palace" in Entre Ríos, and very improbably won his first game of cards with the General, who was the stern dictator of that province and not above throat-cutting. When the game was over, Suárez was told by alarmed fellow-guests that if he wanted the license to run his tramcars in the province, it was expected of him to lose a certain amount of gold coins each night. Urquiza was such a poor player that Suárez had a great deal of trouble losing the appointed sums.

It was in Paraná, the capital city of Entre Ríos, that

Fanny Haslam met Colonel Francisco Borges. This was in 1870 or 1871, during the siege of the city by the *montoneros*, or gaucho militia, of Ricardo López Jordán. Borges, riding at the head of his regiment, commanded the troops defending the city. Fanny Haslam saw him from the flat roof of her house; that very night a ball was given to celebrate the arrival of the government relief forces. Fanny and the Colonel met, danced, fell in love, and eventually married.

My father was the younger of two sons. He had been born in Entre Ríos and used to explain to my grandmother, a respectable English lady, that he wasn't really an Entrerriano, since "I was begotten on the pampa." My grandmother would say, with English reserve, "I'm sure I don't know what you mean." My father's words, of course, were true, since my grandfather was, in the early 1870's, Commander-in-Chief of the northern and western frontiers of the Province of Buenos Aires. As a child, I heard many stories from Fanny Haslam about frontier life in those days. One of these I set down in my "Story of the Warrior and the Captive." My grandmother had spoken with a number of Indian chieftains, whose rather uncouth names were, I think, Simón Coliqueo, Catriel, Pincén, and Namuncurá. In 1874, during one of our civil wars, my grandfather, Colonel Borges, met his death. He was forty-one at the time. In the complicated circumstances surrounding his defeat at the battle of La Verde, he rode out slowly on horseback, wearing a white poncho and followed by ten or twelve of his men, toward the enemy lines, where he was struck by two Remington bullets. This was the first time Remington rifles were used in the Argentine, and it tickles my fancy to think that the firm that shaves me every morning bears the same name as the one that killed my grandfather.

Fanny Haslam was a great reader. When she was over eighty, people used to say, in order to be nice to her, that nowadays there were no writers who could vie with Dickens and Thackeray. My grandmother would answer, "On the

*Jorge Luis Borges*

whole, I rather prefer Arnold Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells." When she died, at the age of ninety, in 1935, she called us to her side and said, in English (her Spanish was fluent but poor), in her thin voice, "I am only an old woman dying very, very slowly. There is nothing remarkable or interesting about this." She could see no reason whatever why the whole household should be upset, and she apologized for taking so long to die.

My father was very intelligent and, like all intelligent men, very kind. Once, he told me that I should take a good look at soldiers, uniforms, barracks, flags, churches, priests, and butcher shops, since all these things were about to disappear, and I could tell my children that I had actually seen them. The prophecy has not yet come true, unfortunately. My father was such a modest man that he would have liked being invisible. Though he was very proud of his English ancestry, he used to joke about it, saying with feigned perplexity, "After all, what are the English? Just a pack of German agricultural laborers." His idols were Shelley, Keats, and Swinburne. As a reader, he had two interests. First, books on metaphysics and psychology (Berkeley, Hume, Royce, and William James). Second, literature and books about the East (Lane, Burton, and Payne). It was he who revealed the power of poetry to me—the fact that words are not only a means of communication but also magic symbols and music. When I recite poetry in English now, my mother tells me I take on his very voice. He also, without my being aware of it, gave me my first lessons in philosophy. When I was still quite young, he showed me, with the aid of a chessboard, the paradoxes of Zeno—Achilles and the tortoise, the unmoving flight of the arrow, the impossibility of motion. Later, without mentioning Berkeley's name, he did his best to teach me the rudiments of idealism.

My mother, Leonor Acevedo de Borges, comes of old Argentine and Uruguayan stock, and at ninety-four is still hale and hearty and a good Catholic. When I was growing up, religion belonged to women and children; most men in

Buenos Aires were freethinkers—though, had they been asked, they might have called themselves Catholics. I think I inherited from my mother her quality of thinking the best of people and also her strong sense of friendship. My mother has always had a hospitable mind. From the time she learned English, through my father, she has done most of her reading in that language. After my father's death, finding that she was unable to keep her mind on the printed page, she tried her hand at translating William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy* in order to compel herself to concentrate. The translation found its way into print, and she was honored for this by a society of Buenos Aires Armenians. Later on, she translated some of Hawthorne's stories and one of Herbert Read's books on art, and she also produced some of the translations of Melville, Virginia Woolf, and Faulkner that are considered mine. She has always been a companion to me—especially in later years, when I went blind—and an understanding and forgiving friend. For years, until recently, she handled all my secretarial work, answering letters, reading to me, taking down my dictation, and also traveling with me on many occasions both at home and abroad. It was she, though I never gave a thought to it at the time, who quietly and effectively fostered my literary career.

Her grandfather was Colonel Isidoro Suárez, who, in 1824, at the age of twenty-four, led a famous charge of Peruvian and Colombian cavalry, which turned the tide of the battle of Junín, in Peru. This was the next to last battle of the South American War of Independence. Although Suárez was a second cousin to Juan Manuel de Rosas, who ruled as dictator in Argentina from 1835 to 1852, he preferred exile and poverty in Montevideo to living under a tyranny in Buenos Aires. His lands were, of course, confiscated, and one of his brothers was executed. Another member of my mother's family was Francisco de Laprida, who, in 1816, in Tucumán, where he presided over the Congress, declared the independence of the Argentine Confederation, and was killed in 1829 in a civil war. My

Jorge Luis Borges

mother's father, Isidoro Acevedo, though a civilian, took part in the fighting of yet other civil wars in the 1860's and 1880's. So, on both sides of my family, I have military forebears; this may account for my yearning after that epic destiny which my gods denied me, no doubt wisely.

I have already said that I spent a great deal of my boyhood indoors. Having no childhood friends, my sister and I invented two imaginary companions, named, for some reason or other, Quilos and The Windmill. (When they finally bored us, we told our mother that they had died.) I was always very nearsighted and wore glasses, and I was rather frail. As most of my people had been soldiers—even my father's brother had been a naval officer—and I knew I would never be, I felt ashamed, quite early, to be a bookish kind of person and not a man of action. Throughout my boyhood, I thought that to be loved would have amounted to an injustice. I did not feel I deserved any particular love, and I remember my birthdays filled me with shame, because everyone heaped gifts on me when I thought that I had done nothing to deserve them—that I was a kind of fake. After the age of thirty or so, I got over the feeling.

At home, both English and Spanish were commonly used. If I were asked to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father's library. In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library. I can still picture it. It was in a room of its own, with glass-fronted shelves, and must have contained several thousand volumes. Being so nearsighted, I have forgotten most of the faces of that time (perhaps even when I think of my grandfather Acevedo I am thinking of his photograph), and yet I vividly remember so many of the steel engravings in *Chambers's Encyclopædia* and in the *Britannica*. The first novel I ever read through was *Huckleberry Finn*. Next came *Roughing It* and *Flush Days in California*. I also read books by Captain Marryat, Wells's *First Men in the Moon*, Poe, a one-volume edition of Longfellow, *Treasure Island*, Dickens, *Don Quixote*, *Tom Brown's School Days*, Grimms' *Fairy*

*Tales*, Lewis Carroll, *The Adventures of Mr Verdant Green* (a now forgotten book), Burton's *A Thousand Nights and a Night*. The Burton, filled with what was then considered obscenity, was forbidden, and I had to read it in hiding up on the roof. But at the time, I was so carried away with the magic that I took no notice whatever of the objectionable parts, reading the tales unaware of any other significance. All the foregoing books I read in English. When later I read *Don Quixote* in the original, it sounded like a bad translation to me. I still remember those red volumes with the gold lettering of the Garnier edition. At some point, my father's library was broken up, and when I read the *Quixote* in another edition I had the feeling that it wasn't the real *Quixote*. Later, I had a friend get me the Garnier, with the same steel engravings, the same footnotes, and also the same errata. All those things form part of the book for me; this I consider the real *Quixote*.

In Spanish, I also read many of the books by Eduardo Gutiérrez about Argentine outlaws and desperadoes—*Juan Moreira* foremost among them—as well as his *Siluetas militares*, which contains a forceful account of Colonel Borges' death. My mother forbade the reading of *Martín Fierro*, since that was a book fit only for hoodlums and schoolboys and, besides, was not about real gauchos at all. This too I read on the sly. Her feelings were based on the fact that Hernández had been an upholder of Rosas and therefore an enemy to our Unitarian ancestors, I read also Sarmiento's *Facundo*, many books on Greek mythology, and later Norse. Poetry came to me through English—Shelley, Keats, FitzGerald, and Swinburne, those great favorites of my father, who could quote them voluminously, and often did.

A tradition of literature ran through my father's family. His great-unde Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur was one of the first Argentine poets, and he wrote an ode on the death of his friend General Manuel Belgrano, in 1820. One of my father's cousins, Álvaro Melián Lafinur, whom I knew from childhood, was a leading minor poet and later found his way into the Argentine Academy of Letters. My father's

Jorge Luis Borges

maternal grandfather, Edward Young Haslam, edited one of the first English papers in Argentina, the *Southern Cross*, and was a Doctor of Philosophy or Letters, I'm not sure which, of the University of Heidelberg. Haslam could not afford Oxford or Cambridge, so he made his way to Germany, where he got his degree, going through the whole course in Latin. Eventually, he died in Paraná. My father wrote a novel, which he published in Majorca in 1921, about the history of Entre Ríos. It was called *The Caudillo*. He also wrote (and destroyed) a book of essays, and published a translation of FitzGerald's Omar Khayyám in the same meter as the original. He destroyed a book of Oriental stories—in the manner of the Arabian Nights—and a drama, *Hacia la nada* (Toward Nothingness), about a man's disappointment in his son. He published some fine sonnets after the style of the Argentine poet Enrique Banchs. From the time I was a boy, when blindness came to him, it was tacitly understood that I had to fulfill the literary destiny that circumstances had denied my father. This was something that was taken for granted (and such things are far more important than things that are merely said). I was expected to be a writer.

I first started writing when I was six or seven. I tried to imitate classic writers of Spanish—Miguel de Cervantes, for example. I had set down in quite bad English a kind of handbook on Greek mythology, no doubt cribbed from Lemprière. This may have been my first literary venture. My first story was a rather nonsensical piece after the manner of Cervantes, an old-fashioned romance called "La visera fatal" (The Fatal Helmet). I very neatly wrote these things into copybooks. My father never interfered. He wanted me to commit all my own mistakes, and once said, "Children educate their parents, not the other way around." When I was nine or so, I translated Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince" into Spanish, and it was published in one of the Buenos Aires dailies, *El País*. Since it was signed merely "Jorge Borges," people naturally assumed the translation was my father's.

I take no pleasure whatever in recalling my early schooldays. To begin with, I did not start school until I was nine. This was because my father, as an anarchist, distrusted all enterprises run by the State. As I wore spectacles and dressed in an Eton collar and tie, I was jeered at and bullied by most of my schoolmates, who were amateur hooligans. I cannot remember the name of the school but recall that it was on Thames Street. My father used to say that Argentine history had taken the place of the catechism, so we were expected to worship all things Argentine. We were taught Argentine history, for example, before we were allowed any knowledge of the many lands and many centuries that went into its making. As far as Spanish composition goes, I was taught to write in a flowery way: *Aquellos que lucharon por una patria libre, independiente, gloriosa . . .* (Those who struggled for a free, independent, and glorious nation . . .). Later on, in Geneva, I was to be told that such writing was meaningless and that I must see things through my own eyes. My sister Norah, who was born in 1901, of course attended a girls' school.

During all these years, we usually spent our summers out in Adrogué, some ten or fifteen miles to the south of Buenos Aires, where we had a place of our own—a large one-story house with grounds, two summerhouses, a windmill, and a shaggy brown sheepdog. Adrogué then was a lost and undisturbed maze of summer homes surrounded by iron fences with masonry planters on the gateposts, of parks, of streets that radiated out of the many plazas, and of the ubiquitous smell of eucalyptus trees. We continued to visit Adrogué for decades.

My first real experience of the pampa came around 1909, on a trip we took to a place belonging to relatives near San Nicolás, to the northwest of Buenos Aires. I remember that the nearest house was a kind of blur on the horizon. This endless distance, I found out, was called the pampa, and when I learned that the farmhands were gauchos, like the characters in Eduardo Gutiérrez, that gave them a certain glamor. I have always come to things after coming to books.

Jorge Luis Borges

Once, I was allowed to accompany them on horseback, taking cattle to the river early one morning. The men were small and darkish and wore *bombachas*, a kind of wide, baggy trousers. When I asked them if they knew how to swim, they replied, "Water is meant for cattle." My mother gave a doll, in a large cardboard box, to the foreman's daughter. The next year, we went back and asked after the little girl. "What a delight the doll has been to her!" they told us. And we were shown it, still in its box, nailed to the wall like an image. Of course, the girl was allowed only to look at it, not to touch it, for it might have been soiled or broken. There it was, high up out of harm's way, worshiped from afar. Lugones has written that in Córdoba, before magazines came in, he had many times seen a playing card used as a picture and nailed to the wall in gauchos' shacks. The four of *copas*, with its small lion and two towers, was particularly coveted. I think I began writing a poem about gauchos, probably under the influence of the poet Ascasubi, before I went to Geneva. I recall trying to work in as many gaucho words as I could, but the technical difficulties were beyond me. I never got past a few stanzas.

## Europe

In 1914, we moved to Europe. My father's eyesight had begun to fail and I remember his saying, "How on earth can I sign my name to legal papers when I am unable to read them?" Forced into early retirement, he planned our trip in exactly ten days. The world was unsuspecting then; there were no passports or other red tape. We first spent some weeks in Paris, a city that neither then nor since has particularly charmed me, as it does every other good Argentine. Perhaps, without knowing it, I was always a bit of a Britisher; in fact, I always think of Waterloo as a victory. The idea of the trip was for my sister and me to go to school in Geneva; we were to live with my maternal grandmother, who traveled with us and eventually died there,

while my parents toured the Continent. At the same time, my father was to be treated by a famous Genevan eye doctor. Europe in those days was cheaper than Buenos Aires, and Argentine money then stood for something. We were so ignorant of history, however, that we had no idea that the First World War would break out in August. My mother and father were in Germany when it happened, but managed to get back to us in Geneva. A year or so later, despite the war, we were able to journey across the Alps into northern Italy. I have vivid memories of Verona and Venice. In the vast and empty amphitheater of Verona I recited, loud and bold, several gaucho verses from *Ascasubi*.

That first fall—1914—I started school at the College of Geneva, founded by John Calvin. It was a day school. In my class there were some forty of us; a good half were foreigners. The chief subject was Latin, and I soon found out that one could let other studies slide a bit as long as one's Latin was good. All these other courses, however—algebra, chemistry, physics, mineralogy, botany, zoology—were studied in French. That year, I passed all my exams successfully, except for French itself. Without a word to me, my fellow-schoolmates sent a petition around to the headmaster, which they had all signed. They pointed out that I had had to study all of the different subjects in French, a language I also had to learn. They asked the headmaster to take this into account, and he very kindly did so. At first, I had not even understood when a teacher was calling on me, because my name was pronounced in the French manner, in a single syllable (rhyming roughly with "forge"), while we pronounce it with two syllables, the "g" sounding like a strong Scottish "h." Every time I had to answer, my schoolmates would nudge me.

We lived in a flat on the southern, or old, side of town. I still know Geneva far better than I know Buenos Aires, which is easily explained by the fact that in Geneva no two streetcorners are alike and one quickly learns the differences. Every day, I walked along that green and icy river,

Jorge Luis Borges

the Rhone, which runs through the very heart of the city, spanned by seven quite different-looking bridges. The Swiss are rather proud and standoffish. My two bosom friends were of Polish-Jewish origin—Simon Jichlinski and Maurice Abramowicz. One became a lawyer and the other a physician. I taught them to play *truco*, and they learned so well and fast that at the end of our first game they left me without a cent. I became a good Latin scholar, while I did most of my private reading in English. At home, we spoke Spanish, but my sister's French soon became so good she even dreamed in it. I remember my mother's coming home one day and finding Norah hidden behind a red plush curtain, crying out in fear, "*Une mouche, une mouche!*" It seems she had adopted the French notion that flies are dangerous. "You come out of there," my mother told her, somewhat unpatriotically. "You were born and bred among flies!" As a result of the war—apart from the Italian trip and journeys inside Switzerland—we did no traveling. Later on, braving German submarines and in the company of only four or five other passengers, my English grandmother joined us.

On my own, outside of school, I took up the study of German. I was sent on this adventure by Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (The Tailor Retailored), which dazzled and also bewildered me. The hero, Diogenes Devil'sdung, is a German professor of idealism. In German literature I was looking for something Germanic, akin to Tacitus, but I was only later to find this in Old English and in Old Norse. German literature turned out to be romantic and sickly. At first, I tried Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* but was defeated by it, as most people—including most Germans—are. Then I thought verse would be easier, because of its brevity. So I got hold of a copy of Heine's early poems, the *Lyrisches Intermezzo*, and a German-English dictionary. Little by little, owing to Heine's simple vocabulary, I found I could do without the dictionary. Soon I had worked my way into the loveliness of the language. I also managed to read Meyrink's novel *Der Golem*. (In 1969, when I was in

Israel, I talked over the Bohemian legend of the Golem with Gershom Scholem, a leading scholar of Jewish mysticism, whose name I had twice used as the only possible rhyming word in a poem of my own on the Golem.) I tried to be interested in Jean-Paul Richter, for Carlyle's and De Quincey's sake—this was around 1917—but I soon discovered that I was very bored by the reading. Richter, in spite of his two British champions, seemed to me very long-winded and perhaps a passionless writer. I became, however, very interested in German expressionism and still think of it as beyond other contemporary schools, such as imagism, cubism, futurism, surrealism, and so on. A few years later, in Madrid, I was to attempt some of the first, and perhaps the only, translations of a number of expressionist poets into Spanish.

At some point while in Switzerland, I began reading Schopenhauer. Today, were I to choose a single philosopher, I would choose him. If the riddle of the universe can be stated in words, I think these words would be in his writings. I have read him many times over, both in German and, with my father and his close friend Macedonio Fernández, in translation. I still think of German as being a beautiful language—perhaps more beautiful than the literature it has produced. French, rather paradoxically, has a fine literature despite its fondness for schools and movements, but the language itself is, I think, rather ugly. Things tend to sound trivial when they are said in French. In fact, I even think of Spanish as being the better of the two languages, though Spanish words are far too long and cumbersome. As an Argentine writer, I have to cope with Spanish and so am only too aware of its shortcomings. I remember that Goethe wrote that he had to deal with the worst language in the world—German. I suppose most writers think along these lines concerning the language they have to struggle with. As for Italian, I have read and reread *The Divine Comedy* in more than a dozen different editions. I've also read Ariosto, Tasso, Croce, and Gentile, but

Jorge Luis Borges

I am quite unable to speak Italian or to follow an Italian play or film.

It was also in Geneva that I first met Walt Whitman, through a German translation by Johannes Schlaf (“*Als ich in Alabama meinen Morgengang machte*”—“As I have walk’d in Alabama my morning walk”). Of course, I was struck by the absurdity of reading an American poet in German, so I ordered a copy of *Leaves of Grass* from London. I remember it still—bound in green. For a time, I thought of Whitman not only as a great poet but as the only poet. In fact, I thought that all poets the world over had been merely leading up to Whitman until 1855, and that not to imitate him was a proof of ignorance. This feeling had already come over me with Carlyle’s prose, which is now unbearable to me, and with the poetry of Swinburne. These were phases I went through. Later on, I was to go through similar experiences of being overwhelmed by some particular writer.

We remained in Switzerland until 1919. After three or four years in Geneva, we spent a year in Lugano. I had my bachelor’s degree by then, and it was now understood that I should devote myself to writing. I wanted to show my manuscripts to my father, but he told me he didn’t believe in advice and that I must work my way all by myself through trial and error. I had been writing sonnets in English and in French. The English sonnets were poor imitations of Wordsworth, and the French, in their own watery way, were imitative of symbolist poetry. I still recall one line of my French experiments: “*Petite boîte noire pour le violon casse.*” The whole piece was titled “*Poeme pour être recité avec un accent russe.*” As I knew I wrote a foreigner’s French, I thought a Russian accent better than an Argentine one. In my English experiments, I affected some eighteenth-century mannerisms, such as “o’er” instead of “over” and, for the sake of metrical ease, “doth sing” instead of “sings.” I knew, however, that Spanish would be my unavoidable destiny.

We decided to go home, but to spend a year or so in

Spain first. Spain at that time was slowly being discovered by Argentines. Until then, even eminent writers like Leopoldo Lugones and Ricardo Güiraldes deliberately left Spain out of their European travels. This was no whim. In Buenos Aires, Spaniards always held menial jobs—as domestic servants, waiters, and laborers—or were small tradesmen, and we Argentines never thought of ourselves as Spanish. We had, in fact, left off being Spaniards in 1816, when we declared our independence from Spain. When, as a boy, I read Prescott's *Conquest of Peru*, it amazed me to find that he portrayed the conquistadors in a romantic way. To me, descended from certain of these officials, they were an uninteresting lot. Through French eyes, however, Latin Americans saw the Spaniards as picturesque, thinking of them in terms of the stock in trade of García Lorca—gypsies, bullfights, and Moorish architecture. But though Spanish was our language and we came mostly of Spanish and Portuguese blood, my own family never thought of our trip in terms of going back to Spain after an absence of some three centuries.

We went to Majorca because it was cheap, beautiful, and had hardly any tourists but ourselves. We lived there nearly a whole year, in Palma and in Valldemosa, a village high up in the hills. I went on studying Latin, this time under the tutelage of a priest, who told me that since the innate was sufficient to his needs, he had never attempted reading a novel. We went over Virgil, of whom I still think highly. I remember I astonished the natives by my fine swimming, for I had learned in swift rivers, such as the Uruguay and the Rhone, while Majorcans were used only to a quiet, tideless sea. My father was writing his novel, which harked back to old times during the civil war of the 1870's in his native Entre Ríos. I recall giving him some quite bad metaphors, borrowed from the German expressionists, which he accepted out of resignation. He had some five hundred copies of the book printed, and brought them back to Buenos Aires, where he gave them away to friends. Every time the word "Paraná"—his home town—had come up

Jorge Luis Borges

in the manuscript, the printers changed it to “Panamá,” thinking they were correcting a mistake. Not to give them trouble, and also seeing it was funnier that way, my father let this pass. Now I repent my youthful intrusions into his book. Seventeen years later, before he died, he told me that he would very much like me to rewrite the novel in a straightforward way, with all the fine writing and purple patches left out. I myself in those days wrote a story about a werewolf and sent it to a popular magazine in Madrid, *La Esfera*, whose editors very wisely turned it down.

The winter of 1919-20 we spent in Seville, where I saw my first poem into print. It was titled “Hymn to the Sea” and appeared in the magazine *Grecia*, in its issue of December 31, 1919. In the poem, I tried my hardest to be Walt Whitman:

O sea! O myth! O sun! O wide resting place!  
I know why I love you. I know that we are both very old,  
that we have known each other for centuries. . . .  
O Protean, I have been born of you—  
both of us chained and wandering,  
both of us hungering for stars,  
both of us with hopes and disappointments. . . !

Today, I hardly think of the sea, or even of myself, as hungering for stars. Years after, when I came across Arnold Bennett’s phrase “the third-rate grandiose,” I understood at once what he meant. And yet when I arrived in Madrid a few months later, as this was the only poem I had ever printed, people there thought of me as a singer of the sea.

In Seville, I fell in with the literary group formed around *Grecia*. This group, who called themselves ultraists, had set out to renew literature, a branch of the arts of which they knew nothing whatever. One of them once told me his whole reading had been the Bible, Cervantes, Darío, and one or two of the books of the Master, Rafael Cansinos-Assens. It baffled my Argentine mind to learn that they had no French and no inkling at all that such a thing as

English literature existed. I was even introduced to a local worthy popularly known as “the Humanist” and was not long in discovering that his Latin was far smaller than mine. As for *Grecia* itself, the editor, Isaac del Vando Villar, had the whole corpus of his poetry written for him by one or another of his assistants. I remember one of them telling me one day, “I’m very busy—Isaac is writing a poem.”

Next, we went to Madrid, and there the great event to me was my friendship with Rafael Cansinos-Assens. I still like to think of myself as his disciple. He had come from Seville, where he had studied for the priesthood, but, having found the name Cansinos in the archives of the Inquisition, he decided he was a Jew. This led him to the study of Hebrew, and later on he even had himself circumcised. Literary friends from Andalusia took me to meet him. I timidly congratulated him on a poem *he* had written about the sea. “Yes,” he said, “and how I’d like to see it before I die.” He was a tall man with the Andalusian contempt for all things Castilian. The most remarkable fact about Cansinos was that he lived completely for literature, without regard for money or fame. He was a fine poet and wrote a book of psalms—chiefly erotic—called *El candelabro de los siete brazos*, which was published in 1914. He also wrote novels, stories, and essays, and, when I knew him, presided over a literary circle.

Every Saturday I would go to the Café Colonial, where we met at midnight, and the conversation lasted until daybreak. Sometimes there were as many as twenty or thirty of us. The group despised all Spanish local color—*cante jongo* and bullfights. They admired American jazz, and were more interested in being Europeans than Spaniards. Cansinos would propose a subject—The Metaphor, Free Verse, The Traditional Forms of Poetry, Narrative Poetry, The Adjective, The Verb. In his own quiet way, he was a dictator, allowing no unfriendly allusions to contemporary writers and trying to keep the talk on a high plane.

Cansinos was a wide reader. He had translated De Quincey’s *Opium-Eater*, the *Meditations of Marcus Aureli-*

Jorge Luis Borges

us from the Greek, novels of Barbuse, and Schwob's *Vies imaginaires*. Later, he was to undertake complete translations of Goethe and Dostoevski. He also made the first Spanish version of the Arabian Nights, which is very free compared to Burton's or Lane's, but which makes, I think, for more pleasurable reading. Once, I went to see him and he took me into his library. Or, rather, I should say his whole house was a library. It was like making your way through a woods. He was too poor to have shelves, and the books were piled one on top of the other from floor to ceiling, forcing you to thread your way among the vertical columns. Cansinos seemed to me as if he were all the past of that Europe I was leaving behind—something like the symbol of all culture, Western and Eastern. But he had a perversity that made him fail to get on with his leading contemporaries. It lay in writing books that lavishly praised second- or third-rate writers. At the time, Ortega y Gasset was at the height of his fame, but Cansinos thought of him as a bad philosopher and a bad writer. What I got from him, chiefly, was the pleasure of literary conversation. Also, I was stimulated by him to far-flung reading. In writing, I began aping him. He wrote long and flowing sentences with an un-Spanish and strongly Hebrew flavor to them.

Oddly, it was Cansinos who, in 1919, invented the term "ultraism." He thought Spanish literature had always been behind the times. Under the pen name of Juan Las, he wrote some short, laconic ultraist pieces. The whole thing—I see now—was done in a spirit of mockery. But we youngsters took it very seriously. Another of the earnest followers was Guillermo de Torre, whom I met in Madrid that spring and who married my sister Norah nine years later.

In Madrid at this time, there was another group gathered around Ramón Gómez de la Serna. I went there once and didn't like the way they behaved. They had a buffoon who wore a bracelet with a rattle attached. He would be made to shake hands with people and the rattle would rattle and Gómez de la Serna would invariably say, "Where's the snake?" That was supposed to be funny. Once, he turned to

me proudly and remarked, "You've never seen this kind of thing in Buenos Aires, have you?" I owned, thank God, that I hadn't.

In Spain, I wrote two books. One was a series of essays called, I now wonder why, *Los naipes del tahir* (The Sharpener's Cards). They were literary and political essays (I was still an anarchist and a freethinker and in favor of pacifism), written under the influence of Pío Baroja. Their aim was to be bitter and relentless, but they were, as a matter of fact, quite tame. I went in for using such words as "fools," "harlots," "liars." Failing to find a publisher, I destroyed the manuscript on my return to Buenos Aires. The second book was titled either *The Red Psalms* or *The Red Rhythms*. It was a collection of poems—perhaps some twenty in all—in free verse and in praise of the Russian Revolution, the brotherhood of man, and pacifism. Three or four of them found their way into magazines—"Bolshevik Epic," "Trenches," "Russia." This book I destroyed in Spain on the eve of our departure. I was then ready to go home.

## Buenos Aires

We returned to Buenos Aires on the *Reina Victoria Eugenia* toward the end of March, 1921. It came to me as a surprise, after living in so many European cities—after so many memories of Geneva, Zurich, Nîmes, Córdoba, and Lisbon—to find that my native town had grown, and that it was now a very large, sprawling, and almost endless city of low buildings with flat roofs, stretching west toward what geographers and literary hands call the pampa. It was more than a homecoming; it was a rediscovery. I was able to see Buenos Aires keenly and eagerly because I had been away from it for a long time. Had I never gone abroad, I wonder whether I would ever have seen it with the peculiar shock and glow that it now gave me. The city—not the whole city, of course, but a few places in it that became emotionally

*Jorge Luis Borges*

significant to me—inspired the poems of my first published book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*.

I wrote these poems in 1921 and 1922, and the volume came out early in 1923. The book was actually printed in five days; the printing had to be rushed, because it was necessary for us to return to Europe. (My father wanted to consult his Genevan doctor about his sight.) I had bargained for sixty-four pages, but the manuscript ran too long and at the last minute five poems had to be left out—mercifully. I can't remember a single thing about them. The book was produced in a somewhat boyish spirit. No proofreading was done, no table of contents was provided, and the pages were unnumbered. My sister made a woodcut for the cover, and three hundred copies were printed. In those days, publishing a book was something of a private venture. I never thought of sending copies to the booksellers or out for review. Most of them I just gave away. I recall one of my methods of distribution. Having noticed that many people who went to the offices of *Nosotros*—one of the older, more solid literary magazines of the time—left their overcoats hanging in the cloak room, I brought fifty or a hundred copies to Alfredo Bianchi, one of the editors. Bianchi stared at me in amazement and said, "Do you expect me to sell these books for you?"

"No," I answered. "Although I've written them, I'm not altogether a lunatic. I thought I might ask you to slip some of these books into the pockets of those coats hanging out there." He generously did so. When I came back after a year's absence, I found that some of the inhabitants of the overcoats had read my poems, and a few had even written about them. As a matter of fact, in this way I got myself a small reputation as a poet.

The book was essentially romantic, though it was written in a rather lean style and abounded in laconic metaphors. It celebrated sunsets, solitary places, and unfamiliar corners; it ventured into Berkeleyan metaphysics and family history; it recorded early loves. At the same time, I also

mimicked the Spanish seventeenth century and cited Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* in my preface. I'm afraid the book was a plum pudding—there was just too much in it. And yet, looking back on it now, I think I have never strayed beyond that book. I feel that all my subsequent writing has only developed themes first taken up there; I feel that all during my lifetime I have been rewriting that one book.

Were the poems in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* ultraist poetry? When I came back from Europe in 1921, I came bearing the banners of ultraism. I am still known to literary historians as “the father of Argentine ultraism.” When I talked things over at the time with fellow-poets Eduardo González Lanuza, Norah Lange, Francisco Piñero, my cousin Guillermo Juan (Borges), and Roberto Ortelli, we came to the conclusion that Spanish ultraism was overburdened—after the manner of futurism—with modernity and gadgets. We were unimpressed by railway trains, by propellers, by airplanes, and by electric fans. While in our manifestos we still upheld the primacy of the metaphor and the elimination of transitions and decorative adjectives, what we wanted to write was essential poetry—poems beyond the here and now, free of local color and contemporary circumstances. I think the poem “Plainness” sufficiently illustrates what I personally was after:

The garden's grillwork gate  
opens with the ease of a page  
in a much thumbed book,  
and, once inside, our eyes  
have no need to dwell on objects  
already fixed and exact in memory.  
Here habits and minds and the private language  
all families invent  
are everyday things to me.  
What necessity is there to speak  
or pretend to be someone else?

Jorge Luis Borges

The whole house knows me,  
they're aware of my worries and weakness.  
This is the best that can happen—  
what Heaven perhaps will grant us:  
not to be wondered at or required to succeed  
but simply to be let in  
as part of an undeniable Reality,  
like stones of the road, like trees.

I think this is a far cry from the timid extravagances of my earlier Spanish ultraist exercises, when I saw a trolley car as a man shouldering a gun, or the sunrise as a shout, or the setting sun as being crucified in the west. A sane friend to whom I later recited such absurdities remarked, "Ah, I see you held the view that poetry's chief aim is to startle." As to whether the poems in *Fervor* are ultraist or not, the answer—for me—was given by my friend and French translator Néstor Ibarra, who said, "Borges left off being an ultraist poet with the first ultraist poem he wrote." I can now only regret my early ultraist excesses. After nearly a half century, I find myself still striving to live down that awkward period of my life.

Perhaps the major event of my return was Macedonio Fernández. Of all the people I have met in my life—and I have met some quite remarkable men—no one has ever made so deep and so lasting an impression on me as Macedonio. A tiny figure in a black bowler hat, he was waiting for us on the *Dársena Norte* when we landed, and I came to inherit his friendship from my father. Both men had been born in 1874. Paradoxically, Macedonio was an outstanding conversationalist and at the same time a man of long silences and few words. We met on Saturday evening at a café—the *Perla*, in the *Plaza del Once*. There we would talk till daybreak, Macedonio presiding. As in Madrid *Cansinos* had stood for all learning, Macedonio now stood for pure thinking. At the time, I was a great reader and went out very seldom (almost every night after dinner, I used to go to bed and read), but my whole week was lit

up with the expectation that on Saturday I'd be seeing and hearing Macedonio. He lived quite near us and I could have seen him whenever I wanted, but I somehow felt that I had no right to that privilege and that in order to give Macedonio's Saturday its full value I had to forgo him throughout the week. At these meetings, Macedonio would speak perhaps three or four times, risking only a few quiet observations, which were addressed—seemingly—to his neighbor alone. These remarks were never affirmative. Macedonio was very courteous and soft-spoken and would say, for example, "Well, I suppose you've noticed . . ." And thereupon he would let loose some striking, highly original thought. But, invariably, he attributed his remark to the hearer.

He was a frail, gray man with the kind of ash-colored hair and moustache that made him look like Mark Twain. The resemblance pleased him, but when he was reminded that he also looked like Paul Valéry, he resented it, since he had little use for Frenchmen. He always wore that black bowler, and for all I know may even have slept in it. He never undressed to go to bed, and at night, to fend off drafts that he thought might cause him toothache, he draped a towel around his head. This made him look like an Arab. Among his other eccentricities were his nationalism (he admired one Argentine president after another for the sufficient reason that the Argentine electorate could not be wrong), his fear of dentistry (this led him to tugging at his teeth, in public, behind a hand, so as to stave off the dentist's pliers), and a habit of falling sentimentally in love with streetwalkers.

As a writer, Macedonio published several rather unusual volumes, and papers of his are still being collected close to twenty years after his death. His first book, published in 1928, was called *No toda es vigilia la de los ojos abiertos* (We're Not Always Awake When Our Eyes Are Open). It was an extended essay on idealism, written in a deliberately tangled and crabbed style, in order, I suppose, to match the tangledness of reality. The next year, a miscellany of his

*Jorge Luis Borges*

writings appeared—*Papeles de Recienvenido* (Newcomer's Papers)—in which I myself took a hand, collecting and ordering the chapters. This was a sort of miscellany of jokes within jokes. Macedonio also wrote novels and poems, all of them startling but hardly readable. One novel of twenty chapters is prefaced by fifty-six different forewords. For all his brilliance, I don't think Macedonio is to be found in his writings at all. The real Macedonio was in his conversation.

Macedonio lived modestly in boardinghouses, which he seemed to change with frequency. This was because he was always skipping out on the rent. Every time he would move, he'd leave behind piles and piles of manuscripts. Once, his friends scolded him about this, telling him it was a shame all that work should be lost. He said to us, "Do you really think I'm rich enough to lose anything?"

Readers of Hume and Schopenhauer may find little that is new in Macedonio, but the remarkable thing about him is that he arrived at his conclusions by himself. Later on, he actually read Hume, Schopenhauer, Berkeley, and William James, but I suspect he had not done much other reading, and he always quoted the same authors. He considered Sir Walter Scott the greatest of novelists, maybe just out of loyalty to a boyhood enthusiasm. He had once exchanged letters with William James, whom he had written in a medley of English, German, and French, explaining that it was because "I knew so little in any one of these languages that I had constantly to shift tongues." I think of Macedonio as reading a page or so and then being spurred into thought. He not only argued that we are such stuff as dreams are made on, but he really believed that we are all living in a dream world. Macedonio doubted whether truth was communicable. He thought that certain philosophers had discovered it but that they had failed to communicate it completely. However, he also believed that the discovery of truth was quite easy. He once told me that if he could lie out on the pampa, forgetting the world, himself, and his quest, truth might suddenly reveal itself to him. He added

that, of course, it might be impossible to put that sudden wisdom into words.

Macedonio was fond of compiling small oral catalogs of people of genius, and in one of them I was amazed to find the name of a very lovable lady of our acquaintance, Quica González Acha de Tomkinson Alvear. I stared at him open-mouthed. I somehow did not think Quica ranked with Hume and Schopenhauer. But Macedonio said, "Philosophers have had to try and explain the universe, while Quica simply feels and understands it" He would turn to her and ask, "Quica, what is Being?" Quica would answer, "I don't know what you mean, Macedonio." "You see," he would say to me, "she understands so perfectly that she cannot even grasp the fact that we are puzzled." This was his proof of Quica's being a woman of genius. When I later told him he might say the same of a child or a cat, Macedonio took it angrily.

Before Macedonio, I had always been a credulous reader. His chief gift to me was to make me read skeptically. At the outset, I plagiarized him devotedly, picking up certain stylistic mannerisms of his that I later came to regret. I look back on him now, however, as an Adam bewildered by the Garden of Eden. His genius survives in but a few of his pages; his influence was of a Socratic nature. I truly loved the man, on this side idolatry, as much as any.

This period, from 1921 to 1930, was one of great activity, but much of it was perhaps reckless and even pointless. I wrote and published no less than seven books—four of them essays and three of them verse. I also founded three magazines and contributed with fair frequency to nearly a dozen other periodicals, among them *La Prensa*, *Nosotros*, *Inicial*, *Criterio*, and *Síntesis*. This productivity now amazes me as much as the fact that I feel only the remotest kinship with the work of these years. Three of the four essay collections—whose names are best forgotten—I have never allowed to be reprinted. In fact, when in 1953 my present publisher—Emecé—proposed to bring out my "complete writings," the only reason I accepted was that it

would allow me to keep those preposterous volumes suppressed. This reminds me of Mark Twain's suggestion that a fine library could be started by leaving out the works of Jane Austen, and that even if that library contained no other books it would still be a fine library, since her books were left out.

In the first of these reckless compilations, there was a quite bad essay on Sir Thomas Browne, which may have been the first ever attempted on him in the Spanish language. There was another essay that set out to classify metaphors as though other poetic elements, such as rhythm and music, could be safely ignored. There was a longish essay on the nonexistence of the ego, cribbed from Bradley or the Buddha or Macedonio Fernández. When I wrote these pieces, I was trying to play the sedulous ape to two Spanish baroque seventeenth-century writers, Quevedo and Saavedra Fajardo, who stood in their own stiff, arid, Spanish way for the same kind of writing as Sir Thomas Browne in "Urne-Buriall." I was doing my best to write Latin in Spanish, and the book collapses under the sheer weight of its involutions and sententious judgments. The next of these failures was a kind of reaction. I went to the other extreme—I tried to be as Argentine as I could. I got hold of Segovia's dictionary of Argentinisms and worked in so many local words that many of my countrymen could hardly understand it. Since I have mislaid the dictionary, I'm not sure I would any longer understand the book myself, and so have given it up as utterly hopeless. The third of these unmentionables stands for a kind of partial redemption. I was creeping out of the second book's style and slowly going back to sanity, to writing with some attempt at logic and at making things easy for the reader rather than dazzling him with purple passages. One such experiment, of dubious value, was "Hombres pelearon" (Men Fought), my first venture into the mythology of the old Northside of Buenos Aires. In it, I was trying to tell a purely Argentine story in an Argentine way. This story is one I have been retelling, with small varia-

tions, ever since. It is the tale of the motiveless, or disinterested, duel—of courage for its own sake. I insisted when I wrote it that in our sense of the language we Argentines were different from the Spaniards. Now, instead, I think we should try to stress our linguistic affinities. I was still writing, but in a milder way, so that Spaniards would not understand me—writing, it might be said, to be understood. The Gnostics claimed that the only way to avoid a sin was to commit it and be rid of it. In my books of these years, I seem to have committed most of the major literary sins, some of them under the influence of a great writer, Leopoldo Lugones, whom I still cannot help admiring. These sins were fine writing, local color, a quest for the unexpected, and a seventeenth-century style. Today, I no longer feel guilty over these excesses; those books were written by somebody else. Until a few years ago, if the price were not too stiff, I would buy up copies and burn them.

Of the poems of this time, I should perhaps have also suppressed my second collection, *Luna de enfrente* (Moon Across the Way). It was published in 1925 and is a kind of riot of sham local color. Among its tomfooleries were the spelling of my first name in the nineteenth-century Chilean fashion as “Jorje” (it was a halfhearted attempt at phonetic spelling); the spelling of the Spanish for “and” as “i” instead of “y” (our greatest writer, Sarmiento, had done the same, trying to be as un-Spanish as he could); and the omission of the final “d” in words like “*autoridá*” and “*ciudá*” In later editions, I dropped the worst poems, pruned the eccentricities, and, successively—through several reprintings—revised and toned down the verses. The third collection of the time, *Cuaderno San Martín* (the title has nothing to do with the national hero; it was merely the brand name of the out-of-fashion copybook into which I wrote the poems), includes some quite legitimate pieces, such as “La noche que en el Sur lo velaron,” whose title has been strikingly translated by Robert Fitzgerald as “Death-watch on the Southside,” and “Muertes de Buenos Aires”

Jorge Luis Borges

(Deaths of Buenos Aires), about the two chief graveyards of the Argentine capital. One poem in the book (no favorite of mine) has somehow become a minor Argentine classic: "The Mythical Founding of Buenos Aires." This book, too, has been improved, or purified, by cuts and revisions down through the years.

In 1929, that third book of essays won the Second Municipal Prize of three thousand pesos, which in those days was a lordly sum of money. I was, for one thing, to acquire with it a secondhand set of the Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. For another, I was insured a year's leisure and decided I would write a longish book on a wholly Argentine subject. My mother wanted me to write about any of three really worthwhile poets—Ascasubi, Almafuerte, or Lugones. I now wish I had. Instead, I chose to write about a nearly invisible popular poet, Evaristo Carriego. My mother and father pointed out that his poems were not good. "But he was a friend and neighbor of ours," I said. "Well, if you think that qualifies him as the subject for a book, go ahead," they said. Carriego was the man who discovered the literary possibilities of the run-down and ragged outskirts of the city—the Palermo of my boyhood. His career followed the same evolution as the tango—rollicking, daring, courageous at first, then turning sentimental. In 1912, at the age of twenty-nine, he died of tuberculosis, leaving behind a single volume of his work. I remember that a copy of it, inscribed to my father, was one of several Argentine books we had taken to Geneva and that I read and reread there. Around 1909, Carriego had dedicated a poem to my mother. Actually, he had written it in her album. In it, he spoke of me: "And may your son . . . go forth, led by the trusting wing of inspiration, to carry out the vintage of a new annunciation, which from lofty grapes will yield the wine of Song." But when I began writing my book the same thing happened to me that happened to Carlyle as he wrote his *Frederick the Great*. The more I wrote, the less I cared about my hero. I had started out to do a straight biography, but on the way I

became more and more interested in old-time Buenos Aires. Readers, of course, were not slow in finding out that the book hardly lived up to its title, *Evaristo Carriego*, and so it fell flat. When the second edition appeared twenty-five years later, in 1955, as the fourth volume of my “complete” works, I enlarged the book with several new chapters, one a “History of the Tango.” As a consequence of these additions, I feel *Evaristo Carriego* has been rounded out for the better.

*Prisma* (Prism), founded in 1921 and lasting two numbers, was the earliest of the magazines I edited. Our small ultraist group was eager to have a magazine of its own, but a real magazine was beyond our means. I had noticed billboard ads, and the thought came to me that we might similarly print a “mural magazine” and paste it up ourselves on the walls of buildings in different parts of town. Each issue was a large single sheet and contained a manifesto and some six or eight short, laconic poems, printed with plenty of white space around them, and a woodcut by my sister. We sallied forth at night—González Lanuza, Piñero, my cousin, and I—armed with pastepots and brushes provided by my mother, and, walking miles on end, slapped them up along Santa Fe, Callao, Entre Ríos, and Mexico Streets. Most of our handiwork was torn down by baffled readers almost at once, but luckily for us Alfredo Bianchi, of *Nosotros*, saw one of them and invited us to publish an ultraist anthology among the pages of his solid magazine. After *Prisma*, we went in for a six-page magazine, which was really just a single sheet printed on both sides and folded twice. This was the first *Proa* (Prow), and three numbers of it were published. Two years later, in 1924, came the second *Proa*. One afternoon, Brandán Caraffa, a young poet from Córdoba, came to see me at the Garden Hotel, where we were living upon return from our second European trip. He told me that Ricardo Güiraldes and Pablo Rojas Paz had decided to found a magazine that would represent the new literary generation, and that everyone had said that if that were its goal I could not

Jorge Luis Borges

possibly be left out. Naturally, I was flattered. That night, I went around to the Phoenix Hotel, where Güiraldes was staying. He greeted me with these words: "Brandán told me that the night before last all of you got together to found a magazine of young writers, and everyone said I couldn't be left out." At that moment, Rojas Paz came in and told us excitedly, "I'm quite flattered." I broke in and said, "The night before last, the three of us got together and decided that in a magazine of new writers you couldn't be left out." Thanks to this innocent stratagem, *Proa* was born. Each one of us put in fifty pesos, which paid for an edition of three to five hundred copies with no misprints and on fine paper. But a year and a half and fifteen issues later, for lack of subscriptions and ads, we had to give it up.

These years were quite happy ones because they stood for many friendships. There were those of Norah Lange, Macedonio, Piñero, and my father. Behind our work was a sincerity; we felt we were renewing both prose and poetry. Of course, like all young men, I tried to be as unhappy as I could—a kind of Hamlet and Raskolnikov rolled into one. What we achieved was quite bad, but our comradeships endured.

In 1924, I found my way into two different literary sets. One, whose memory I still enjoy, was that of Ricardo Güiraldes, who was yet to write *Don Segundo Sombra*. Güiraldes was very generous to me. I would give him a quite clumsy poem and he would read between the lines and divine what I had been trying to say but what my literary incapacity had prevented me from saying. He would then speak of the poem to other people, who were baffled not to find these things in the text. The other set, which I rather regret, was that of the magazine *Martín Fierro*. I disliked what *Martín Fierro* stood for, which was the French idea that literature is being continually renewed—that Adam is reborn every morning, and also for the idea that, since Paris had literary cliques that wallowed

in publicity and bickering, we should be up to date and do the same. One result of this was that a sham literary feud was cooked up in Buenos Aires—that between Florida and Boedo. Florida represented downtown and Boedo the proletariat. I'd have preferred to be in the Boedo group, since I was writing about the old Northside and slums, sadness, and sunsets. But I was informed by one of the two conspirators—they were Ernesto Palacio, of Florida, and Roberto Mariani, of Boedo—that I was already one of the Florida warriors and that it was too late for me to change. The whole thing was just a put-up job. Some writers belonged to both groups—Roberto Arlt and Nicolás Olivari, for example. This sham is now taken into serious consideration by “credulous universities.” But it was partly publicity, partly a boyish prank.

Linked to this time are the names of Silvina and Victoria Ocampo, of the poet Carlos Mastronardi, of Eduardo Mallea, and, not least, of Alejandro Xul-Solar. In a rough-and-ready way, it may be said that Xul, who was a mystic, a poet, and a painter, is our William Blake. I remember asking him on one particularly sultry afternoon about what he had done that stifling day. His answer was “Nothing whatever, except for founding twelve religions after lunch.” Xul was also a philologist and the inventor of two languages. One was a philosophical language after the manner of John Wilkins and the other a reformation of Spanish with many English, German, and Greek words thrown in. He came of Baltic and Italian stock. “Xul” was his version of “Schulz” and “Solar” of “Solari.” At this time, I also met Alfonso Reyes. He was the Mexican ambassador to Argentina, and used to invite me to dinner every Sunday at the embassy. I think of Reyes as the finest Spanish prose stylist of this century, and in my writing I learned a great deal about simplicity and directness from him.

Summing up this span of my life, I find myself completely out of sympathy with the priggish and rather dogmatic young man I then was. Those friends, however, are still

Jorge Luis Borges

very living and very close to me. In fact, they form a precious part of me. Friendship is, I think, the one redeeming Argentine passion.

### Maturity

In the course of a lifetime devoted chiefly to books, I have read but few novels, and, in most cases, only a sense of duty has enabled me to find my way to their last page. At the same time, I have always been a reader and rereader of short stories. Stevenson, Kipling, James, Conrad, Poe, Chesterton, the tales of Lane's Arabian Nights, and certain stories by Hawthorne have been habits of mine since I can remember. The feeling that great novels like *Don Quixote* and *Huckleberry Finn* are virtually shapeless served to reinforce my taste for the short-story form, whose indispensable elements are economy and a clearly stated beginning, middle, and end. As a writer, however, I thought for years that the short story was beyond my powers, and it was only after a long and roundabout series of timid experiments in narration that I sat down to write real stories.

It took me some six years, from 1927 to 1933, to go from that all too self-conscious sketch "Hombres pelearon" to my first outright short story, "Hombre de la esquina rosada" (Streetcorner Man). A friend of mine, don Nicolás Paredes, a former political boss and professional gambler of the Northside, had died, and I wanted to record something of his voice, his anecdotes, and his particular way of telling them. I slaved over my every page, sounding out each sentence and striving to phrase it in his exact tones. We were living out in Adrogué at the time and, because I knew my mother would heartily disapprove of the subject matter, I composed in secret over a period of several months. Originally titled "Hombres de las orillas" (Men from the Edge of Town), the story appeared in the Saturday supplement, which I was editing, of a yellow-press daily called *Crítica*. But out of shyness, and perhaps a

feeling that the story was a bit beneath me, I signed it with a pen name—the name of one of my great-great grandfathers, Francisco Bustos. Although the story became popular to the point of embarrassment (today I only find it stogy and mannered and the characters bogus), I never regarded it as a starting point. It simply stands there as a kind of freak.

The real beginning of my career as a story writer starts with the series of sketches entitled *Historia universal de la infamia* (A Universal History of Infamy), which I contributed to the columns of *Crítica* in 1933 and 1934. The irony of this is that “Streetcorner Man” really was a story but that these sketches and several of the fictional pieces which followed them, and which very slowly led me to legitimate stories, were in the nature of hoaxes and pseudo-essays. In my *Universal History*, I did not want to repeat what Marcel Schwob had done in his *Imaginary Lives*. He had invented biographies of real men about whom little or nothing is recorded. I, instead, read up on the lives of known persons and then deliberately varied and distorted them according to my own whims. For example, after reading Herbert Asbury’s *The Gangs of New York*, I set down my free version of Monk Eastman, the Jewish gunman, in flagrant contradiction of my chosen authority. I did the same for Billy the Kid, for John Murrel (whom I rechristened Lazarus Morell), for the Veiled Prophet of Khorassan, for the Tichborne Claimant, and for several others. I never thought of book publication. The pieces were meant for popular consumption in *Crítica* and were pointedly picturesque. I suppose now the secret value of those sketches—apart from the sheer pleasure the writing gave me—lay in the fact that they were narrative exercises. Since the general plots or circumstances were all given me, I had only to embroider sets of vivid variations.

My next story, “The Approach to al-Mu’tasim,” written in 1935, is both a hoax *and* a pseudo-essay. It purports to be a review of a book published originally in Bombay three years earlier. I endowed its fake second edition with a real

Jorge Luis Borges

publisher, Victor Gollancz, and a preface by a real writer, Dorothy L. Sayers. But the author and the book are entirely my own invention. I gave the plot and details of some chapters—borrowing from Kipling and working in the twelfth-century Persian mystic Farid ud-Din Attar—and then carefully pointed out its shortcomings. The story appeared the next year in a volume of my essays, *Historia de la eternidad* (A History of Eternity), buried at the back of the book together with an article on the “Art of Insult.” Those who read “The Approach to al-Mu’tasim” took it at face value, and one of my friends even ordered a copy from London. It was not until 1942 that I openly published it as a short story in my first story collection, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (The Garden of Branching Paths). Perhaps I have been unfair to this story; it now seems to me to foreshadow and even to set the pattern for those tales that were somehow awaiting me, and upon which my reputation as a storyteller was to be based.

Along about 1937, I took my first regular full-time job. I had previously worked at small editing tasks. There was the *Crítica* supplement, which was a heavily and even gaudily illustrated entertainment sheet. There was *El Hogar*, a popular society weekly, to which, twice a month, I contributed a couple of literary pages on foreign books and authors. I had also written newsreel texts and had been editor of a pseudo-scientific magazine called *Urbe*, which was really a promotional organ of a privately owned Buenos Aires subway system. These had all been small-paying jobs, and I was long past the age when I should have begun contributing to our household upkeep. Now, through friends, I was given a very minor position as First Assistant in the Miguel Cané branch of the Municipal Library, out in a drab and dreary part of town to the southwest. While there were Second and Third Assistants below me, there were also a Director and First, Second, and Third Officials above me. I was paid two hundred and ten pesos a month and later went up to two hundred and forty. These were

sums roughly equivalent to seventy or eighty American dollars.

At the library, we did very little work. There were some fifty of us doing what fifteen could easily have done. My particular job, shared with fifteen or twenty colleagues, was classifying and cataloging the library's holdings, which until that time were uncatalogued. The collection, however, was so small that we knew where to find the books without the system, so the system, though laboriously carried out, was never needed or used. The first day, I worked honestly. On the next, some of my fellows took me aside to say that I couldn't do this sort of thing because it showed them up. "Besides," they argued, "as this cataloging has been planned to give us some semblance of work, you'll put us out of our jobs." I told them I had classified four hundred titles instead of their one hundred. "Well, if you keep that up," they said, "the boss will be angry and won't know what to do with us." For the sake of realism, I was told that from then on I should do eighty-three books one day, ninety another, and one hundred and four the third.

I stuck out the library for about nine years. They were nine years of solid unhappiness. At work, the other men were interested in nothing but horse racing, soccer matches, and smutty stories. Once, a woman, one of the readers, was raped on her way to the ladies' room. Everybody said such things were bound to happen, since the men's and ladies' rooms were adjoining. One day, two rather posh and well-meaning friends—society ladies—came to see me at work. They phoned me a day or two later to say, "You may think it amusing to work in a place like that, but promise us you will find at least a nine-hundred-peso job before the month is out." I gave them my word that I would. Ironically, at the time I was a fairly well-known writer—except at the library. I remember a fellow employee's once noting in an encyclopedia the name of a certain Jorge Luis Borges—a fact that set him wondering at the coincidence of our identical names and birth dates. Now and then during these years, we municipal workers were rewarded with gifts of a two-

Jorge Iuís Borges

pound package of maté to take home. Sometimes in the evening, as I walked the ten blocks to the tramline, my eyes would be filled with tears. These small gifts from above always underlined my menial and dismal existence.

A couple of hours each day, riding back and forth on the tram, I made my way through *The Divine Comedy*, helped as far as “Purgatory” by John Aitken Carlyle’s prose translation and then ascending the rest of the way on my own. I would do all my library work in the first hour and then steal away to the basement and pass the other five hours in reading or writing. I remember in this way rereading the six volumes of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* and the many volumes of Vicente Fidel López’ *History of the Argentine Republic*. I read Léon Bloy, Claudel, Groussac, and Bernard Shaw. On holidays, I translated Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. At some point, I was moved up to the dizzying height of Third Official. One morning, my mother rang me up and I asked for leave to go home, arriving just in time to see my father die. He had undergone a long agony and was very impatient for his death.

It was on Christmas Eve of 1938—the same year my father died—that I had a severe accident. I was running up a stairway and suddenly felt something brush my scalp. I had grazed a freshly painted open casement window. In spite of first-aid treatment, the wound became poisoned, and for a period of a week or so I lay sleepless every night and had hallucinations and high fever. One evening, I lost the power of speech and had to be rushed to the hospital for an immediate operation. Septicemia had set in, and for a month I hovered, all unknowingly, between life and death. (Much later, I was to write about this in my story “The South.”) When I began to recover, I feared for my mental integrity. I remember that my mother wanted to read to me from a book I had just ordered, C. S. Lewis’ *Out of the Silent Planet*, but for two or three nights I kept putting her off. At last, she prevailed, and after hearing a page or two I fell to crying. My mother asked me why the tears. “I’m crying because I understand,” I said. A bit

later, I wondered whether I could ever write again. I had previously written quite a few poems and dozens of short reviews. I thought that if I tried to write a review now and failed, I'd be all through intellectually but that if I tried something I had never really done before and failed at that it wouldn't be so bad and might even prepare me for the final revelation. I decided I would try to write a story. The result was "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*."

"Pierre Menard," like its forerunner "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim," was still a halfway house between the essay and the true tale. But the achievement spurred me on. I next tried something more ambitious—"TIön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," about the discovery of a new world that finally replaces our present world. Both were published in Victoria Ocampo's magazine *Sur*. I kept up my writing at the library. Though my colleagues thought of me as a traitor for not sharing their boisterous fun, I went on with work of my own in the basement, or, when the weather was warm, up on the flat roof. My Kafkian story "The Library of Babel" was meant as a nightmare version or magnification of that municipal library, and certain details in the text have no particular meaning. The numbers of books and shelves that I recorded in the story were literally what I had at my elbow. Clever critics have worried over those ciphers, and generously endowed them with mystic significance. "The Lottery in Babylon," "Death and the Compass," and "The Circular Ruins" were also written, in whole or part, while I played truant. These tales and others were to become *The Garden of Branching Paths*, a book expanded and retitled *Ficciones* in 1944. *Ficciones* and *El Aleph* (1949 and 1952), my second story collection, are, I suppose, my two major books.

In 1946, a president whose name I do not want to remember came into power. One day soon after, I was honored with the news that I had been "promoted" out of the library to the inspectorship of poultry and rabbits in the public markets. I went to the City Hall to find out what it was all about. "Look here," I said. "It's rather strange

*Jorge Luis Borges*

that among so many others at the library I should be singled out as worthy of this new position." "Well," the clerk answered, "you were on the side of the Allies—what do you expect?" His statement was unanswerable; the next day, I sent in my resignation. My friends rallied round me at once and offered me a public dinner. I prepared a speech for the occasion but, knowing I was too shy to read it myself, I asked my friend Pedro Henríquez Ureña to read it for me.

I was now out of a job. Several months before, an old English lady had read my tea leaves and had foretold that I was soon to travel, to lecture, and to make vast sums of money thereby. When I told my mother about it, we both laughed, for public speaking was far beyond me. At this juncture, a friend came to the rescue, and I was made a teacher of English literature at the Asociación Argentina de Cultura Inglesa. I was also asked at the same time to lecture on classic American literature at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores. Since this pair of offers was made three months before classes opened, I accepted, feeling quite safe. As the time grew near, however, I grew sicker and sicker. My series of lectures was to be on Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, Whitman, Twain, Henry James, and Veblen. I wrote the first one down. But I had no time to write out the second one. Besides, thinking of the first lecture as Doomsday, I felt that only eternity could come after. The first one went off well enough—miraculously. Two nights before the second lecture, I took my mother for a long walk around Adrogué and had her time me as I rehearsed my talk. She said she thought it was overlong. "In that case," I said, "I'm safe." My fear had been of running dry. So, at forty-seven, I found a new and exciting life opening up for me. I traveled up and down Argentina and Uruguay, lecturing on Swedenborg, Blake, the Persian and Chinese mystics, Buddhism, gauchesco poetry, Martin Buber, the Kabbalah, the Arabian Nights, T. E. Lawrence, medieval Germanic poetry, the Icelandic sagas, Heine, Dante, expressionism, and Cervantes. I went

from town to town, staying overnight in hotels I'd never see again. Sometimes my mother or a friend accompanied me. Not only did I end up making far more money than at the library but I enjoyed the work and felt that it justified me.

One of the chief events of these years—and of my life—was the beginning of my friendship with Adolfo Bioy-Casares. We met in 1930 or 1931, when he was about seventeen and I was just past thirty. It is always taken for granted in these cases that the older man is the master and the younger his disciple. This may have been true at the outset, but several years later, when we began to work together, Bioy was really and secretly the master. He and I attempted many different literary ventures. We compiled anthologies of Argentine poetry, tales of the fantastic, and detective stories; we wrote articles and forewords; we annotated Sir Thomas Browne and Gracián; we translated short stories by writers like Beerbohm, Kipling, Wells, and Lord Dunsany; we founded a magazine, *Destiempo*, which lasted three issues; we wrote film scripts, which were invariably rejected. Opposing my taste for the pathetic, the sententious, and the baroque, Bioy made me feel that quietness and restraint are more desirable. If I may be allowed a sweeping statement, Bioy led me gradually toward classicism.

It was at some point in the early forties that we began writing in collaboration—a feat that up to that time I had thought impossible. I had invented what we thought was a quite good plot for a detective story. One rainy morning, he told me we ought to give it a try. I reluctantly agreed, and a little later that same morning the thing happened. A third man, Honorio Bustos Domecq, emerged and took over. In the long run, he ruled us with a rod of iron and to our amusement, and later to our dismay, he became utterly unlike ourselves, with his own whims, his own puns, and his own very elaborate style of writing. Domecq was the name of a great-grandfather of Bioy's and Bustos of a great-grandfather of mine from Córdoba. Bustos Domecq's first book was *Six Problems for don Isidro Parodi* (1942),

Jorge Luis Borges

and during the writing of that volume he never got out of hand. Max Carrados had attempted a blind detective; Bioy and I went one step further and confined our detective to a jail cell. The book was at the same time a satire on the Argentine. For many years, the dual identity of Bustos Domecq was never revealed. When finally it was, people thought that, as Bustos was a joke, his writing could hardly be taken seriously.

Our next collaboration was another detective novel, *A Model for Death*. This one was so personal and so full of private jokes that we published it only in an edition that was not for sale. The author of this book we named B. Suárez Lynch. The "B." stood, I think, for Bioy and Borges, "Suárez" for another great-grandfather of mine, and Lynch for another great-grandfather of Bioy's. Bustos Domecq reappeared in 1946 in another private edition, this time of two stories, entitled *Two Memorable Fantasies*. After a long eclipse, Bustos took up his pen again, and in 1967 brought out his *Chronicles*. These are articles written on imaginary, extravagantly modern artists—architects, sculptors, painters, chefs, poets, novelists, couturiers—by a devotedly modern critic. But both the author and his subjects are fools, and it is hard to tell who is taking in whom. The book is inscribed, "To those three forgotten greats—Picasso, Joyce, Le Corbusier." The style is itself a parody. Bustos writes a literary journalese, abounding in neologisms, a Latinate vocabulary, clichés, mixed metaphors, non sequiturs, and bombast.

I have often been asked how collaboration is possible. I think it requires a joint abandoning of the ego, of vanity, and maybe of common politeness. The collaborators should forget themselves and think only in terms of the work. In fact, when somebody wants to know whether such-and-such a joke or epithet came from my side of the table or Bioy's, I honestly cannot tell him. I have tried to collaborate with other friends—some of them very close ones—but their inability to be blunt on the one hand or thick-skinned on the other has made the scheme impossible. As to the *Chronicles*

of *Bustos Domecq*, I think they are better than anything I have published under my own name and nearly as good as anything Bioy has written on his own.

In 1950, I was elected President of the Sociedad Argentina de Escritores (Argentine Society of Writers). The Argentine Republic, then as now, is a soft country, and the S.A.D.E. was one of the few strongholds against the dictatorship. This was so evident that many distinguished men of letters did not dare set foot inside its doors until after the revolution. One curious trait of the dictatorship was that even its professed upholders made it clear that they did not really take the government seriously but were acting out of self-interest. This was understood and forgiven, since most of my countrymen have an intellectual, if not a moral, conscience. Nearly all the smutty jokes made up about Perón and his wife were the invention of Peronistas themselves, trying to save face. The S.A.D.E. was eventually closed. I remember the last lecture I was allowed to give there. The audience, quite a small one, included a very puzzled policeman who did his clumsy best to set down a few of my remarks on Persian Sufism. During this drab and hopeless period, my mother—then in her seventies—was under house arrest. My sister and one of my nephews spent a month in jail. I myself had a detective on my heels, whom I first took on long, aimless walks and at last made friends with. He admitted that he too hated Perón, but said that he was obeying orders. Ernesto Palacio once offered to introduce me to the Unspeakable, but I did not want to meet him. How could I be introduced to a man whose hand I would not shake?

The long-hoped-for revolution came in September, 1955. After a sleepless, anxious night, nearly the whole population came out into the streets, cheering the revolution and shouting the name of Córdoba, where most of the fighting had taken place. We were so carried away that for some time we were quite unaware of the rain that was soaking us to the bone. We were so happy that not a single word was even uttered against the fallen dictator. Perón

*Jorge Luis Borges*

went into hiding, and was later allowed to leave the country. No one knows how much money he got away with.

Two very dear friends of mine, Esther Zemborain de Torres and Victoria Ocampo, dreamed up the possibility of my being appointed Director of the National Library. I thought the scheme a wild one, and hoped at most to be given the directorship of some small-town library, preferably to the south of the city. Within the space of a day, a petition was signed by the magazine *Sur* (read Victoria Ocampo), by the reopened S.A.D.E. (read Carlos Alberto Erro), by the Sociedad Argentina de Cultura Inglesa (read Carlos del Campillo), and by the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores (read Luis Reissig). This was placed on the desk of the Minister of Education, and eventually I was appointed to the directorship by General Eduardo Lonardi, who was Acting President. A few days earlier, my mother and I had walked to the Library one night to take a look at the building, but, feeling superstitious, I refused to go in. "Not until I get the job," I said. That same week, I was called to come to the Library to take over. My family was present, and I made a speech to the employees, telling them I was actually the Director—the incredible Director. At the same time, José Edmundo Clemente, who a few years before had managed to persuade Emecé to bring out an edition of my works, became the Assistant Director. Of course, I felt very important, but we got no pay for the next three months. I don't think my predecessor, who was a Peronista, was ever officially fired. He just never came around to the Library again. They named me to the job but did not take the trouble to unseat him.

Another pleasure came to me the very next year, when I was named to the professorship of English and American Literature at the University of Buenos Aires. Other candidates had sent in painstaking lists of their translations, papers, lectures, and other achievements. I limited myself to the following statement: "Quite unwittingly, I have been qualifying myself for this position throughout my life." My

plain approach gained the day. I was hired, and spent ten or twelve happy years at the University.

My blindness had been coming on gradually since childhood. It was a slow, summer twilight. There was nothing particularly pathetic or dramatic about it. Beginning in 1927, I underwent eight eye operations, but since the late 1950's, when I wrote my "Poem of the Gifts," for reading and writing purposes I have been blind. Blindness ran in my family; a description of the operation performed on the eyes of my great-grandfather, Edward Young Haslam, appeared in the pages of the London medical journal, the *Lancet*. Blindness also seems to run among the Directors of the National Library. Two of my eminent forerunners, José Mármol and Paul Groussac, suffered the same fate. In my poem, I speak of God's splendid irony in granting me at one time 800,000 books and darkness.

One salient consequence of my blindness was my gradual abandonment of free verse in favor of classical metrics. In fact, blindness made me take up the writing of poetry again. Since rough drafts were denied me, I had to fall back on memory. It is obviously easier to remember verse than prose, and to remember regular verse forms rather than free ones. Regular verse is, so to speak, portable. One can walk down the street or be riding the subway while composing and polishing a sonnet, for rhyme and meter have mnemonic virtues. In these years, I wrote dozens of sonnets and longer poems consisting of eleven-syllable quatrains. I thought I had taken Lugones as my master, but when the verses were written my friends told me that, regrettably, they were quite unlike him. In my later poetry, a narrative thread is always to be found. As a matter of fact, I even think of plots for poems. Perhaps the main difference between Lugones and me is that he held French literature as his model and lived intellectually in a French world, whereas I look to English literature. In this new poetic activity, I never thought of building a sequence of poems, as I always formerly did, but was chiefly interested in each piece for its own sake. In this way, I wrote poems on such different

subjects as Emerson and wine, Snorri Sturluson and the hourglass, my grandfather's death and the beheading of Charles I. I also went in for summing up my literary heroes: Poe, Swedenborg, Whitman, Heine, Camões, Jonathan Edwards, and Cervantes. Due tribute, of course, was also paid to mirrors, the Minotaur, and knives.

I had always been attracted to the metaphor, and this leaning led me to the study of the simple Saxon kennings and overelaborate Norse ones. As far back as 1932, I had even written an essay about them. The quaint notion of using, as far as it could be done, metaphors instead of straightforward nouns, and of these metaphors' being at once traditional and arbitrary, puzzled and appealed to me. I was later to surmise that the purpose of these figures lay not only in the pleasure given by the pomp and circumstance of compounding words but also in the demands of alliteration. Taken by themselves, the kennings are not especially witty, and calling a ship "a sea-stallion" and the open sea "the whale's-road" is no great feat. The Norse skalds went a step further, calling the sea "the sea-stallion's-road," so that what originally was an image became a laborious equation. In turn, my investigation of kennings led me to the study of Old English and Old Norse. Another factor that impelled me in this direction was my ancestry. It may be no more than a romantic superstition of mine, but the fact that the Haslams lived in Northumbria and Mercia—or, as they are today called, Northumberland and the Midlands—links me with a Saxon and perhaps a Danish past. (My fondness for such a northern past has been resented by some of my more nationalistic countrymen, who dub me an Englishman, but I hardly need point out that many things English are utterly alien to me: tea, the Royal Family, "manly" sports, the worship of every line written by the uncaring Shakespeare.)

At the end of one of my University courses, several of my students came to see me at the Library. We had just polished off all English literature from Beowulf to Bernard

Shaw in the span of four months, and I thought we might now do something in earnest. I proposed that we begin at the beginning, and they agreed. I knew that at home, on a certain top shelf, I had copies of Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. When the students came the next Saturday morning, we began reading these two books. We skipped grammar as much as we could and pronounced the words like German. All at once, we fell in love with a sentence in which Rome (Romeburh) was mentioned. We got drunk on these words and rushed down Peru Street shouting them at the top of our voices. And so we had set out on a long adventure. I had always thought of English literature as the richest in the world; the discovery now of a secret chamber at the very threshold of that literature came to me as an additional gift. Personally, I knew that the adventure would be an endless one, and that I could go on studying Old English for the rest of my days. The pleasure of studying, not the vanity of mastering, has been my chief aim, and I have not been disappointed these past twelve years. As for my recent interest in Old Norse, this is only a logical step, since the two languages are closely linked and since of all medieval Germanic literature Old Norse is the crown. My excursions into Old English have been wholly personal and, therefore, have made their way into a number of my poems. A fellow-academician once took me aside and said in alarm, "What do you mean by publishing a poem entitled 'Embarking on the Study of Anglo-Saxon Grammar'?" I tried to make him understand that Anglo-Saxon was as intimate an experience to me as looking at a sunset or falling in love.

Around 1954, I began writing short prose pieces—sketches and parables. One day, my friend Carlos Frías, of Emecé, told me he needed a new book for the series of my so-called complete works. I said I had none to give him, but Frías persisted, saying, "Every writer has a book if he only looks for it." Going through drawers at home one idle Sunday, I began ferreting out uncollected poems and prose pieces, some of the latter going back to my days on *Critica*.

*Jorge Luis Borges*

These odds and ends, sorted out and ordered and published in 1960, became *El hacedor* (The Maker). Remarkably, this book, which I accumulated rather than wrote, seems to me my most personal work and, to my taste, maybe my best. The explanation is only too easy: the pages of *El hacedor* contain no padding. Each piece was written for its own sake and out of an inner necessity. By the time it was undertaken, I had come to realize that fine writing is a mistake, and a mistake born out of vanity. Good writing, I firmly believe, should be done in an unobtrusive way.

On the closing page of that book, I told of a man who sets out to make a picture of the universe. After many years, he has covered a blank wall with images of ships, towers, horses, weapons, and men, only to find out at the moment of his death that he has drawn a likeness of his own face. This may be the case of all books; it is certainly the case of this particular book.

### Crowded Years

Fame, like my blindness, had been coming gradually to me. I had never expected it, I had never sought it. Néstor Ibarra and Roger Caillois, who in the early 1950's daringly translated me into French, were my first benefactors. I suspect that their pioneer work paved the way for my sharing with Samuel Beckett the Formentor Prize in 1961, for until I appeared in French I was practically invisible—not only abroad but at home in Buenos Aires. As a consequence of that prize, my books mushroomed overnight throughout the western world.

This same year, under the auspices of Edward Larocque Tinker, I was invited as Visiting Professor to the University of Texas. It was my first physical encounter with America. In a sense, because of my reading, I had always been there, and yet how strange it seemed when in Austin I heard ditch diggers who worked on campus speaking in English, a

language I had until then always thought of as being denied that class of people. America, in fact, had taken on such mythic proportions in my mind that I was sincerely amazed to find there such commonplace things as weeds, mud, puddles, dirt roads, flies, and stray dogs. Though at times we fell into homesickness, I know now that my mother—who accompanied me—and I grew to love Texas. She, who always loathed football, even rejoiced over *our* victory when the Longhorns defeated the neighboring Bears. At the University, when I finished one class I was giving in Argentine literature, I would sit in on another as a student of Saxon verse under Dr. Rudolph Willard. My days were full. I found American students, unlike the run of students in the Argentine, far more interested in their subjects than in their grades. I tried to interest people in Ascasubi and Lugones, but they stubbornly questioned and interviewed me about my own output. I spent as much time as I could with Ramón Martínez López, who, as a philologist, shared my passion for etymologies and taught me many things. During those six months in the States, we traveled widely, and I lectured at universities from coast to coast. I saw New Mexico, San Francisco, New York, New England, Washington. I found America the friendliest, most forgiving, and most generous nation I had ever visited. We South Americans tend to think in terms of convenience, whereas people in the United States approach things ethically. This—amateur Protestant that I am—I admired above all. It even helped me overlook skyscrapers, paper bags, television, plastics, and the unholy jungle of gadgets.

My second American trip came in 1967, when I held the Charles Eliot Norton Chair of Poetry at Harvard, and lectured to well-wishing audiences on “This Craft of Verse.” I spent seven months in Cambridge, also teaching a course on Argentine writers and traveling all over New England, where most things American, including the West, seem to have been invented. I made numerous literary pilgrimages—to Hawthorne’s haunts in Salem, to Emerson’s in Concord, to Melville’s in New Bedford, to Emily Dick-

*Jorge Luis Borges*

inson's in Amherst, and to Longfellow's around the corner from where I lived. Friends seemed to multiply in Cambridge: Jorge Guillén, John Murchison, Juan Marichal, Raimundo Lida, Héctor Ingrao, and a Persian physicist who had worked out a theory of spherical time that I do not quite understand but hope someday to plagiarize—Farid Hushfar. I also met writers like Robert Fitzgerald, John Updike, and the late Dudley Fitts. I availed myself of chances to see new parts of the continent: Iowa, where I found my native pampa awaiting me; Chicago, recalling Carl Sandburg; Missouri; Maryland; Virginia. At the end of my stay, I was greatly honored to have my poems read at the Y.M.H.A. Poetry Center in New York, with several of my translators reading and a number of poets in the audience. I owe a third trip to the United States, in November of 1969, to my two benefactors at the University of Oklahoma, Lowell Dunham and Ivar Ivask, who invited me to give talks there and called together a group of scholars to comment on, and enrich, my work. Ivask made me a gift of a fish-shaped Finnish dagger—rather alien to the tradition of the old Palermo of my boyhood.

Looking back on this past decade, I seem to have been quite a wanderer. In 1963, thanks to Neil MacKay of the British Council in Buenos Aires, I was able to visit England and Scotland. There, too, again in my mother's company, I made my pilgrimages: to London, so teeming with literary memories; to Lichfield and Dr. Johnson; to Manchester and De Quincey; to Rye and Henry James; to the Lake Country; to Edinburgh. I visited my grandmother's birthplace in Hanley, one of the Five Towns—Arnold Bennett country. Scotland and Yorkshire I think of as among the loveliest places on earth. Somewhere in the Scottish hills and glens I recaptured a strange sense of loneliness and bleakness that I had known before; it took me some time to trace this feeling back to the far-flung wastes of Patagonia. A few years later, this time in the company of María Esther Vázquez, I made another European trip. In England, we stayed with the late Herbert Read in his fine rambling

house out on the moors. He took us to Yorkminster, where he showed us some ancient Danish swords in the Viking Yorkshire room of the museum. I later wrote a sonnet to one of the swords, and just before his death Sir Herbert corrected and bettered my original title, suggesting, instead of "To a Sword in York," "To a Sword in Yorkminster." We later went to Stockholm, invited by my Swedish publisher, Bonnier, and by the Argentine ambassador. Stockholm and Copenhagen I count among the most unforgettable cities I have seen, like San Francisco, New York, Edinburgh, Santiago de Compostela, and Geneva.

Early in 1969, invited by the Israeli government, I spent ten very exciting days in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. I brought home with me the conviction of having been in the oldest and the youngest of nations, of having come from a very living, vigilant land back to a half-asleep nook of the world. Since my Genevan days, I had always been interested in Jewish culture, thinking of it as an integral element of our so-called Western civilization, and during the Israeli-Arab war of a few years back I found myself taking immediate sides. While the outcome was still uncertain, I wrote a poem on the battle. A week after, I wrote another on the victory. Israel was, of course, still an armed camp at the time of my visit. There, along the shores of Galilee, I kept recalling these lines from Shakespeare:

Over whose acres walk'd those blessed feet,  
Which, fourteen hundred years ago, were nail'd,  
For our advantage, on the bitter cross.

Now, despite my years, I still think of the many stones I have left unturned, and of others I would like to turn again. I hope yet to see Mormon Utah, to which I was introduced as a boy by Mark Twain's *Roughing It* and by the first book of the Sherlock Holmes saga, *A Study in Scarlet*. Another daydream of mine is a pilgrimage to Iceland, and another still to return again to Texas and to Scotland.

At seventy-one, I am still hard at work and brimming with plans. Last year I wrote a new book of poems, *Elogio de la sombra* (In Praise of Darkness). It was my first entirely new volume since 1960, and these were also my first poems since 1929 written with a book in mind. My main concern in this work, running through several of its pieces, is of an ethical nature, irrespective of any religious or antireligious bias. "Darkness" in the title stands for both blindness and death. To finish *Elogio*, I worked every morning, dictating at the National Library. By the time I ended, I had set up a comfortable routine—so comfortable that I kept it up and began writing tales. These, my first stories since 1953, I published this year. The collection is called *El informe de Brodie* (Doctor Brodie's Report). It is a set of modest experiments in straightforward storytelling, and is the book I have often spoken about in the past five years. Recently, I completed the script of a film to be called *Los otros* (The Others). Its plot is my own; the writing was done together with Adolfo Bioy-Casares and the young Argentine director Hugo Santiago. My afternoons now are usually given over to a long-range and cherished project: for nearly the past three years, I have been lucky to have my own translator at my side, and together we are bringing out some ten or twelve volumes of my work in English, a language I am unworthy to handle, a language I often wish had been my birthright.

I intend now to begin a new book, a series of personal—not scholarly—essays on Dante, Ariosto, and medieval northern subjects. I want also to set down a book of informal, outspoken opinions, whims, reflections, and private heresies. After that, who knows? I still have a number of stories, heard or invented, that I want to tell. At present, I am finishing a long tale called "The Congress." Despite its Kafkaian title, I hope it will turn out more in the line of Chesterton. The setting is Argentine and Uruguayan. For twenty years, I have been boring my friends with the raw plot. Finally, I came to see that no further elaboration was needed. I have another project that has been pending for

an even longer period of time—that of revising and perhaps rewriting my father's novel *The Caudillo*, as he asked me to years ago. We had gone as far as discussing many of the problems; I like to think of the undertaking as a continued dialogue and a very real collaboration.

People have been unaccountably good to me. I have no enemies, and if certain persons have masqueraded as such, they've been far too good-natured to have ever pained me. Anytime I read something written against me, I not only share the sentiment but feel I could do the job far better myself. Perhaps I should advise would-be enemies to send me their grievances beforehand, with full assurance that they will receive my every aid and support. I have even secretly longed to write, under a pen name, a merciless tirade against myself. Ah, the unvarnished truths I harbor!

At my age, one should be aware of one's limits, and this knowledge may make for happiness. When I was young, I thought of literature as a game of skillful and surprising variations; now that I have found my own voice, I feel that tinkering and tampering neither greatly improve nor greatly spoil my drafts. This, of course, is a sin against one of the main tendencies of letters in this century—the vanity of overwriting—which led a man like Joyce into publishing expensive fragments, showily entitled "Work in Progress." I suppose my best work is over. This gives me a certain quiet satisfaction and ease. And yet I do not feel I have written myself out. In a way, youthfulness seems closer to me today than when I was a young man. I no longer regard happiness as unattainable; once, long ago, I did. Now I know that it may occur at any moment but that it should never be sought after. As to failure or fame, they are quite irrelevant and I never bother about them. What I'm out for now is peace, the enjoyment of thinking and of friendship, and, though it may be too ambitious, a sense of loving and of being loved.



# Commentaries

*With Norman Thomas  
di Giovanni*



# Commentaries

## The Aleph

What eternity is to time, the Aleph is to space. In eternity, all time—past, present, and future—coexists simultaneously. In the Aleph, the sum total of the spatial universe is to be found in a tiny shining sphere barely over an inch across. When I wrote my story, I recalled Wells's dictum that in a tale of the fantastic, if the story is to be acceptable to the mind of the reader, only one fantastic element should be allowed at a time. For example, though Wells wrote a book about the invasion of Earth by Martians, and another book about a single invisible man in England, he was far too wise to attempt a novel about an invasion of our planet by an army of invisible men. Thinking of the Aleph as a thing of wonder, I placed it in as drab a setting as I could imagine—a small cellar in a nondescript house in an unfashionable quarter of Buenos Aires. In the world of the *Arabian Nights*, such things as magic lamps and rings are left lying about and nobody cares; in our skeptical world, we have to tidy up any alarming or out-of-the-way element. Thus, at the end of "The Aleph," the house has to be pulled down and the shining sphere destroyed with it.

Jorge Luis Borges

Once, in Madrid, a journalist asked me whether Buenos Aires actually possessed an Aleph. I nearly yielded to temptation and said yes, but a friend broke in and pointed out that were such an object to exist it would not only be the most famous thing in the world but would renew our whole conception of time, astronomy, mathematics, and space. "Ah," said the journalist, "so the entire thing is your own invention. I thought it was true because you gave the name of the street." I did not dare tell him that the naming of streets is not much of a feat.

My chief problem in writing the story lay in what Walt Whitman had very successfully achieved—the setting down of a limited catalog of endless things. The task, as is evident, is impossible, for such chaotic enumeration can only be simulated, and every apparently haphazard element has to be linked to its neighbor either by secret association or by contrast.

"The Aleph" has been praised by readers for its variety of elements: the fantastic, the satiric, the autobiographical, and the pathetic. I wonder whether our modern worship of complexity is not wrong, however. I wonder whether a short story should be so ambitious. Critics, going even further, have detected Beatrice Portinari in Beatriz Viterbo, Dante in Daneri, and the descent into hell in the descent into the cellar. I am, of course, duly grateful for these unlooked-for gifts.

Beatriz Viterbo really existed and I was very much and hopelessly in love with her. I wrote my story after her death. Carlos Argentino Daneri is a friend of mine, still living, who to this day has never suspected he is in the story. The verses are a parody of his verse. Daneri's speech on the other hand is not an exaggeration but a fair rendering. The Argentine Academy of Letters is the habitat of such specimens.

### Streetcorner Man

As already stated as far back as 1935 in the foreword to *Historia universal de la infamia*, this story was written under the triple influence of Stevenson, G. K. Chesterton, and Josef von Sternberg's unforgettable gangster films. My aim was to recapture the atmosphere of the outer slums of Buenos Aires some fifty years ago. At the same time, I wanted the story to be vividly and persistently visual, and to unfold with a kind of pattern

or symmetry. The characters appear on the scene like actors and make set speeches, deliberately unlike the unstudied and careless manner of everyday life. Francisco Real knocks twice at the same door: the first time to swagger in and challenge his man, the second time to die. Another example of this symmetry is the high window, out of which first goes the knife and later the body. All this is sheer choreography. The fact that this story was later made into a ballet, a movie, and a stage play corroborates this. But strangely enough, Argentine readers have always felt the story to be realistic. Some eager young men once asked me if I had actually witnessed the scene. I knew very well when I wrote the story that things could never have happened in that stagy and even operatic way, but I suppose I was indulging in a bit of wishful thinking. All Argentines are fond of an imaginary heroic and mythic past, especially as applied to hoodlums and pimps.

The voice used throughout the story is supposed to be oral, but the sentences are really those of a written work. They are unbroken and complete, while in real life Argentines rarely finish a sentence; the moment they feel the hearer has caught what they are aiming at, they just break off. The language of "Streetcorner Man" is partly a conventionalized slang, or dialect, of Buenos Aires called *lunfardo*. This language is primarily a device of the writers of *sainetes* and tango lyrics. It has, as to be expected, been canonized by several glossaries, by an Academy of Lunfardo, and by the Argentine Academy of Letters. As a matter of fact, *lunfardo* is barely used by the people it is credited to. Once taxed by fellow journalists for his utter ignorance of *lunfardo*, Roberto Arlt, the novelist of Buenos Aires lowlife, said, "I'm afraid I've spent all my life in the outer slums among common people and toughs and so never had time to study such a thing."

The "esquina rosada" of the Spanish title means pink, or rose-colored, corner. It refers to the painted walls of the Streetcorner *almacenes*, which a long time ago were both groceries and saloons, where men drank and played cards. These corners were often painted other vivid colors, such as green, purple, or blue, and stood out in an otherwise drab city. For me the *esquina rosada* symbolizes a particular kind of life. It has nothing whatever to do, as some adventurous translator has supposed, with the red lamp that hung outside Julia's dance hall. Such an establishment would be called a "Farol Colorado," which is close to the term

*Jorge Luis Borges*

“red-light district” In a way, the American “drugstore cowboy” would be something of a latter-day “hombre de la esquina rosada.”

### The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim

The idea that a man may be many men is, of course, a literary commonplace. This is usually understood in an ethical way (William Wilson, Jekyll and Hyde, and so on) or in terms of heredity (Hawthorne, Zola). In “The Approach to al-Mu'tasim” the concept undergoes certain modifications. There, I think of men being incessantly changed by each man they talk to and perhaps by each book they read. Thus I arrived at the tale of a kind of saint who spreads circles of diminishing splendor all around him, and is finally discovered by somebody who divines him through these many far-flung echoes of his influence. Since this plot is something of an allegory, it led me quite naturally to an Eastern setting. I do my best to be indebted to Kipling; India, as we are aware, stands for almost countless multitudes.

I knew only too well that this delicate work lay far beyond my powers. I therefore plotted the piece as a literary hoax, rather after the example of *Sartor Resartus*. Years after the story was published, I found out that Henry James had attempted a similar scheme in his novel *The Sacred Fount*, and had failed through sheer inability to keep his characters distinguishable.

As to Farid ud-Din Attar, I am afraid my knowledge of his famous poem can be reduced to FitzGerald's *A bird's-eye view of Farid-Uddin Attar's Bird-parliament*, to Browne's *Literary History of Persia*, and to a few handbooks on Sufism. Silvina Ocampo, by the way, composed a very fine poem based on Attar's book.

### The Circular Ruins

The ontological argument, the claim that Something or Someone could be its own cause—its *causa sui*—as the Schoolmen and Spinoza have it, has always seemed to me a mere juggling of words, a violence done to language. In my opinion, a speech implies a speaker and a dream, a dreamer; this, of course, leads to the concept of an endless series of speakers and dreamers, an infinite regress, and may be what lies at the root of my story.

Naturally, when I wrote it, I never thought of the story in these abstract terms. In a pair of sonnets on chess, written years afterward, I took up the same idea. The chessmen do not know they are guided by a player; the player does not know he is guided by a god; the god does not know what other gods are guiding him. Several years ago, during a one-day visit to Lubbock, in the Texas panhandle, a girl asked me whether in writing another poem, "The Golem," I had been consciously re-writing "The Circular Ruins." The answer was no, but I thanked her for revealing this unsuspected affinity to me. In fact, it amazed me to have traveled hundreds of miles to come upon this piece of news about myself out on the edge of the desert.

Readers have thought of "The Circular Ruins" as my best story. I can hardly share this view since I now think of fine writing, which this tale comes continually to the brink of, as a beginner's mistake. One might argue, however, that if it is going to be done at all, this kind of story needs this kind of writing. This also accounts for the dim Eastern setting and for the fact that the scheme is somehow timeless. The title itself suggests the Pythagorean and Eastern idea of cyclical time.

Lewis Carroll gave me my epigraph, which may have been the story's seed, but had I not often thought about life as a dream, that seed, known to millions of readers, might have fallen wide of the furrow.

When I wrote "The Circular Ruins" way back in 1940, the work carried me away as it had never done before and as it has never done since. The whole story is about a dream and, while writing it down, my everyday affairs—my job at the municipal library, going to the movies, dining with friends—were like a dream. For the space of that week, the one thing, real to me was the story.

## Death and the Compass

Since 1923 I had been doing my best, and never quite succeeding, to be the poet of Buenos Aires. When, in 1942, I undertook a nightmare version of the city in "Death and the Compass," my friends told me that at long last I had managed to evoke a sufficiently recognizable image of my home town. A few topographical elucidations may perhaps be in order. The *Hôtel du Nord* stands for the Plaza Hotel. The estuary is the *Río de la*

*Jorge Luis Borges*

Plata, called “the great lion-colored river” by Lugones, and, far more effectively, “the unmoving river” by Eduardo Mallea. The Rue de Toulon is the Paseo Colón, or rather, in terms of rowdiness, the old Paseo de Julio, today called Leandro Alem. Triste-le-Roy, a beautiful name invented by Amanda Molina Vedia, stands for the now demolished Hotel Las Delicias in Adrogué. (Amanda had painted a map of an imaginary island on the wall of her bedroom; on her map I discovered the name Triste-le-Roy.) In order to avoid any suspicion of realism, I used distorted names and placed the story in some cosmopolitan setting beyond any specific geography. The characters’ names further bear this out: Treviranus is German, Azevedo is Portuguese and Jewish, Yarmolinsky is a Polish Jew, Finnegan is Irish, Lönnrot is Swedish.

Patterns in time and space are to be found throughout the story. A triangle is suggested but the solution is really based on a rhombus. This rhombus is picked up in the Carnival costumes of the seeming kidnappers and in the windows of Triste-le-Roy as well as in the Fourfold Name of God—the Tetragrammaton. A thread of red also runs through the story’s pages. There is the sunset on the rose-colored wall and, in the same scene, the blood splashed on the dead man’s face. Red is found in the detective’s and in the gunman’s names.

The killer and the slain, whose minds work in the same way, may be the same man. Lönnrot is not an unbelievable fool walking into his own death trap but, in a symbolic way, a man committing suicide. This is hinted at by the similarity of their names. The end syllable of “Lönnrot” means “red” in German, and “Red Scharlach” is also translatable, in German, as “Red Scarlet.”

No apology is needed for repeated mention of the Kabbalah, for it provides the reader and the all-too-subtle detective with a false track, and the story is, as most of the names imply, a Jewish one. The Kabbalah also provides an additional sense of mystery.

As in the case of most stories, “Death and the Compass” should stand or fall by its general atmosphere, not by its plot, which I suppose is now quite old-fashioned and therefore uninteresting. I have embedded many memories of Buenos Aires and its southern outskirts in this wild story. Triste-le-Roy itself is a heightened and distorted version of the roomy and pleasant Hotel Las Delicias, which still survives in so many memories.

I have written a longish elegy, entitled "Adrogué," about the real hotel.

The straight-line labyrinth at the story's close comes out of Zeno the Eleatic.

### The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)

This tale is my Argentine version of the call of the wild. It is also a gloss on the gauchesco poem *Martín Fierro*, written in 1872 by José Hernández. In the poem, Sergeant Cruz is a former desperado who, as often happens to his kind, becomes the leader of a posse and is sent out to hunt down the deserter and murderer Martín Fierro. Cruz witnesses this outlaw's courage, goes over to his side, kills some of his own men, and returns to his old life. In this unexpected decision, I think of Cruz as being the most interesting and puzzling character in Hernández' book. For all I know, I may be the only reader to have wondered at the strange behavior of a policeman who goes over to the enemy. As *Martín Fierro* is now a classic, all things in it seem to be taken for granted.

I suppose I was moved to write the story out of my personal bewilderment. A quite detailed account of Sergeant Cruz's former life is given in Hernández; these circumstances had to be changed so that the reader familiar with the poem would not realize until the very end that he was being told something he already knew. The name Cruz itself I buried under the longer Tadeo Isidoro; I also worked in actual historical episodes unconnected with Hernández, such as Mesa's execution and Laprida's thirty white men pitted against two hundred Indians. A number of incidental details came out of my own family history. Suárez, who routs the gauchos at the opening of the story, was my great-grandfather; the ranch where Cruz once worked belonged to another relative, Francisco Xavier Acevedo. It was Suárez, by the way, who ordered the drums to drown out Manuel Mesa's last words. I have, however, left certain tracks and hints in my version in order to prevent the story from concluding on a mere trick. Reference to the poem is made as early as the second paragraph, and, at the end of the story, the obvious reason for my not describing the fight is that it is already very minutely set forth in *Martín Fierro*,

In the dramatic moment when Tadeo Isidoro Cruz finds out

Jorge Luis Borges

who he is and refuses to act against Martín Fierro, there may be something deeply and unconsciously Hispanic. I am reminded of that famous passage in *Don Quixote* when the knight urges the officers of the law to set the convicts free, saying to them, "Let each man tend to his own sins; there's a God in heaven who takes good care to punish the wicked and to reward the good, and an honest man should not go out of his way to be another man's jailer. . . ."

### The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths

Several elements or personal whims may be found in this un-presuming fable. Firstly, its Eastern setting, its deliberate aim to be a page—overlooked by Lane or Burton—out of the *Arabian Nights*. Secondly, that obvious symbol of perplexity, the maze, given in the story two forms—that of the traditional labyrinth, and, even more sinister, that of the unbounded desert. After some twenty-five years, I am beginning to suspect that the king of Babylon, with his lust for winding ways and devious complexity, stands for civilization, while the Arabian king stands for unrelieved barbarism. For all I know, the first may be a *porteño* and his antagonist, a gaucho.

### The Dead Man

A ten days' stay on the Uruguay-Brazil border in 1934 seems to have impressed me far more than all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, since in my imagination I keep going back to that one not very notable experience. (At the time, I thought of it as boring, though on one of those days I did see a man shot down before my very eyes.) A likely explanation for this is that everything I then witnessed—the stone fences, the longhorn cattle, the horses' silver trappings, the bearded gauchos, the hitching posts, the ostriches—was so primitive, and even barbarous, as to make it more a journey into the past than a journey through space.

"The Dead Man" should not be taken, as I sometimes fear it may be, as a deliberate allegory on human life, though, like poor Otálora, we are given all things only to have them

snatched from us at the moment we die. I prefer the story to be read as a kind of adventure.

Several rash enthusiasts have fallen into the mistake of thinking that “The Dead Man” might easily be worked into a film. They overlook the fact that Azevedo Bandeira, in a movie, would require psychological plausibility, while in a story he may be both accepted and yet not understandable. No real man, of course, would act the way he does.

The story has been criticized by some friends as being no more than a sketchy outline; my incapacity, or laziness, has led me to believe that such an outline is sufficient.

A few elements in the story may be worth pointing out. Here, as in other cases, I have begun with a long opening sentence. My feeling is that first sentences should be long in order to tear the reader out of his everyday life and firmly lodge him in an imaginary world. If an illustrious example be allowed me, Cervantes apparently felt the same way when he began his famous novel. As to the names, Otálora is an old family name of mine; so is Azevedo, but with a Spanish c instead of the Portuguese o. Bandeira was the name of Enrique Amorim’s head gardener, and the word *bandeira* (flag) also suggests the Portuguese *bandeirantes*, or conquistadors. During that 1934 trip, we actually spent one night at a ranch called El Suspiro. The present tense, used throughout the story, makes it perhaps more vivid. The gaucho laboriously picking out a *milonga* at the very end is my comment on the way country people really play the guitar, though I’m sure that in the film version he will be made to sound like Andrés Segovia.

## The Other Death

All theologians have denied God one miracle—that of undoing the past. The eleventh-century churchman Pier Damiano, however, grants Him that all but unimaginable power. This gave me the idea of writing a story about a scientist who, in some minor and unobtrusive way, attempts a similar feat. He hides two black balls in an upper drawer and three yellow ones in a lower drawer and, after years of hard work, finds that they have changed places. I was not long in perceiving that this tame miracle would never do, and that I would have to dream up something more dramatic. I thought of a common man coming

*Jorge Luis Borges*

to such a wonder, unawares, at the very moment he dies. Aparicio Saravia's revolution had caught my imagination from boyhood, and I saw a way of combining, in a setting of that backwoods civil war, the gaucho idea of courage as the one cardinal virtue and my metaphysical plan. And so my story, which was first titled "The Redemption," was born.

In the story, for literary purposes, the miracle takes place over a span of some forty-odd years. Pedro Damián's sin would be the more unbearable for him since, as the lone Argentine among Uruguayans, he would feel greater shame. Ultimately, Damián dies as he would have liked to die—struck down by a bullet in the chest while leading a charge. Had this actually happened, his fellow soldiers would hardly have remarked on such a detail. I introduced it into my story in order to make the whole atmosphere that much more visionary.

Emerson's verses are mentioned at the outset for two main reasons: first, because I simply admire their beauty; second, so as to send the reader—if he goes back to them—off the track, since they strongly express the idea that the past is unchangeable.

A favorite trick of mine is to work into my fiction the names of real friends. In "The Other Death" we find Ulrike von Kühlmann, Patricio Gannon, and Emir Rodríguez Monegal.

### Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth

Before "Ibn Hakkan," I had previously tried my hand at two detective stories, "The Garden of Branching Paths" (1941) and "Death and the Compass" (1942). The former won a second prize in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*; the latter was flatly rejected. My interest in detective fiction is rooted in my reading of Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Wrecker*, G. K. Chesterton, Eden Phillpotts, and, of course, Ellery Queen. In a world of shapeless psychological writing, I found in this particular form the classic virtues of a beginning, a middle, and an end—of something planned and executed. Bioy-Casares and I even went to the length of editing, in Buenos Aires, a successful collection of detective novels. The series was called "The Seventh Circle." The amount of reading required in the selection of these books rid me, in time, of my

boyish craze for the general run of such games and puzzles. "Ibn Hakkan" turned out to be my swan song.

My first two exercises of 1941 and 1942 were, I think, fair attempts at Chestertonian storytelling. When I wrote "Ibn Hakkan," however, it became a cross between a permissible detective story and a caricature of one. The more I worked on it, the more hopeless the plot seemed and the stronger my need to parody. What I ended up with I hope will be read for its humor. I certainly can't expect anyone to take seriously or to look for symbols in such pictorial whims as a black slave, a lion in Cornwall, a red-haired king, and a scarlet maze so large that on first sight its outer ramparts appear to be a straight blank wall.

The pseudo-Arabian parable preached by the timorous Mr. Allaby from his pulpit was written before "Ibn Hakkan." How it found its way into the story is now a mystery to me.

## The Man on the Threshold

I have previously written of this story:

The sudden and recurring glimpse into a deep set of corridors and patios of a tenement house around the corner from Paraná Street, in Buenos Aires, gave me the tale entitled "The Man on the Threshold"; I placed it in India so as to make its unlikeliness less obvious.

Looking back on this statement, I seem to recall a rather different starting point. One night in Salto, Uruguay, with Enrique Amorim, for lack of anything better to do, we went around to the local slaughterhouse to watch the cattle being killed. Squatting on the threshold of the long, low adobe building was a battered and almost lifeless old man. Amorim asked him, "Are they killing?" The old man appeared to come to a brief and evil awakening, and answered back in a fierce whisper, "Yes, they're killing! They're killing!"

Somehow the idea—somehow the image—of an apparently helpless old man holding a secret power impressed itself on my imagination. I wove this image into the present story and, several years later, used it again—almost word for word—near the close of another story, "The South." Of course, the same

*Jorge Luis Borges*

linking of seeming helplessness and real power is to be found in the *Arabian Nights* and in the idea of old and wizened witches.

Students of Kipling will note that my Indian background is, in part, cribbed from him. Mention of Nikal Seyn comes from *Kim*. The madman counting on his fingers and mocking at the trees comes from the poem "Evarra and His Gods." The young man crowned with flowers was suggested, I think, by *From Sea to Sea*.

I'm sorry to say that "The Man on the Threshold" is also a bit of a trick story and a game with time. What is told as having happened years and years earlier is actually taking place at that moment. The teller, of course, as he patiently spins his yam, is really hindering the officer from breaking in and stopping the trial and execution.

## The Challenge

I was lecturing during the dictatorship out in the western part of the Province of Buenos Aires, in the city of Chivilcoy, when I was told the story of Wenceslao Suárez, nicknamed the Manco, or One-Handed. After I published "The Challenge," I received two letters bearing on the subject. (These letters are printed at the back of *Evaristo Carriego*.) One recounts Wenceslao's story with certain variations in the place names and in the behavior of his foe. The other tells of a similar incident in Entre Ríos, where the opponents—an Argentine and an Uruguayan—end their fight exchanging knives as a token of friendship. Both letters corroborate rather than debunk the tradition.

I found in this story a key to much of what I had already heard, thought about, and invented in stories of my own about such disinterested duels. I think the reader will find in "The Challenge" a full explanation of my feeling for the subject of knives, knife fighters, courage, and so on, as it has concerned me over the past forty or forty-five years.

Of course, Wenceslao's story may be found wanting in likelihood, but, as Boileau pointed out, "Reality stands in no need of being true to life."

This piece, like many others of mine, is halfway between a real short story and an essay.

## The Captive

This tale, of course, is true. Frontier life has always attracted me, no doubt because some hundred years ago my grandparents lived among civilization's outposts out on the edge of the Province of Buenos Aires. Colonel Borges, my grandfather, there held the command of the Northern and Western Frontier until he met his death in 1874. Additionally, I have always been interested in the strangeness of memory and in the fact that the past is somehow rescued, or saved for us, by it. De Quincey thought of the human brain as a palimpsest, wherein all our yesterdays, down to the minutest detail, survive; for their release, these yesterdays only await the proper, unsuspected stimulus. Memory, not the captive, may very well be the real subject of the story.

## Borges and Myself

This all-too-famous sketch is my personal rendering of the old Jekyll-and-Hyde theme, save that in their case the opposition is between good and evil and in my version the opposites are the spectator and the spectacle. During extremes of happiness or unhappiness, I am apt to feel—in the space of a single, fleeting moment—that what I am undergoing is happening, independent of me, to somebody else. According to one of the Indian schools of philosophy, the ego is merely an onlooker who has identified himself with the man he is continually looking at. The fact that when I write I am stressing certain peculiarities of mine and omitting others has led me to think of Borges as a creature of fancy. This suspicion is strengthened by the existence of so many articles and studies that deal with him. A preoccupation with identity and sometimes its discord, duality, runs through much of my work—for example, in “The Theologians” and in “Tadeo Isidoro Cruz” and in the very title of my later poetry, *The Self and the Other*.

Jorge Luis Borges

### The Maker

This story may be thought of as autobiographical—Homer as an exaltation of myself, his blindness as my blindness, his acceptance of darkness as my acceptance. On the other hand, the departures from autobiography are striking. Blindness came to me as a slow twilight, not as a revelation; no Iliads and no Odysseys ever awaited me. When I first conceived this piece, I hesitated between Homer and Milton. Milton, however, is almost a contemporary, and also—as Dr. Johnson felt—a not very lovable figure. But Homer, as old as Western civilization itself, is a myth and so may quite easily be made into another myth. Eleven years after writing “The Maker,” I seem to have recast my fable—without being aware of it—into a more narrowly autobiographical poem called “In Praise of Darkness.” As for Milton, I have paid due tribute to him in a sonnet entitled “A Rose and Milton.”

An early translator was worried that there was no strict English equivalent for the words “El hacedor,” my Spanish title. I could only inform him that “*hacedor*” was my own translation of the English “maker,” as used by Dunbar in his “Lament.”

Ever since 1934, the writing of short prose pieces—fables, parables, brief narratives—has given me a certain mysterious satisfaction. I think of such pages as these as I think of coins—small material objects, hard and bright, tokens of something else.

### The Intruder

In the fall of 1965, the Buenos Aires bibliophile Gustavo Fillol Day asked me for a short story to be published by him in one of those fine and secret editions meant for the happy few. Around that time I had been rereading Kipling’s *Plain Tales from the Hills*, and I told Fillol that I had a story in mind. The brevity and straightforwardness of the young Kipling tempted me, since I had always written very involved and many-faceted narratives. A few months later I was ready to get down to work,

and at the beginning of 1966 I dictated “The Intruder” to my mother.

Without my suspecting it, the hint for this story—perhaps the best I have ever written—came out of a chance conversation with my friend don Nicolás Paredes sometime back in the late twenties. Commenting on the decadence of tango lyrics, which even then went in for “loud self-pity” among sentimental *compadritos* betrayed by their wenches, Paredes remarked dryly, “Any man who thinks five minutes straight about a woman is no man—he’s a queer.” Love among such people was obviously ruled out; I knew that their real passion would be friendship. Out of this rather abstract set of ideas I evolved my story. I placed it in an almost nameless town to the south of Buenos Aires more than seventy years ago so that nobody could dispute the details. Really there are only two characters—the two brothers. Of them, we are allowed to hear only what the elder brother says; it is he who takes all the decisions, even the last one. I made them brothers for the sake of likelihood and, of course, to avoid unsavory implications.

I was stuck at the end of the story, unsure of the words Cristián would say. My mother, who from the outset thoroughly disliked the tale, at that point gave me the words I needed without a moment’s hesitation.

“The Intruder” was, by the way, the first of my new ventures into straightforward storytelling. From this beginning I went on to write many others, ultimately collecting them under the title *El informe de Brodie* (Doctor Brodie’s Report).

## The Immortals

Blake wrote that were our senses closed—were we made blind, deaf, dumb, and so forth—we should see all things as they are: endless. “The Immortals” came out of that strange idea and also out of Rupert Brooke’s derivative line, “And see, no longer blinded by our eyes.” We acknowledge this first debt by calling one of the characters don Guillermo Blake.

Thrice over I attempted writing the story. First with Marta Mosquera Eastman and later with Alicia Jurado. They may still have copies of those early drafts. The story was to have been called “The Chosen One.” For some reason or other, each of these schemes was dropped. Then, in 1966, I took the story up

*Jorge Luis Borges*

again with Bioy-Casares. By that time, Bioy and I had invented a new way of telling gruesome and uncanny tales. It lay in understating the grimness and essential horror while playing up certain humorous aspects—a kind of graft between Alfred Hitchcock and the Marx Brothers. This not only made for more amusing and less pretentious writing, but at the same time underlined the horror. We developed the technique in our comic detective saga, *Six Problems for don Isidro Parodi*, and, more openly, in the first of the *Two Memorable Fantasies*, “The Witness.” In fact, some of the personages in “The Immortals” are taken from the *Six Problems*, and in the present story are fated to a terrible eternity. Another detail may be pointed out, the circumstance that all the characters—including the very Frankenstein of the story, the maker of monsters Dr. Narbondo—are also blatant fools and indulge in a silly jargon all their own.

The story deals in its own way with the problem of immortality. Since our only proof of personal death is statistical, and inasmuch as a new generation of deathless men may be already on its way, I have for years lived in fear of never dying. Such an idea as immortality would, of course, be unbearable. In “The Immortals” we are face to face with people who are only immortal and nothing else, and the prospect, I trust, is appalling. I think that this joint story (I can say this without undue vanity because I wrote it with someone else) is among my very best and that, despite its having been overlooked by Argentine critics, it may yet come into its own.

### The Meeting

I seem to be telling the same story over and over again. Obviously, “The Meeting” is at heart the identical tale I have told in another new story of mine, “Juan Muraña.” It is also linked to a fairly recent sonnet called “Allusion to a Shadow of the Nineties,” which is about Muraña’s knife, and to a short prose poem, “The Dagger,” written I think in the late forties. Perhaps not so obvious is the fact that when I wrote these things I was quite unaware of repeating myself or of attempting variations. Precisely what takes over my mind in these cases, I do not know.

Spinoza’s doctrine of things having a life of their own, or

of wanting to persist in their own being, has struck me as particularly true of those things, such as weapons, meant for quite specific ends. A dagger, for example, has to fulfill a destiny. In the story, the two knives have a will of their own, ruling the hapless young men who are supposed to be wielding them. Duncan and Uriarte are gentlemen, but the knives turn them into gauchos. In order to make this sufficiently clear, I have given Uriarte, who is a coward, the victory.

Back of all this lies my personal—or perhaps Argentine—obsession with knives. In the United States or in England, where men tend to square off with their fists, people think of fighting as something to be done bare-handed. In Western or gangster films, we often see men throw down their arms and resort to their fists. To me this seems highly unnatural and even unconvincing, since there is no earthly reason for a cowboy or a gangster also to be something of a boxer. Among *compadritos*, if a man struck another he did it with the back of his hand, as a mere provocation, and then the real fighting began. To me there is real intimacy in the knife; in fact, in one of my poems, the last line runs: “and across my throat the intimate knife.” Firearms, of course, stand for marksmanship rather than courage. Fistfighting seems both harmless and undignified to an Argentine, while knife dueling has what Dr. Johnson said of the lives of sailors and seamen—“the dignity of danger.”

A few minor autobiographical elements have found their way into “The Meeting.” Álvaro Melián Lafinur was a childhood idol of mine and really was my cousin. He wore a dagger and a cloak and used to play the guitar, singing the Uruguayan ballads of Elias Regules which I mention, Álvaro was a quite bad poet and, as to be expected, an academician. It is in this latter role that I introduced him into “The Aleph.”

### Pedro Salvadores

I think the tale of Pedro Salvadores is summed up fully enough in its last paragraph. I might therefore take this opportunity to say something about the way it was written. At first, I played with the idea of attempting historical research, but I soon realized that for aesthetic purposes oral tradition is truer than mere facts. (The early version of Chevy Chase seems clumsier than

*Jorge Luis Borges*

the later.) I perhaps first heard this story from my grandfather when I was five or six. I set it down, in part, as my mother recalled it. I recently learned that the nineteenth-century novelist Eduardo Gutiérrez had already recorded the story—I think in a book called *El puñal del tirano*—and that the man's real name was José María Salvadores. As to Unitarians and Federalists, these words should not be taken at face value. The Unitarians, as Sarmiento and Echeverría well knew, represented civilization, while the Federalists stood for the barbarism of caudillo clans. Honorably, my own forebears on both sides were Unitarians.

Our own time has furnished us with many destinies like that of Pedro Salvadores; Anne Frank's is perhaps the best known of them.

### Rosendo's Tale

This story is, obviously, a sequel and an antidote to "Streetcorner Man." The earlier story was mistakenly read as realistic; the present one is a deliberate surmise as to how events might actually have happened on the night Francisco Real was murdered. When I wrote "Streetcorner Man," I was—as I pointed out at the time—fully aware of its stony unreality. As the years went by, however, and that story became embarrassingly popular, I wanted people to understand that I was not quite the fool I was being admired for.

I had been rereading my Browning and knew from *The Ring and the Book* that a story could be told from different points of view. Rosendo Juárez, the seeming coward of the first version, might perhaps be allowed to have his own say. So, instead of the braggart of "Streetcorner Man," we get a Shavian character who sees through the romantic nonsense and childish vanity of dueling, and finally attains manhood and sanity. In the first telling, Francisco Real is mortally wounded in the chest; sadly and realistically enough, he was really stabbed in the back while fornicating with La Lujanera in a ditch.

In the days when the story took place, toughs and killers were aided and abetted by the authorities, since most of them were official bodyguards of leading political figures. They were also used during elections to intimidate voters, knowing very well that because of police support they could act with impunity. Seldom outlaws, they were simply strong-arm men. I

*Commentaries*

recall an anecdote told me by a priest in Adrogué. He walked up to the polling booth during one election and was politely and firmly informed by the local Rosendo Juárez, “Father, you have already cast your vote.”

Incidentally, the reference to the young man dressed in black, who wrote Paredes’ letter for him, is to the poet Evaristo Carriego.



# Bibliographical Note

The original titles and first magazine or newspaper appearances of the stories in this volume are as follows (place of publication, throughout, unless otherwise indicated, is Buenos Aires):

STREETCORNER MAN: "Hombre de la esquina rosada" (entitled "Hombres de las orillas" and signed "F. Bustos"), *Crítica* (September 16, 1933).

THE CIRCULAR RUINS: "Las ruinas circulares," *Sur* (December 1940).

DEATH AND THE COMPASS: "La muerte y la brújula," *Sur* (May 1942).

THE LIFE OF TADEO ISIDORO CRUZ (1829-1874): "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)," *Sur* (December 1944).

THE ALEPH: "El Aleph," *Sur* (September 1945).

THE TWO KINGS AND THEIR TWO LABYRINTHS: "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos" (entitled "Historia de los dos reyes y de los dos laberintos" and attributed, as an excerpt from *The Land of Midian Revisited* (1879), to R. F. Burton), *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* (May 1946).

THE DEAD MAN: "El muerto," *Sur* (November 1946).

THE OTHER DEATH: "La otra muerte" (entitled "La redención"), *La Nación* (January 9, 1949).

IBN HAKKAN AL-BOKHARI, DEAD IN HIS LABYRINTH: "Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su Laberinto," *Sur* (August 1951).

THE MAN ON THE THRESHOLD: "El hombre en el umbral," *La Nación* (April 20, 1952).

Jorge Luis Borges

THE CHALLENGE: "El desafío," *La Nación* (December 28, 1952).

THE CAPTIVE: "El cautivo," *La Biblioteca* (January-February-March 1957).

BORGES AND MYSELF: "Borges y yo," *La Biblioteca* (January-February-March 1957).

THE MAKER: "El Hacedor," *La Biblioteca* ([February] 1958).

THE MEETING: "El encuentro," *La Prensa* (October 5, 1969).

PEDRO SALVADORES: "Pedro Salvadores" [in English translation], *The New York Review of Books* (New York: August 21, 1969).

ROSENDO'S TALE: "Historia de Rosendo Juárez," *La Nación* (November 9, 1969).

"El acercamiento a Almotásim" (THE APPROACH TO AL-MU'TASIM) did not appear in a magazine before its publication in *Historia de la eternidad* (Viau y Zona, 1936); "Los inmortales" (THE IMMORTALS) did not appear before it was published in *Crónicas de Bustos Domecq* (Losada, 1967). The first appearance of "La intrusa" (THE INTRUDER) was in an edition of fifty-two copies, printed by the Buenos Aires bibliophile Gustavo Fillol Day in April 1966 for private distribution among his and the author's friends; it also appeared, in the same month, in the sixth impression of the third edition of *El Aleph* (Emecé, 1966).

"Hombre de la esquina rosada" was first collected in *Historia universal de la infamia* (Tor, 1935). "Las ruinas circulares" was first reprinted in *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (Sur, 1942); "La muerte y la brújula" in *Ficciones* (Sur, 1944); "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)," "El Aleph," "El muerto," and "La otra muerte" in the first edition of *El Aleph* (Losada, 1949); "Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto," "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos," and "El hombre en el umbral" in the second edition of *El Aleph* (Losada, 1952). "El desafío" (entitled "El culto del coraje") was first collected in the second edition of *Evaristo Carriego* (Emecé, 1955), where it appeared in a somewhat different form as part of the chapter "Historia del tango." "El cautivo," "Borges y yo," and "El hacedor" were collected in *El hacedor* (Emecé, 1960); "Pedro Salvadores" in *Elogio de la sombra* (Emecé, 1969); "El encuentro" and "Historia de Rosendo Juárez" in *El informe de Brodie* (Emecé, 1970).

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JORGE LUIS BORGES was born on August 24, 1899, in Buenos Aires. In 1955, with the overthrow of Perón, he was named Director of the Argentine National Library, and in the same year became professor of English and American literatures at the University of Buenos Aires. In 1961, he shared the International Publishers' Prize with Samuel Beckett. He has made three trips to the United States—the latest, in 1969, to attend a conference devoted to his writings at the University of Oklahoma.

### ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

NORMAN THOMAS DI GIOVANNI was born in Newton, Massachusetts, in 1933, and was graduated from Antioch College in 1955. He met Borges in 1967 while the latter was at Harvard. In 1968, on Borges' invitation, he went to live in Buenos Aires, where he works with the author in daily sessions. Together they are producing ten of Borges' books in English versions. The first of these, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, was published in 1969.