

Jorge Luis Borges

Twenty Poems

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A Patio

At evening
they grow weary, the patio's two or three colours.
Tonight, the moon, bright circle,
fails to dominate space.
Patio, channel of sky.
The patio is the slope
down which sky flows into the house.
Serene,
eternity waits at the crossroad of stars.
It's pleasant to live in the friendly dark
of entrance-way, arbour, and cistern.

Simplicity

It opens, the gate to the garden
with the docility of a page
that frequent devotion questions
and inside, my gaze
has no need to fix on objects
that already exist, exact, in memory.
I know the customs and souls
and that dialect of allusions
that every human gathering goes weaving.
I've no need to speak
nor claim false privilege;
they know me well who surround me here,
know well my afflictions and weakness.
This is to reach the highest thing,
that Heaven perhaps will grant us:
not admiration or victory
but simply to be accepted
as part of an undeniable Reality,
like stones and trees.

Limits

Of these streets that deepen the sunset,
There must be one (but which) that I've walked
Already one last time, indifferently
And without knowing it, submitting

To One who sets up omnipotent laws
And a secret and a rigid measure
For the shadows, the dreams, and forms
That work the warp and weft of this life.

If all things have a limit and a value
A last time nothing more and oblivion
Who can say to whom in this house
Unknowingly, we have said goodbye?

Already through the grey glass night ebbs
And among the stack of books that throws
A broken shadow on the unlit table,
There must be one I will never read.

In the South there's more than one worn gate
With its masonry urns and prickly pear
Where my entrance is forbidden
As it were within a lithograph.

Forever there's a door you have closed,
And a mirror that waits for you in vain;
The crossroad seems wide open to you
And there a four-faced Janus watches.

There is, amongst your memories, one
That has now been lost irreparably;
You'll not be seen to visit that well
Under white sun or yellow moon.

Your voice cannot recapture what the Persian
Sang in his tongue of birds and roses,
When at sunset, as the light disperses,
You long to speak imperishable things.

And the incessant Rhone and the lake,
All that yesterday on which today I lean?
They will be as lost as that Carthage
The Romans erased with fire and salt.

At dawn I seem to hear a turbulent
Murmur of multitudes who slip away;
All who have loved me and forgotten;
Space, time and Borges now leaving me.

A Rose and Milton

From the generations of roses
That are lost in the depths of time
I want one saved from oblivion,
One spotless rose, of all things
That ever were. Fate permits me
The gift of choosing for once
That silent flower, the last rose
That Milton held before him,
Unseen. O vermilion, or yellow
Or white rose of a ruined garden,
Your past still magically remains
Forever shines in these verses,
Gold, blood, ivory or shadow
As if in his hands, invisible rose.

Readers

Of that knight with the sallow, dry
Complexion and heroic bent, they guess
That, always on the verge of adventure,
He never sallied from his library.
The precise chronicle of his urges
And its tragic-comical reverses
Was dreamed by him, not by Cervantes,
It's no more than a chronicle of dream.
Such my fate too. I know there's something
Immortal and essential that I've buried
Somewhere in that library of the past
In which I read the history of the knight.
The slow leaves recall a child who gravely
Dreams vague things he cannot understand.

A Milonga for Manuel Flores

Manuel Flores is going to die,
That's 'on the money';
Dying is a habit
That's well-known to many.

Even so it grieves me
To say adiós to being,
That thing so familiar,
So sweet and enduring.

At dawn I gaze at my hands,
In my hands the veins there;
I gaze but don't understand
It's as if they were strangers.

Tomorrow four bullets will come
And oblivion with those four;
Thus said the wise Merlin:
To die is to have been born.

So many things on the road
These two eyes have seen!
When Christ has judged me
Who knows what they'll see.

Manuel Flores is going to die,
That's 'on the money';
Dying is a habit
That's well-known to many.

New England 1967

The forms in my dreams have changed;
now there are red houses side by side
and the delicate bronze of the leaves
and chaste winter and pious wood.
As on the seventh day, the world
is good. In the twilight there persists
what's almost non-existent, bold, sad,
an ancient murmur of Bibles, war.
Soon (they say) the first snow will fall
America waits for me on every street,
but I feel in the decline of evening
today so long, and yesterday so brief.
Buenos Aires, I go journeying
your streets, without time or reason.

The Suicide

Not a star will remain in the night.
The night itself will not remain.
I will die and with me the sum
Of the intolerable universe.
I'll erase the pyramids, the coins,
The continents and all the faces.
I'll erase the accumulated past.
I'll make dust of history, dust of dust.
Now I gaze at the last sunset.
I am listening to the last bird.
I bequeath nothingness to no-one.

Things

My walking-stick, small change, key-ring,
The docile lock and the belated
Notes my few days left will grant
No time to read, the cards, the table,
A book, in its pages, that pressed
Violet, the leavings of an afternoon
Doubtless unforgettable, forgotten,
The reddened mirror facing to the west
Where burns illusory dawn. Many things,
Files, sills, atlases, wine-glasses, nails,
Which serve us, like unspeaking slaves,
So blind and so mysteriously secret!
They'll long outlast our oblivion;
And never know that we are gone.

To the Nightingale

On what secret night in England
Or by the incalculable constant Rhine,
Lost among all the nights of my nights,
Carried to my unknowing ear
Your voice, burdened with mythology,
Nightingale of Virgil, of the Persians?
Perhaps I never heard you, yet my life
I bound to your life, inseparably.
A wandering spirit is your symbol
In a book of enigmas. El Marino
Named you the siren of the woods
And you sing through Juliet's night
And in the intricate Latin pages
And from the pine-trees of that other,
Nightingale of Germany and Judea,
Heine, mocking, burning, mourning.
Keats heard you for all, everywhere.
There's not one of the bright names
The people of the earth have given you
That does not yearn to match your music,
Nightingale of shadows. The Muslim
Dreamed you drunk with ecstasy
His breast trans-pierced by the thorn
Of the sung rose that you redden
With your last blood. Assiduously
I plot these lines in twilight emptiness,
Nightingale of the shores and seas,
Who in exaltation, memory and fable
Burn with love and die melodiously.

The Moon

There is such solitude in that gold.
The moon of these nights is not the moon
The first Adam saw. Long centuries
Of human vigil have filled her with
An old lament. See. She is your mirror.

Remorse

I have committed the worst of sins
One can commit. I have not been
Happy. Let the glaciers of oblivion
Take and engulf me, mercilessly.
My parents bore me for the risky
And the beautiful game of life,
For earth, water, air and fire.
I failed them, I was not happy.
Their youthful hope for me unfulfilled.
I applied my mind to the symmetric
Arguments of art, its web of trivia.
They willed me bravery. I was not brave.
It never leaves me. Always at my side,
That shadow of a melancholy man.

Alhambra

Welcome, the water's voice
To one whom black sand overwhelmed,
Welcome, to the curved hand
The smooth column of the marble,
Welcome, slender labyrinths of water
Between the lemon trees,
Welcome the melodious *zéjel*,
Welcome is love, welcome the prayer
Offered to a God who is One,
Welcome the jasmine.

Vain the scimitar
Against the long lances of the host,
Vain to be the best.
Good to know, foreknow, grieving king,
That your courtesies are farewells,
That the key will be denied you,
The infidels' cross eclipse the moon,
The afternoon you gaze on prove your last.

Granada, 1976.

Things That Might Have Been

I think of things that weren't, but might have been.
The treatise on Saxon myths Bede never wrote.
The inconceivable work Dante might have had a glimpse of,
As soon as he'd corrected the Comedy's last verse.
History without the afternoons of the Cross and the hemlock.
History without the face of Helen.
Man without the eyes that gave us the moon.
On Gettysburg's three days, victory for the South.
The love we never shared.
The wide empire the Vikings chose not to found.
The world without the wheel or the rose.
The view John Donne held of Shakespeare.
The other horn of the Unicorn.
The fabled Irish bird that lights on two trees at once.
The child I never had.

Inferno V:129

They let fall the book, when they see
that they are the ones in the book.
(They will be in another, greater,
but what can that matter to them.)
Now they are Paolo, Francesca,
not two friends who are sharing
the savour of a fable.
They gaze with incredulous wonder.
Their hands do not touch.
They've discovered the sole treasure;
They have found one another.
They betray no Malatesta,
since betrayal requires a third
and they are the only two on earth.
They are Paolo and Francesca
and the queen and her lover too
and all the lovers who've been
since Adam went with Eve
in the Paradise garden.
A book, a dream reveals
that they are forms in a dream once
dreamt in Brittany.
Another book will ensure that men,
dreams also, dream of them.

The Just

A man who, as Voltaire wished, cultivates his garden.
He who is grateful that music exists on earth.
He who discovers an etymology with pleasure.
A pair in a Southern café, enjoying a silent game of chess.
The potter meditating on colour and form.
The typographer who set this, though perhaps not pleased.
A man and a woman reading the last triplets of a certain canto.
He who is stroking a sleeping creature.
He who justifies, or seeks to, a wrong done him.
He who is grateful for Stevenson's existence.
He who prefers the others to be right.
These people, without knowing, are saving the world.

Shinto

When misfortune confounds us
in an instant we are saved
by the humblest actions
of memory or attention:
the taste of fruit, the taste of water,
that face returned to us in dream,
the first jasmine flowers of November,
the infinite yearning of the compass,
a book we thought forever lost,
the pulsing of a hexameter,
the little key that opens a house,
the smell of sandalwood or library,
the ancient name of a street,
the colourations of a map,
an unforeseen etymology,
the smoothness of a filed fingernail,
the date that we were searching for,
counting the twelve dark bell-strokes,
a sudden physical pain.

Eight million the deities of Shinto
who travel the earth, secretly.
Those modest divinities touch us,
touch us, and pass on by.

The Sum

The silent friendliness of the moon
(misquoting Virgil) accompanies you
since that one night or evening lost
in time now, on which your restless
eyes first deciphered her forever
in a garden or patio turned to dust.
Forever? I know someone, someday
will be able to tell you truthfully:
'You'll never see the bright moon again,
You've now achieved the unalterable
sum of moments granted you by fate.
Useless to open every window
in the world. Too late. You'll not find her.'
We live discovering and forgetting
that sweet familiarity of the night.
Take a long look. It might be the last.

Elegy for a Park

The labyrinth is lost. Lost too
all those lines of eucalyptus,
the summer awnings and the vigil
of the incessant mirror, repeating
the expression of every human face,
everything fleeting. The stopped
clock, the tangled honeysuckle,
the arbour, the frivolous statues,
the other side of evening, the trills,
the mirador and the idle fountain
are things of the past. Of the past?
If there's no beginning, no ending,
and if what awaits us is an endless
sum of white days and black nights,
we are already the past we become.
We are time, the indivisible river,
are Uxmal, Carthage and the ruined
walls of the Romans and the lost
park that these lines commemorate.

Borges and I

The other one, Borges, is the one to whom things happen. I wander through Buenos Aires, and pause, perhaps mechanically nowadays, to gaze at an entrance archway and its metal gate; I hear about Borges via the mail, and read his name on a list of professors or in some biographical dictionary. I enjoy hourglasses, maps, eighteenth century typography, etymology, the savour of coffee and Stevenson's prose: the other shares my preferences but in a vain way that transforms them to an actor's props. It would be an exaggeration to say that our relationship is hostile; I live, I keep on living, so that Borges can weave his literature, and that literature justifies me. It's no pain to confess that certain of his pages are valid, but those pages can't save me, perhaps because good writing belongs to no one, not even the other, but only to language and tradition. For the rest, I am destined to vanish, definitively, and only some aspect of me can survive in the other. Little by little, I will yield all to him, even though his perverse habit of falsifying and exaggerating is clear to me. Spinoza understood that all things want to go on being themselves; the stone eternally wishes to be stone, and the tiger a tiger. I am forced to survive as Borges, not myself (if I am a self), yet I recognise myself less in his books than in many others, less too than in the studious strumming of a guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him, and passed from suburban mythologies to games of time and infinity, but now those are Borges' games and I will have to think of something new. Thus my life is a flight and I will lose all and all will belong to oblivion, or to that other.

I do not know which of us is writing this page.

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