

Jorge Luis Borges

Further Selected Poems

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Ars Poetica

Gaze at the river, formed of time and water
And remember: that time's another river;
Knowing that we vanish like the river,
And that the faces flow by like water.

Feel that waking is to another dream,
That dreams it's awake, and that death,
Which our flesh fears, is that death
Every night that we call dreaming.

Find in the day, or the year, a symbol,
Of Humanity's days, and its years,
And convert the assault of the years
To music, a murmur and a symbol.

Find in death a dream; in the sunset,
A golden sadness; such is poetry,
Impoverished, immortal. Poetry
Returns like the dawn and the sunset.

Sometimes, in the afternoons, a face
Gazes from the depths of a mirror.
Art should resemble that mirror,
Revealing to us our own true face.

They say that Ulysses, tired of wonders,
Cried with love, casting eyes on Ithaca,
The green and humble. Art's that Ithaca
Of an eternal green, and not of wonders.

It's also like that interminable river,
That passes, and yet remains the same,
Of a changing Heraclitus who's the same
And yet other, like the interminable river.

To a Minor Poet of the Anthology

Where is the memory, now, of those days
That were yours on Earth, that wove together
Pain and joy, and were the universe to you?

The endless river of the years consumed them,
And you are just a name now in an index.

The gods gave undying glory to others,
Exergues, inscriptions, exact historians.
Of you, we only know, obscure friend,
That you heard a nightingale, one afternoon.

Among the shadowy asphodels, your vain shade
Will think the gods have proved over-greedy,

Yet our days are a web of trivial miseries,
And what could be better than those ashes
Of which, in the end, oblivion is made?

The gods cast upon others the inexorable light
Of glory, that views the depths and sees the flaws;
Of glory, that ever withers the rose it venerates.
They were more merciful with you, my brother.

In the ecstasy of a sunset that knows no night,
You hear the voice of Theocritus' nightingale.

The Sand-Glass

It's fine to be measured by the sharp shadow
Cast by a column in the summer-sun.
Or by the water from that flowing river
In which Heraclitus viewed our madness,

Time; since, to time and fate, the two
Both seem alike, the imponderable, sombre
Diurnal shadow, the irrevocable course
Of the water that progresses on its way.

It's fine; though in the desert, Time

Finds another substance, soft and heavy,
That almost seems to have been conceived
To mark the time that the dead possess.

So arose the allegorical instrument
Of the dictionaries, the engravings;
That timepiece the antiquarian greys
Will soon relegate, to the ashen world

Of the extraneous bishop, the undefended
Spade, the blurred and blurring telescope,
That of the opium-bitten sandalwood,
Of the dust, of the worthless accidental.

Who has not lingered before the severe
And gloomy instrument, that is grasped
In the right hand of Death, as he goes by,
Whose outline Durer skilfully repeated?

Through the open apex of the inverted cone
The steady flow of sand's already sifting,
The slow golden stream that falls and fills
The concave crystal of its universe.

There's a certain delight in observing
The arcane decline and slide of sand
As it revolves, on the point of falling,
With a hastiness that is wholly human.

The sand of the seasons is the same,
And infinite is the history of sand;
Thus, the abyss of invulnerable eternity
That lies beneath your pleasure or pain.

The fall of the sand never ceases.
I bleed; not the crystalline glass.
The rite of decantation of the sand
Is endless, and with the sand life ebbs.

In the minutes measured by the sand

I believe I am feeling Cosmic Time,
History holding memory in its mirrors,
Or that Lethe has magically dissolved

The pillar of smoke and that of fire,
Carthage and Rome locked in war,
Simon Magus, the seven feet of land
The Saxon king offered that of Norway.

This subtle, unwearied, endless thread
Brings down everything, and erases.
I've no means to save myself, a chance
Thing of time, of dissolving matter.

The Rain

Suddenly the afternoon has cleared,
Because, already, a gentler rain falls.
Falls or fell. Rain is a thing
That certainly happens in the past.

Whoever hears it fall has recovered
A time when fortunate chance
Revealed a flower called a rose,
And the curious colour of red.

This rain that blinds the windows
Will, in the lost suburbs, nurture
The black grapes on a certain vine

In a courtyard that no longer exists.
It brings me, tardily, the longed-for voice,
Of my father who returns, and is not dead.

Things (2)

The fallen volume that the rest
Hide, in the depths of the shelf,
One that the days and the nights
Of silent dust now slowly cover.

The Phoenician anchor, English waters
Hold in their soft and blind abyss.
The mirror reflecting nobody,
Now the house remains empty.
One's fragments left here and there,
Through the realm of time and space.
The illegible dust that was Shakespeare.
The modulations of the clouds,
The momentary symmetrical rose
That chance once made of the hidden
Crystals of the child's kaleidoscope.
The oars of Argos, the first vessel.
The footprints in sand the drowsy
Wave fatally blurs on the beach.
Turner's colours when the lights
Are extinguished in the long gallery,
And not a footstep sounds in the night.
The reverse of the detailed Mappa Mundi.
A slight cobweb in the Great Pyramid.
The blind stone, and the curious hand.
The dream that I had before dawn
That vanished in the clear light of day.
The beginning and end of the Epic
Of Finnsburh, today just a few
Iron verses not lost to the ages.
The letter in reverse on blotting-paper,
The turtle at the bottom of the cistern.
That which can't be, the other horn
Of the unicorn, the Being that's Three in One.
A triangular disc. The elusive moment
In which Zeno of Elea's arrow,
Motionless in air, finds the target.
A flower between the pages of Bécquer.
The pendulum that Time has stopped.
The steel that pierced Odin, on the tree.
The text of the pages as yet uncut.
The echo of the hooves in the charge
At Junín, which, in some eternal way,
Never ceased, and is part of the drama.
Sarmiento's shadow on the pavement,

The voice the shepherd heard on the mountain.
The bones whitening in the desert.
The bullet that killed Francisco Borges,
The other side of the tapestry, the things
No one sees but Berkely's God.

Note: The Finnsburh Fragment is the surviving part of an Old English epic poem. The Arrow is the third of Zeno of Elea's paradoxes which concerns motion. Bécquer was Gustavo Bécquer (1836-1870) the noted Spanish Romantic poet. Domingo Sarmiento (1811-1888), writer and statesman was the second president of Argentina. Colonel Francisco Borges (1833-1874), Borges' grandfather, died in action at La Verde, Argentina, while fighting to suppress Mitre's revolt. George Berkely's concept of God was of an all-seeing omnipresent Mind.

To an Anglo-Saxon Poet

You, whose flesh, now vanished in the dust
Once weighed on Earth as heavily as ours,
You whose eyes viewed the familiar star,
You who lived, not in some rigid yesterday
But in the unceasing present, at the furthest
Point, and vertiginous apex of time,
You who were summoned, in your monastery
To the ancient utterance of the epic,
You who sang the victory at Brunanburh,
And attributed it not to the Lord,
But to the iron sword of your king,
You who sang with fierce delight
The humiliation of the Viking foe,
A feast for the eagle and the raven,
You who brought to your military ode
The metaphorical elements of lineage,
You who, in an age without history,
Saw, in the now, a yesterday,
And, in the blood and sweat of Brunanburh,
A crystal filled with ancient auroras,
You who loved your England so
Yet never name it,
Are, today, no more than a clutch of words,

That the Germanists annotate,
Today you are no more than my voice
Reviving your ancient iron words.

I ask of my gods, or Time's summation,
That my days might deserve oblivion,
And my Name like Ulysses be No-One,
But that some verse of mine might be there,
On a night propitious for remembrance,
Or in the mornings of those yet to be.

Note: The Battle of Brunanburh (937AD) saw the victory of the Anglo-Saxon armies of Wessex and Mercia, under King Aethelstan and his brother Edmund, against a combined northern army of Scots, Vikings and Strathclyde Britons. The battle is recorded in a verse panegyric in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

To One Who Is Sorrowful

There is what there was; the stubborn sword
Of the Saxon, and his iron metre,
The seas, and the islands, of exile
Of the son of Laertes, the golden
Moon of Persia, the endless gardens
Of philosophy and of history.
The sepulchral gold of memory
And, in the shade, the scent of jasmine.
And none of that matters. The resigned
Exercise of versifying will not save you,
Nor the well of sleep, nor the star
That in devastated night forgets the dawn.
Your thoughts are only of a woman,
Like to the others, but who is she?

Absence

I shall have to lift the vast life
That even now still reflects you,
Each day I will have to reconstruct it.
Since you walked away

How many places seem empty,
Devoid of meaning, like
A lamp in the light of day.
Afternoons that were niches for your image,
Music where for me you always lingered,
The words of those times,
I'll have to shatter with my hands.
In what hollow will I hide my soul
So that it fails to view your absence,
That like a harsh sun, without sunset,
Shines mercilessly and finally?
Your absence surrounds me
Like a rope around the throat,
Like the sea in which I drown.

The Beloved

Instruments, ivories, moons and roses,
Lamplight, and the curve of Durer's line,
The nine numerals, the changing zero,
I have to imagine these things exist.

I have to imagine Persepolis and Rome
Existed in the past, that the sifting sand
Meted out their fate to the battlements,
Such a fate as undid the iron centuries.

I must imagine the weapons, the pyres,
Of the epics, and the weight of seas
That gnaw at the pillars of the Earth.

I must imagine there are others. It's a lie.
Only you exist. You, my ill-fortune,
My good-fortune, inexhaustible and pure.

Spain

More than the symbols
More than the pomp and ash of anniversaries,
More than the grammarian's aberration,

Who sees in the story of the knight
Who dreamed of being Don Quixote, and was so, in the end,
Not friendship and delight
But the herbarium of archaisms, and a byword,
You, silent Spain, exist in us.
Spain of the buffalo that would die
By the steel or the rifle,
On the sunset prairies of Montana.
The Spain where Ulysses went down to Hades' House.
Spain of the Iberian, Celt, Carthaginian, Roman,
Spain of the harsh Visigoths,
Of Scandinavian stock,
Who used and forgot Ulfilas' script,
That shepherd of the flock,
Spain of Islam, the Kabbalah,
And the Dark Night of the Soul,
Spain of the Inquisitors,
Who suffered the fate of executioners
They who might have been martyrs,
Spain of the wider adventure
That deciphered the seas, reduced cruel empires,
And exists today, in Buenos Aires,
On this July evening in 1964.
Spain of the other guitar, the shameless
Not the humble one, ours.
Spain of the patio,
Spain of the pious stones of cathedral and sanctuary,
Spain of fine manliness and broad friendship,
Spain of vain courage,
We profess to other loves
We forget you as we forget our past,
Because you are in us, inseparably,
In the intimate habits of the blood,
In the Acevedo and Suárez of my lineage
Spain
Mother of rivers, swords, and endless
Fatal, and unceasing, generations.

Note: Ulfilas (c311-383) was a Goth, of Cappadocian Greek descent, who, traditionally, invented the Gothic alphabet, and translated the Bible into Gothic.

To H.O.

On a certain street, there's a certain closed door
With your doorbell, your exact number,
And the savour of a lost paradise,
That, in the evenings, will not open
To my step. At the ending of each day,
The expected voice expected my arrival,
In the disintegration of the everyday,
In the peacefulness of the beloved night.
Those things are not. My fate is other:
The vague hours, and impure memories,
The abuse of literature,
And, in the end, unappealing death.
This the gravestone I wish for: only,
A pair of abstract dates, and oblivion.

Note: H. O. A person for whom Borges' felt affection, later called J.M.; probably Judith Machado.

The Lost One

Where is my life; the one that might have been,
And yet was not? The life of good-fortune,
Or that of dreadful sorrow, the other thing
That might have proved a sword or shield,

Yet was not? Where the lost Persian ancestry,
Or Norwegian? Where the chance of sight?
Where the anchor, sea, the obliviousness

To being who I am? Where the pure night,
That the rough labouring-man confides in,
And where the laborious, illiterate day,

That our literature seems to long for?

I think moreover of that fair companion
Who awaited me, and may await me yet.

I Am

I am he who knows himself no less vain
Than the vainest gazer; who, in the mirror's
Crystalline silence, traces the reflection
Of the body (all the same) of his brother.

I am, unspeaking friends, he who knows
There's no finer revenge than oblivion,
No truer absolution. Some god granted
To human hatred this curious solution.

I am he who, despite its famed paths
To error, failed to decipher the plural
Singular, arduous, diverse labyrinth

Of Time, which is one, and faced by all.
I am nobody, one who was not a blade
In the duel: echo, oblivion, nothingness.

Blind

Whose face looks at me I don't know,
When I look at my face in the mirror,
What old man lurks in his reflection,
With a silent, and long-wearied anger?

Slowly in my darkness, with my hand,
I explore my invisible features.
A gleam reaches me. I've glimpsed your hair,
That is ashen coloured, or still golden.

I repeat to myself I've only lost
The superficial exterior of things;
It's Milton's brave consolation,

But I think of letters and roses,

And that if I could see my face
I'd know who I am in this strange twilight.

Waking

The light enters; I, awkwardly, ascend,
From dream to the dream that's shared,
And things recover the expected places
That are their due, as vague yesterdays
Converge, vastly, overwhelmingly,
On the present: the secular migrations
Of birds, of men, the legions destroyed
By weapons of steel, Rome and Carthage.

The tale of every day, also, returns,
My voice, my face, my fear, my fate.
Oh, that death, that other awakening,
Might but grant time without memory
Of my name, and of all I have been!
Oh, that I might but know forgetfulness!

Saturdays

Outside, there's a sunset, a dark jewel
Mounted on time,
And the depths of a blind city
Of men who fail to see you.
The afternoon is silent or sings,
Someone lifts from the cross the longing
That was nailed to the piano.
Always your multitudinous beauty,
Despite your coldness
Your beauty
Lavishes its miracles on Time.
There is good-fortune in you
As there are fresh leaves in the spring.
I am scarcely a person anymore,
I am solely that longing
Which is lost in the afternoon.
In you exists delight

As cruelty in the blade.

Night is stirring the grate tonight.
In the severity of the room
Our two solitudes seek each other, blindly,
It outlasts the afternoon,
The glorious whiteness of your flesh.
In our love there is a sorrow
That is like to that of the soul.

You,
Who alone were all of beauty yesterday,
Are also, now, all of love.

Pre-Requisites

The sunsets and the generations.
The days, of which none was the first.
The freshness of the water in Adam's
Throat. The ordering of Paradise.
The eye deciphering the darkness.
The love-making of wolves in the dawn.
The word. The hexameter. The mirror.
The Tower of Babel and arrogance.
The moon that the Chaldeans gazed on.
The innumerable sands of the Ganges.
Chang Tzu, and the butterfly that dreams him.
The golden apples of the Hesperides.
The wandering paths of the Labyrinth,
Penelope's endless piece of weaving.
The cycles of time of the Stoics.
The coin in the mouths of the dead.
The weight of the sword in the scale.
Every drop of water in the water-clock.
The eagles, the triumphs, the legions.
Caesar on the day of Pharsalus.
The shadows of the crosses on the ground.
The chess and algebra of Persia.
The faces in the long migrations.
The conquest of realms by the sword.

The moving compass. The open sea.
The echo of the clock in memory.
The king executed with an axe.
The untold dust that once was armies.
The voice of the nightingale in Denmark.
That calligrapher's scrupulous line.
The suicide's visage in the mirror.
The gambler's card. The greed for gold.
The shapes of clouds in the desert.
Every arabesque of the kaleidoscope.
Every regret and every tear.
All of these things were required
In order that our hands might meet.

Proteus

Before the oarsmen of the Odyssey
Troubled the wine-coloured sea,
It glimpsed the elusive forms
Of the god whose name was Proteus.

Shepherd of the sea-dwelling flocks,
Possessor of the gift of divination,
He preferred to hide what he knew
Interweaving disparate prophecies,

Urged on by others, he assumed
The form of a lion, or a pyre,
Or a tree shading the river bank,

Or of water losing itself in water.
Don't be amazed by Egyptian Proteus,
You who, yourself, are one and many.

Note. Proteus of Egypt is, in Homer's 'Odyssey' (IV:430), the name of the shape-shifting sea god, the 'Old Man of the Sea' whom Menelaus wrestled with.

The White Hind

From what wild ballad of green England,
From what Persian illustration, arcane region
Of the nights and days our yesteryears enclose,
Came the white deer I dreamed of at dawn?

Gone in a flash. I saw her cross the meadow,
Lost to the gold of an illusory afternoon,
A slight creature formed from my memory
And brief oblivion, one flank alone on show.

The divinities that rule this curious world
Allowed me to dream but not possess you;
Perhaps, in some deep corner of the future,

I'll find you once more, white doe of dream.
I'm a fleeting dream, too, though lasting longer
Than the dream of a meadow, and of whiteness.

The Other Tiger

'The craft that createth a semblance, and fails of the heart's desire.'

*From this house in South America (Sigurd the
Volsung, 1876)*

I think of a tiger. The gloom exalts
The vast and laborious Library,
And seems to distance the shelves;
Strong, innocent, bloodstained, new,
He travels his jungle, his tomorrow,
To leave his pugmarks on the edge,
In the silt, of an unnamed river's shore,
(In his world no names, no past, exist
Nor future, only the certain moment)
And preserve the barbarous reaches
And scent in the tortuous labyrinth
Among the scents the scent of dawn,
And the delectable scent of deer;
Between the bamboo-stripes I discern
The tiger's stripes, and feel the structure

Of bone, beneath the fine vibrant skin.
Convex seas and deserts of the planet
Interpose themselves between us in vain,
From this house in South America,
This far harbour, I track you in dream,
O tiger of the banks of the Ganges.

Afternoon deepens in my soul, I reflect
That the tiger I invoke in my verse
Is a tiger of symbol and shadow,
A series of literary tropes,
Born of encyclopedic memories
And not the fatal tiger, the fateful jewel,
Under the sun or the changing moon,
That in Sumatra or Bengal fulfils
His routine of love, idleness, and death.
I contrasted here, the symbolic tiger
With the real one, the one of fiery blood.
Who decimates the herds of buffalos,
And today, the third of August, '59.
Casts a leisurely shadow in the grass,
And yet the very fact of naming him,
Conjecturing his present circumstance,
Makes him artistic fiction, not a living
Creature, not one that walks the Earth.

We could search for another tiger,
Like the first two he will prove a form
Of my dream, a work of human words,
And not the tiger, the vertebrate,
That, beyond the reach of mythology,
Treads the ground. I know it well, and yet
Something urges me to that vague venture,
Ancient and foolish; I persevere
In searching, amid the shades of evening
For the other tiger, absent from my verse.

A Steel Key in East Lansing

(To Judith Machado)

I am a piece of filed steel,
My jagged blade not arbitrary.
Idle, my steel sleeps in a cupboard,
That I can't see, linked to its chain.

There's a lock that waits for me,
A single lock. The door is made
Of wrought iron and solid glass,
Its other side the house, real, concealed.

Deep in its shadows, the empty
Mirrors view the nights and days,
And the photographs of the dead,

And the photographs' dim yesterdays.
Will I ever push against the solid
Door, and in so doing turn the lock?

Note: Borges was in East Lansing, Michigan, in early 1976, as a visiting professor at the Michigan State University College of Arts and Letters.

Buenos Aires

And the city, today, is like a map
Of my humiliations and failures;
From that door I've watched the sunset,
By that marble statue, waited in vain.

Here, uncertain yesterday, distinct today
Have granted me the common events
Brought by every mortal chance; here,
My footsteps trace the endless labyrinth.

Here, like Cinderella, afternoon awaits
The denouement that morning owes it,
Here, my shadow will, no less vainly,

Be lost in the last shade, thin and slight.
It's fear and not love that so unites us,

Which is why I love this place so deeply.

1964

I

The world's lost its magic. They've left you.
You will no longer share the bright moon,
Nor the leisurely gardens. There's no longer
A single moon that's not a mirror of the past,

A crystal of loneliness, a sun of torment.
Farewell the mutual hands and brows
Love neared. Today, you only possess
A loyal memory, and empty days.

Everyone loses (you repeat, in vain)
Only what they own not, and never
Owned, but courage is not enough

To acquire the art of forgetting.
A symbol, a rose, can tear you apart,
The cry of a guitar can kill you.

II

I'll not be happy. No matter, perhaps;
So much else exists in the world.
A single moment is deeper, and more
Changeable than the sea. Life is short,

And though the days are very long,
One wonder still lies in wait for us,
Death, the other sea, the other arrow
That frees us from the sun, and moon,

And love. The delight you brought me.
And took from me again, must be erased.
What meant everything, must be nothing.

I have only the pleasure of being sad,
The idle habit that inclines me to seek
The South, a certain door, a certain corner.

Innocent

We're told each day produces wonders
That can alter the most stubborn fate;
Human footsteps have marked the moon,
Insomnia lays waste the miles and days.

Public nightmares lurk in the blue,
That darken the day. There's not a thing
That's not other, contrary, or neither.
Utterly simple surprises disturb me.

I'm amazed a key can open a door,
Amazed my hand's a certain thing,
Amazed that Zeno's instantaneous arrow,

Never fails to reach its unattainable goal,
Amazed that a sword can be beautiful,
That the rose holds the scent of a rose.

The Enigmas

I, that am singing now, will, tomorrow,
Be the mysterious one, the dead one.
Inhabitant of a magical, empty realm
Without a 'when', or before, or after.

So, the mystics say. I believe myself
Undeserving of a Hell or Paradise,
And yet predict nothing. Our history
Adopts, like Proteus, various forms.

What winding labyrinth, what whiteness
Blinded by radiance, will prove my fate
When I'm offered the final adventure,

The curious experience of death?
I wish to drink crystalline oblivion,
To be forever; yet, not to have been.

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