

Lorraine Glennon / BORGES AND I

Fancy your coming out and asking me, of all people, to contribute a piece to your volume on Jorge Luis Borges. I am acquainted with him, of course, and in fact was quite intimate with him once, but it has been years since we've met and about the specifics of our relationship I am more than a little dubious. Nevertheless, I shall attempt to relate to you the events (as I remember them) of the night when I knew him best.

Back in 1961, I was living in Lubbock, in the Texas panhandle. I was just another college student, who, like many a student of the day, had been introduced to Borges through enrollment in a contemporary literature course. In class, I denounced his fiction. His stories were clever, I said, but lukewarm; he did not deal first-hand with the range of human experience but considered it clinically, from a distance, as an object for philosophical speculation. His work lacked emotional force, I said, emotional consequences. Why I felt this way and why I reacted so negatively to him, I do not know. I do know that, long after the class had ended, I regularly found myself going, almost against my will, to the library to seek out more and more of his stories to read. Soon, I was also familiar with his poetry and his essays. These readings affected me oddly. Undeniably, Borges held a peculiar attraction for me (otherwise, what was I doing there?), but it was an attraction I could neither understand nor explain. As I sat in the library hunched over one of his books, part of me was drawn, almost hypnotically, to the page; yet another, larger, part of me remained curiously untouched. I was angered by my inability to define my attitude toward him. Invariably, I would leave the library with a throbbing headache.

At that time, Borges was a Visiting Professor at the University of Texas, in Austin. When I learned that he was coming to Lubbock for a day to give a lecture on Argentine literature and to discuss his own work, I was quite excited. I was eager to hear him speak, hopeful that his comments about his work might perhaps clarify a few of my own responses.

Borges and his entourage came to Lubbock in early spring. It was a warm, dry day, typical of the desert climate we have in the panhandle. His speech, delivered in a gymnasium to a one-eighth capacity audience, was very formal, his manner was very distant; yet, when he talked of books, his face assumed an expression of rapt awe that is more commonly seen on a person who is confiding to you that he is in love or who is telling you about an idyllic vacation trip he has taken. However unfulfilling, it was fascinating simply to watch Borges.

After he finished giving his prepared speech, Borges opened up the floor for questions. In answering a question put forth by a young man seated several rows behind me, Borges made reference to a poem of his called "The Golem." In a moment of bravery (for I was greatly intimidated by the man), I raised my hand and asked if, in writing "The Golem" he had been consciously rewriting his story, "The Circular Ruins." He looked surprised and replied that no, he had not, but that he was grateful to me for "revealing this unsuspected affinity" to him. He told me that I had "enriched his story." Again, I was puzzled by him: I could not determine whether his answer was sincere or delivered tongue-in-cheek. By no means a clarifier, Borges-in-person proved as frustrating to me and as enigmatic as Borges-in-literature.

Pleading fatigue, he received no more questions after mine. The audience arose and began to file noisily out of the gymnasium. Borges stood, with the aid of his cane, near the podium, politely chatting and shaking hands with the small group of admirers who had gathered around him. I had almost reached the exit when, without making any conscious decision to do so, I turned back and approached him. Suddenly, I no longer feared him.

"I enjoyed your talk immensely, Señor Borges," I told him, extending my hand. He took my hand and, squinting, cast his kind, unseeing eyes on my face for a long moment. "I'm the girl who asked the final question," I said, "about 'The Golem' and 'The Circular Ruins'."

"Ah, yes," he said, and again he thanked me for sharing my observation with him. Then he pressed a small white card into my hand.

I walked the distance from the gymnasium back to my dormitory room in a trance. It wasn't until I was inside my room and standing in front of my bureau mirror that I remembered the card he had given me. I took it out of my handbag and examined it closely. It was small — about the size of a businessman's calling card — and on its surface a messy conglomeration of unintelligible symbols was scrawled in black ink. I examined the card from every imaginable angle, trying to decipher the meaning of the symbols. From one angle, they seemed to form a configuration resembling a family coat-of-arms composed of snakes and serpents coiled around a hexagon-shaped military shield. From another angle, I saw a cage filled with exotic beasts of various shapes and descriptions, all unrecognizable to me. I turned the card over, I viewed it sideways, upside down . . . in no way could I make any sense of it. Finally, in desperation, I held the card up to my mirror, thinking perhaps I could see it more objectively that way. In the mirror's glass, I read the card with ease. The message reflected there was, "Come later to my hotel, the Holiday Inn in Lubbock. I will meet you in the lobby at 9:00 p.m. J.L.B."

Imagine the feelings that message evoked in me! My heartbeat quickened, my thoughts became hopelessly jumbled. What could this mean, I wondered, what did Borges have in mind? I glanced at my watch; it was 4:15. I had nearly five hours before I would see him and not the slightest idea of what to do in the meantime. I knew that I needed to calm down, but how? I decided to rest for a few hours. A short nap, I told myself, would refresh me. I crawled into the reclining chair that sat by itself in the corner of my bedroom and I closed my eyes.

At five minutes before 9:00, I found myself standing uncertainly in the lobby of the Lubbock Holiday Inn. I could hear the rumble of the elevator as it descended; when it reached the ground floor, its door parted and Borges stepped forward. He was dressed in the same grey suit and tie he had worn earlier at his lecture. He walked toward me haltingly, clutching at his cane, which I saw now was really a sword with a knobbed handle. It was sheathed, but lethal-looking; the handle was gold and of a baroque design.

"Here I am, Borges," I said, placing my hand on his arm.

"You are very prompt," he said.

"What beautiful English you speak!" As I uttered the words, I realized that neither of us was speaking English at all. Rather, we spoke the language in which he had scribbled his message on the card.

He graciously acknowledged my compliment and led me to a door in the rear of the lobby, which opened onto a spiral staircase.

"Where are we going?" I asked. "Can't we take the elevator?"

"We are going to Nirvana," he said, "and to get there, we must climb these stairs up to the Tower of Victory."

I was frightened. "But it's so dark!"

He smiled at me and I felt reassured. He seemed so gentle, so innocuous. "Is it?" he asked. "For the blind, the distinction between light and darkness does not exist."

We began the ascent. Looking up, I could see no end to the looping chain of steps; it seemed to wind infinitely upward into the heavens.

We had been climbing for approximately one hour (our progress was made slow and laborious by Borges' blindness and old age) when I noticed a shapeless blue creature trailing two or three steps behind us on the outside edge of the stairway.

"Borges," I said in a stage-whisper, "there's a horrible creature following us! It's ugly and it's blue and it *glows*!"

"I cannot believe you," he said politely, "for if I did, I would be unable to go even a single step further."

"It's true," I insisted. "It's right behind us." I hollered at it, "Shoo! Get away!"

"Don't worry," Borges said, "even if such a creature is lurking there, it cannot possibly follow us all the way." He patted my hand to comfort me. "Come, let us proceed without fear."

Although I still had misgivings, his air of calm confidence quelled them and I allowed myself to be coaxed into continuing the journey upward with him. Periodically, I would peek over my shoulder to check if the creature was still there. It always was; as we went higher, it seemed to sprout tentacles and to glow with a greater and greater intensity until I thought I surely should be blinded by its bluish brilliance.

After two hours of climbing, we reached a landing and Borges stopped. "This is my room," he said, lightly tapping with his cane on a closed door.

"But are we stopping here?" I asked. "There are still fourteen steps left to climb."

He sighed. "I am too old and too weary to attempt them all tonight," he said. "Nirvana will have to wait." He reached into the pocket of his suit coat and withdrew his room key, which he offered to me. "Here, you can unlock the door."

"Why, Borges," I said, "what do you mean? There is no lock on this door. See?" Turning the knob, I opened the door easily and we stepped across the threshold. The blue creature on the stairs began to moan softly, as if in pain. The sound set my teeth on edge; I could not bear to hear it. Quickly, I slammed the door shut in its face.

Borges' room was sparsely furnished, even for a Holiday Inn. There was (I think) a small table with two straight-backed chairs situated across from each other, a bureau, and a bed. There were also many, many mirrors. I was unable to determine the exact number of items in the room due to the fact that frequently, what I took to be a wall or a door or a piece of furniture turned out instead to be only a mirror reflection of that object. The room appeared to have six walls, but again, the presence of the mirrors renders my judgment on that point hypothetical at best.

From the top drawer of the bureau, Borges took a small ivory box. He carefully placed it on the table and then seated himself in front of it. I sat down on the bed; immediately I sprang up again. "Do you sleep on that?" I asked. "It's so lumpy and uncomfortable!"

"No, never would I sleep there," he replied. "I sleep standing up, in that closet." He gestured with his cane.

"This certainly is different from most Holiday Inn rooms I've seen," I said. I spotted a book lying on the bureau. "But at least there's a Gideon Bible." I walked over to the bureau and picked up the volume. In appearance, it was ordinary enough, but reading it proved to be impossible. The pages were very thin and each time I tried to turn one, more pages would flutter out of it. It was positively exasperating! What good was a book like that, I wondered. A reader could never get anywhere with it! In disgust, I flung it down and went over to sit in the chair opposite Borges.

He had emptied the contents of the ivory box onto the table top. Spread before him were twenty-five matchsticks; all were of the same approximate size, but each was in some slight way different from every other. There was an infinitesimal crook in one, another was splintered . . .

Seeing the matchsticks made me desire a cigarette. I took one out of my handbag and Borges, ever the gentleman, hastened to light it for me. He struck one of the matchsticks on the underside of the table and it ignited. He held it for a time and I thought it strange the way the flame burned down to the bottom and then continued to burn without flickering. Borges' fingers touched the flame directly but he appeared not to feel it. When I leaned over to accept the light, my fingertips also brushed against the flame but I experienced no sensation of heat. Finally, Borges blew on the flame to extinguish it and placed the charred matchstick back on the table top.

I shifted my gaze from Borges' face to the ashtray where I rested my cigarette. What I saw when I looked up again at Borges made me scream in horror. His body, seated casually in the chair, looked the same, but his human head had been replaced with the head of a vicious bull.

"Oh no, oh no!" I cried. "God help me!" I buried my face in my hands and began to sob pitifully. The skin of my face felt different to my touch . . . coarser, hairier. Near my forehead, I felt two hard, pointed, protuberances. Horns! "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" I screamed.

"Don't be alarmed," Borges said. "You are all right."

"All right!" I gasped. "How can you say that!" I kept my eyes tightly shut, terrified to open them again.

"Please open your eyes and look at me. It was my other self you saw, reflected in the mirror. It wasn't the real Borges."

I challenged him, "How do I *know* it wasn't the 'real Borges'?"

"You may doubt me if you wish."

"But what about me?" I asked. "That was no reflection; I felt my head with my own two hands!"

"You suffered a momentary identity crisis," he said, "but you are all right now. If you look into a mirror, you will see that your regular features have been restored."

I wondered how he, a blind man, could know that. "Are you omniscient?" I asked.

"I said that you could doubt me."

It was difficult for me to associate the mild voice I heard with the face I had seen. Surely, I thought, both could not belong to the same man. His low-key method of persuasion produced its by-now familiar effect on me. Tentatively, I opened my eyes. There he sat, the same old gentle Borges, a man who looked incapable of carrying out an act more violent than the swatting of a fly. (Yet I *had* seen the bull's head, if only for an instant. Or did I merely imagine that I saw it?) As for me, the mirror at my side assured me that my former (not beautiful, but at least recognizably human) looks had been returned to me.

"Now," Borges said, clearing his throat, "I shall begin my constructions."

I didn't understand what he was saying. "Borges," I asked, "why did you bring me here?"

"To win your allegiance," he said simply. "Watch."

"You have my allegiance already," I said, not really knowing what he — or I — meant. Nevertheless, I settled back in my chair to watch him. And at that point, the spell was cast.

Using the twenty-five matchsticks as building blocks, Borges erected structure after structure on the table top before us. He very carefully chose each matchstick that he used . . . sometimes turning it over, feeling its size and shape, and then rejecting it in favor of a more appropriate matchstick. (Once, he extracted a matchstick from an already-completed structure and filled the void it left with a matchstick that *I* thought less well-suited to the over-all design. "No more irresponsible building," he muttered as he did it.) He fit the matchsticks together in the most astonishing shapes and patterns! He built cylinders, cubes, pyramids. On the surface, these structures often looked simple, but how deceptive that outer simplicity was! When I examined them closely, I discovered their foundations to be intricately complex, frequently labyrinthine. To my untrained eye, these structures, minute and compactly-built as they were, appeared perfect, unimprovable. But Borges was never satisfied. After finishing one, he would display it for a moment or two, then topple it with his hand and begin anew on a fresh, yet strikingly similar, construction.

As he worked, Borges was transformed, not into a minotaur this time, but into a circus magician. He acquired a cape, white gloves and a top hat; he wielded the matchsticks like tiny magic wands. His face was radiant, intent . . . totally absorbed in the task at hand. As the evening wore on, I came to perceive the entire scene as in a black-and-white photograph. Only the matchstick construction, in the foreground, was in focus; the rest was blurred to a cloudy gray. Everything else in the room — even Borges, even myself — became less real to me than the object created by his magic. Yet Borges would not have it that way: he kept doing things to draw my attention *back* to him. Now and then, he would interject remarks that served to remind me that *he* was the creator and *I* the witness.

I became mesmerized by it all, dizzy. As I stared at a matchstick pyramid, the desire to crawl inside it, to feel my way around, was overwhelming. But I realized it was impossible; its minimal size prohibited that sort of exploration. Gripping the edge of the table to keep my balance, I gazed at Borges. His charm had at last become irresistible to me. I yearned to make him part of me. Leaping up from my chair, I swept aside the pyramid and threw my arms around his neck. "Borges!" I cried, with abandon, "Put yourself at my center! Let me consume you!"¹

He shook his head. "You are too complicated," he said. "Your center is inaccessible."

"No, Borges, no!" I said. "Its pathway is a straight line."

He smiled his kind smile and began to undress me — tenderly, yet with the same air of gentle detachment that he'd been maintaining all evening. Inexplicably, his manner served only to captivate me further. When we both were undressed, we climbed into the badly sagging bed (where Borges refused to sleep) and drew the covers up over our shoulders. As he prepared to enter me, I heard him murmur, "You are so infinitely deep, so unknowable."

"You must go deeper, Borges," I said breathlessly. "Deeper, deeper, to my center!"

"Please," he said, "call me Georgie."

¹ *Though seemingly extreme, the response here is not unusual. A study conducted by Cary Nelson indicates that encounters with Borges frequently present the subtle temptations to which the narrator yields. (Editor's Note)*

At the instant of climax (which is eternal), I felt the brutal thrust and twist of a knife deep within me as my gentle, genteel lover became himself. Yet paradoxically, in the same vertiginous instant, his identity merged with and became indistinguishable from the identities of the fourteen other men I had known. (I confess that I could not have told you his name.) In the darkness I searched his face and discovered it to be as featureless and devoid of expression as the sun's. Swooning then from the pain, I fell back, satisfied, onto my pillow.

When I awoke, I was drenched in perspiration. I realized that I must have fallen asleep while reading in my reclining chair. A book lay open in my lap. I looked at the title: *The Book of Imaginary Borges*.² Marking my place with the small white card that I held clenched in my fist (on which was scribbled my shopping list), I arose from the chair. Despite my sleep, I felt exhausted; my dreams had left me limp. I hobbled into the small closet-like bathroom with which my dormitory room was equipped. Grabbing a towel from the rack, I pressed it to my damp face. When I withdrew it, I saw on its surface the image of Borges, outlined in blood. And across the bottom of the towel — I could scarcely believe my eyes — the words "Holiday Inn" were stitched in pale green thread.

² *At present, The Book of Imaginary Borges is not available in translation.*
(Editor's Note)