

Introduction: Borges (and I)

The stories of Jorge Luis Borges begin quietly. A narrator, often a man speaking from behind his ordinariness, often a bit of a pedant, starts to tell us some story in a voice so soft that only the intensity of the speaker, shaken by something he has learned and would tell us, makes us stop and lean closer to listen.

And in a moment, a sentence or two, we begin to understand that this man is telling us that something we have always taken as true is not--not quite, and perhaps not at all. Beginning each story--or poem or sentence--is like distractedly opening a small box and being shocked to see within it long perspectives reaching out into the infinite, past our lives, past stars and planets, past things that have not yet happened but will, and into a void that contains all possibilities, all of them visible at once and all somehow present right there among us. Even more disquieting, he makes it clear that to travel these reaches something in this protagonist must die. Sometimes the death is figurative, sometimes literal, but in either case, the act of dying releases a moment of deep clarity that seems to illuminate the life it closes. Perhaps this moment *is* the real life. When we finish the story, and if we have let it affect us, we look around at the world we have every day lived in and know we cannot really trust the place again. For one thing, there's this troubling question of Death as Life.

The details of Borges's own life prior to his fame seem like those of one of his protagonists. He lived with his aging mother, was a librarian in a sub-branch of the national library in Buenos Aires, wrote for small literary journals, and became eventually a well-known figure in what was the rather removed community that was Argentine letters in the 40's and 50's. But at the same time that his reputation was growing, his sight was relentlessly failing, and as vision was lost he was left to journey on in his imagination. On these travels deep into his own mind he learned the things he *had* to tell his readers. By the 1960's the writing from these journeys found its way onto a larger stage, and he was revealed to be, not so much an Argentine writer, but a writer for the world and our time.

And it was books, he said--taken into his mind and allowed to grow there--that let him not only survive in the darkness but grow and deepen. They became his source of experience, his world. He said:

No one should read self-pity or reproach
into this statement of the majesty
of God, who with such splendid irony
granted me books and blindness at one touch.

When we begin to read a Borges story we follow him into his world with a pleasure that turns to the uneasy alertness that is the disguised gift he has for anyone who reads him closely. Afterward we can try to reclaim our distance by viewing him as a writer of stories-with-a-twist or as an aphorist, but it doesn't work. He's too disturbing for that. We must simply accept that our eyes have been opened a little by the blind man.

The images in this book grew out of writing--my own and not Borges's. After years of making photographs I began working to fulfill an old promise I'd made to return someday to the writing that had let me slip beyond the suburban boundaries of my life when I was younger.

I began by writing some stories, a scrap of a memoir, and a few poems. They were only fair, but they filled me with the exhilaration of discovering, or rediscovering, that the reaches of imagination are perfectly real, as real as the world of things. In order to make a photograph I had to traipse through my surroundings to find an arrangement of things that somehow reflected my thoughts. But when writing I could just go sit at my table and type out the words, "The clouds rolled in and loosened doom over the land like a rain," and it would be true in any weather, *true in the mind*, where art does its work. I could speak things into existence in an instant without having to find the physical equivalents that photography demands—the trees and mountains and windows and light, the sad man, the child's face, the rain. Writing lifted me from my world of constant doing and making, and set me down in a realm of stillness and watching, where I found the power to make real worlds in my mind...or found it again.

One day during this time I was hanging around my studio with nothing much to do, cleaning up in a desultory way (the only way I ever clean). There was an old book out on a table. I went to put it away, but instead I just opened it and gazed. I looked at the way the sharp metal type cut into the paper, at the blooms of foxing in the margins. I smelled its slight odor of papery rot, caught Latin words here and there and made out that they said something about the spirit and devotion. I stood there for the longest time. The book had stilled me.

On an impulse, I went to the closet where I keep a compost heap of props and got four black stones from a Japanese river. I set them out carefully in a line across the pages of the book. And suddenly it looked to me like...a poem. Or a kind of poem, at least. Maybe a Haiku or something by one of the Imagists, something that didn't narrate or argue but just placed a few simple things before you and invited you to complete the work. This book with its stones was a pure image, the kind that can move from one mind to another and root there in some mysterious panspermic process. Joining things that didn't logically go together--Latin meditations and Japanese rivers, black stones and creamy paper--broke apart some notion of what these things should say and set my imagination free to work. I had always wanted my photography to do this, and now I saw this wonderful composition open on the table before me.

I took a picture of this poem. And that was the beginning of these books.

After a while there were enough of them to suggest that they might themselves make a book, and indeed *had* to be a book. So I began to think about what might be necessary to make this happen. Perhaps it needed the armature of a text, but what that text might be

and how it might work to unite the whole wasn't clear. Then a designer friend, Lana Rigsby, saw the pictures and said they reminded her of Borges.

Of course!

I began to reinvestigate Borges in the light of my picture-making, and at once the connection was palpable, particularly when he wrote about books. He was near me as I worked from then on. I didn't think about particular stories, but I was always aware of his way of standing among the ordinary and pointing to possibilities that were unexpected and profound and alarming. In the story *The Book of Sand*, a stranger seems relieved to sell the narrator a book. This book, it turns out, can never be opened to the same page twice. Its contents shift and slide within the pages and defy the expectation that a book should contain and fix what is in it. The narrator becomes obsessed. He tries to plumb the book and find its rationale, its organizing principle, but he cannot. It has every possibility in the cosmos spread across its ever-changing pages, shows him glimpses of all creation. And suddenly he grasps what the book is telling him--that, contrary to what he has always believed, there is no possibility at all of knowing the world, not even his own immediate world, through intellection. In fear, he abandons the book on an anonymous shelf in the depths of the national library, from where it continues to haunt him. The narrator's mundane act of buying a book and opening it sends the reader spiraling into his own series of haunting considerations.

Working with these pictures and the Borges stories has been a bit like being stranded by a storm in a remote country house with a witty, cerebral, pedantic, enigmatic and altogether entrancing man. Now I'm down to the last details of readying things for publication and ordering the final maquette, and just the other day I thought how disquieting it would be to notice that some familiar story suddenly seemed to have a character I'd never noticed before, or a slightly different ending, or if the snake, always bounded by the pages of the open book, had started to crawl off.

The Secret Books doesn't attempt to illustrate Borges, and it doesn't aspire to be a collaboration--as an artist I couldn't hold his coat. I have simply found some instances in which he speaks directly about books and have put them with my images of books to make a kind of sequence, or perhaps a dialogue. And navigating thus under the star of Borges, I look at this book--words and images, side by side on the table before me--and find myself looking down dark, unfamiliar paths across the plane of the world with a rising sense, both exciting and ominous, that everything is about to change.

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