Classic Poetry Series

Jorge Luis Borges

- poems -

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Adam Cast Forth

Was there a Garden or was the Garden a dream?
Amid the fleeting light, I have slowed myself and queried,
Almost for consolation, if the bygone period
Over which this Adam, wretched now, once reigned supreme,

Might not have been just a magical illusion
Of that God I dreamed. Already it's imprecise
In my memory, the clear Paradise,
But I know it exists, in flower and profusion,

Although not for me. My punishment for life
Is the stubborn earth with the incestuous strife
Of Cains and Abels and their brood; I await no pardon.

Yet, it's much to have loved, to have known true joy,
To have had -- if only for just one day --
The experience of touching the living Garden.

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Jorge Luis Borges

Art of Poetry, The

To gaze at a river made of time and water
And remember Time is another river.
To know we stray like a river
and our faces vanish like water.

To feel that waking is another dream
that dreams of not dreaming and that the death
we fear in our bones is the death
that every night we call a dream.

To see in every day and year a symbol
of all the days of man and his years,
and convert the outrage of the years
into a music, a sound, and a symbol.

To see in death a dream, in the sunset
a golden sadness--such is poetry,
humble and immortal, poetry,
returning, like dawn and the sunset.

Sometimes at evening there's a face
that sees us from the deeps of a mirror.
Art must be that sort of mirror,
disclosing to each of us his face.

They say Ulysses, wearied of wonders,
wept with love on seeing Ithaca,
humble and green. Art is that Ithaca,
a green eternity, not wonders.

Art is endless like a river flowing,
passing, yet remaining, a mirror to the same
inconstant Heraclitus, who is the same
and yet another, like the river flowing.

Jorge Luis Borges

Browning Decides to Be a Poet

In these red labyrinths of London
I find that I have chosen
the strangest of all callings,
save that, in its way, any calling is strange.
Like the alchemist
who sought the philosopher's stone
in quicksilver,
I shall make everyday words--
the gambler's marked cards, the common coin--
give off the magic that was their
when Thor was both the god and the din,
the thunderclap and the prayer.
In today's dialect
I shall say, in my fashion, eternal things:
I shall try to be worthy
of the great echo of Byron.
This dust that I am will be invulnerable.
If a woman shares my love
my verse will touch the tenth sphere of the concentric heavens;
if a woman turns my love aside
I will make of my sadness a music,
a full river to resound through time.
I shall live by forgetting myself.
I shall be the face I glimpse and forget,
I shall be Judas who takes on
the divine mission of being a betrayer,
I shall be Caliban in his bog,
I shall be a mercenary who dies
without fear and without faith,
I shall be Polycrates, who looks in awe
upon the seal returned by fate.
I will be the friend who hates me.
The persian will give me the nightingale, and Rome the sword.
Masks, agonies, resurrections
will weave and unweave my life,
and in time I shall be Robert Browning.

Jorge Luis Borges

El Instante

Dónde estarán los siglos, dónde el sueño
de espadas que los tártaros soñaron,
dónde los fuertes muros que allanaron,
dónde el Árbol de Adán y el otro Leño?
El presente está solo. La memoria
erige el tiempo. Sucesión y engaño
es la rutina del reloj. El año
no es menos vano que la vana historia.
Entre el alba y la noche hay un abismo
de agonías, de luces, de cuidados;
el rostro que se mira en los gastados
espejos de la noche no es el mismo.
El hoy fugaz es tenue y es eterno;
otro Cielo no esperes, ni otro Infierno.

Jorge Luis Borges

Elegy

Oh destiny of Borges
to have sailed across the diverse seas of the world
or across that single and solitary sea of diverse
names,
to have been a part of Edinburgh, of Zurich, of the
two Cordobas,
of Colombia and of Texas,
to have returned at the end of changing generations
to the ancient lands of his forebears,
to Andalucia, to Portugal and to those counties
where the Saxon warred with the Dane and they
mixed their blood,
to have wandered through the red and tranquil
labyrinth of London,
to have grown old in so many mirrors,
to have sought in vain the marble gaze of the statues,
to have questioned lithographs, encyclopedias,
atlases,
to have seen the things that men see,
death, the sluggish dawn, the plains,
and the delicate stars,
and to have seen nothing, or almost nothing
except the face of a girl from Buenos Aires
a face that does not want you to remember it.
Oh destiny of Borges,
perhaps no stranger than your own.

Jorge Luis Borges

History of the Night

Throughout the course of th generations
men constructed the night.
At first she was blindness;
thorns raking bare feet,
fear of wolves.
We shall never know who forged the word
for the interval of shadow
dividing the two twilights;
we shall never know in what age it came to mean
the starry hours.
Others created the myth.
They made her the mother of the unruffled Fates
that spin our destiny,
thev sacrificed black ewes to her, and the cock
who crows his own death.
The Chaldeans assigned to her twelve houses;
to Zeno, infinite words.
She took shape from Latin hexameters
and the terror of Pascal.
Luis de Leon saw in her the homeland
of his stricken soul.
Now we feel her to be inexhuastible
like an ancient wine
and no one can gaze on her without vertigo
and time has charged her with eternity.

And to think that she wouldn't exist
except for those fragile instruments, the eyes.

Jorge Luis Borges

Instants

If I could live again my life,
In the next - I'll try,
- to make more mistakes,
I won't try to be so perfect,
I'll be more relaxed,
I'll be more full - than I am now,
In fact, I'll take fewer things seriously,
I'll be less hygenic,
I'll take more risks,
I'll take more trips,
I'll watch more sunsets,
I'll climb more mountains,
I'll swim more rivers,
I'll go to more places - I've never been,
I'll eat more ice creams and less (lime) beans,
I'll have more real problems - and less imaginary
ones,
I was one of those people who live
prudent and prolific lives -
each minute of his life,
Offcourse that I had moments of joy - but,
if I could go back I'll try to have only good moments,

If you don't know - thats what life is made of,
Don't lose the now!

I was one of those who never goes anywhere
without a thermometer,
without a hot-water bottle,
and without an umberella and without a parachute,

If I could live again - I will travel light,
If I could live again - I'll try to work bare feet
at the beginning of spring till
the end of autumn,
I'll ride more carts,
I'll watch more sunrises and play with more children,
If I have the life to live - but now I am 85,
- and I know that I am dying ...

Jorge Luis Borges

Limits

Of all the streets that blur in to the sunset,
There must be one (which, I am not sure)
That I by now have walked for the last time
Without guessing it, the pawn of that Someone

Who fixes in advance omnipotent laws,
Sets up a secret and unwavering scale
for all the shadows, dreams, and forms
Woven into the texture of this life.

If there is a limit to all things and a measure
And a last time and nothing more and forgetfulness,
Who will tell us to whom in this house
We without knowing it have said farewell?

Through the dawning window night withdraws
And among the stacked books which throw
Irregular shadows on the dim table,
There must be one which I will never read.

There is in the South more than one worn gate,
With its cement urns and planted cactus,
Which is already forbidden to my entry,
Inaccessible, as in a lithograph.

There is a door you have closed forever
And some mirror is expecting you in vain;
To you the crossroads seem wide open,
Yet watching you, four-faced, is a Janus.

There is among all your memories one
Which has now been lost beyond recall.
You will not be seen going down to that fountain
Neither by white sun nor by yellow moon.

You will never recapture what the Persian
Said in his language woven with birds and roses,
When, in the sunset, before the light disperses,
You wish to give words to unforgettable things.

And the steadily flowing Rhone and the lake,
All that vast yesterday over which today I bend?
They will be as lost as Carthage,
Scourged by the Romans with fire and salt.

At dawn I seem to hear the turbulent
Murmur of crowds milling and fading away;
They are all I have been loved by, forgotten by;
Space, time, and Borges now are leaving me.

Jorge Luis Borges

Other Tiger, The

A tiger comes to mind. The twilight here
Exalts the vast and busy Library
And seems to set the bookshelves back in gloom;
Innocent, ruthless, bloodstained, sleek
It wanders through its forest and its day
Printing a track along the muddy banks
Of sluggish streams whose names it does not know
(In its world there are no names or past
Or time to come, only the vivid now)
And makes its way across wild distances
Sniffing the braided labyrinth of smells
And in the wind picking the smell of dawn
And tantalizing scent of grazing deer;
Among the bamboo's slanting stripes I glimpse
The tiger's stripes and sense the bony frame
Under the splendid, quivering cover of skin.
Curving oceans and the planet's wastes keep us
Apart in vain; from here in a house far off
In South America I dream of you,
Track you, O tiger of the Ganges' banks.

It strikes me now as evening fills my soul
That the tiger addressed in my poem
Is a shadowy beast, a tiger of symbols
And scraps picked up at random out of books,
A string of labored tropes that have no life,
And not the fated tiger, the deadly jewel
That under sun or stars or changing moon
Goes on in Bengal or Sumatra fulfilling
Its rounds of love and indolence and death.
To the tiger of symbols I hold opposed
The one that's real, the one whose blood runs hot
As it cuts down a herd of buffaloes,
And that today, this August third, nineteen
Fifty-nine, throws its shadow on the grass;
But by the act of giving it a name,
By trying to fix the limits of its world,
It becomes a fiction not a living beast,
Not a tiger out roaming the wilds of earth.

We'll hunt for a third tiger now, but like
The others this one too will be a form
Of what I dream, a structure of words, and not
The flesh and one tiger that beyond all myths
Paces the earth. I know these things quite well,
Yet nonetheless some force keeps driving me
In this vague, unreasonable, and ancient quest,
And I go on pursuing through the hours
Another tiger, the beast not found in verse.

Jorge Luis Borges

Remorse For Any Death

Free of memory and of hope,
limitless, abstract, almost future,
the dead man is not a dead man: he is death.
Like the God of the mystics,
of Whom anything that could be said must be denied,
the dead one, alien everywhere,
is but the ruin and absence of the world.
We rob him of everything,
we leave him not so much as a color or syllable:
here, the courtyard which his eyes no longer see,
there, the sidewalk where his hope lay in wait.
Even what we are thinking,
he could be thinking;

we have divvied up like thieves
the booty of nights and days.

Jorge Luis Borges

Shinto

When sorrow lays us low
for a second we are saved
by humble windfalls
of the mindfulness or memory:
the taste of a fruit, the taste of water,
that face given back to us by a dream,
the first jasmine of November,
the endless yearning of the compass,
a book we thought was lost,
the throb of a hexameter,
the slight key that opens a house to us,
the smell of a library, or of sandalwood,
the former name of a street,
the colors of a map,
an unforeseen etymology,
the smoothness of a filed fingernail,
the date we were looking for,
the twelve dark bell-strokes, tolling as we count,
a sudden physical pain.

Eight million Shinto deities
travel secretly throughout the earth.
Those modest gods touch us--
touch us and move on.

Jorge Luis Borges

Susana Soca

With lingering love she gazed at the dispersed
Colors of dusk. It pleased her utterly
To lose herself in the complex melody
Or in the cunous life to be found in verse.
It was not the primal red but rather grays
That spun the fine thread of her destiny,
For the nicest distinctions and all spent
In waverings, ambiguities, delays.
Lacking the nerve to tread this treacherous
Labyrinth, she looked in on, whom without,
The shapes, the turbulence, the striving rout,
(Like the other lady of the looking glass.)
The gods that dwell too far away for prayer
Abandoned her to the final tiger, Fire.

Jorge Luis Borges

That One

Oh days devoted to the useless burden
of putting out of mind the biography
of a minor poet of the Southem Hemisphere,
to whom the fates or perhaps the stars have given
a body which will leave behind no child,
and blindness, which is semi-darkness and jail,
and old age, which is the dawn of death,
and fame, which absolutely nobody deserves,
and the practice of weaving hendecasyllables,
and an old love of encyclopedias
and fine handmade maps and smooth ivory,
and an incurable nostalgia for the Latin,
and bits of memories of Edinburgh and Geneva
and the loss of memory of names and dates,
and the cult of the East, which the varied peoples
of the teeming East do not themselves share,
and evening trembling with hope or expectation,
and the disease of entymology,
and the iron of Anglo-Saxon syllables,
and the moon, that always catches us by surprise,
and that worse of all bad habits, Buenos Aires,
and the subtle flavor of water, the taste of grapes,
and chocolate, oh Mexican delicacy,
and a few coins and an old hourglass,
and that an evening, like so many others,
be given over to these lines of verse.

Jorge Luis Borges

The Art of Poetry

To gaze at a river made of time and water
And remember Time is another river.
To know we stray like a river
and our faces vanish like water.

To feel that waking is another dream
that dreams of not dreaming and that the death
we fear in our bones is the death
that every night we call a dream.

To see in every day and year a symbol
of all the days of man and his years,
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The Other Tiger

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Another tiger, the beast not found in verse.

Jorge Luis Borges

To a Cat

Mirrors are not more silent
nor the creeping dawn more secretive;
in the moonlight, you are that panther
we catch sight of from afar.
By the inexplicable workings of a divine law,
we look for you in vain;
More remote, even, than the Ganges or the setting sun,
yours is the solitude, yours the secret.
Your haunch allows the lingering
caress of my hand. You have accepted,
since that long forgotten past,
the love of the distrustful hand.
You belong to another time. You are lord
of a place bounded like a dream.

Jorge Luis Borges

We are the time. We are the famous

We are the time. We are the famous
metaphor from Heraclitus the Obscure.

We are the water, not the hard diamond,
the one that is lost, not the one that stands still.

We are the river and we are that greek
that looks himself into the river. His reflection
changes into the waters of the changing mirror,
into the crystal that changes like the fire.

We are the vain predetermined river,
in his travel to his sea.

The shadows have surrounded him.
Everything said goodbye to us, everything goes away.

Memory does not stamp his own coin.

However, there is something that stays
however, there is something that bemoans.

Jorge Luis Borges