

Three flash-fictions by Jorge Luis Borges – by DOROTHY POTTER SNYDER

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These three “minicuentos” by Jorge Luis Borges have fascinated me for years, and they can serve the devoted Borges reader as a supplemental reference to the themes the author explores in his longer and more famous works: documents (and false documents), memory, duality, identity and death. But references alone they are not: they are perfectly complete little jewels in themselves, and their economy of expression presents a great challenge to the translator. I hope I have done them justice. — Dorothy Potter Snyder

Abel and Cain

Abel and Cain met again after Abel’s death. They were walking through the desert and they recognized each other from afar because both of them were very tall. The brothers sat down on the ground, made a fire, and ate. They kept silence, the way tired folks do when the day draws to a close. In the sky, a star appeared that had yet to be named. By the flames’ light, Cain noticed the mark of the stone on Abel’s forehead, and he dropped the bread he was about to put in his mouth and begged forgiveness for his crime.

Abel responded:

“Did you kill me or did I kill you? I don’t remember anymore. And here we are, together, just like before.”

“Now I know that you have truly forgiven me,” said Cain. “Because to forget is

to forgive. I will also try to forget.”

Slowly, Abel said:

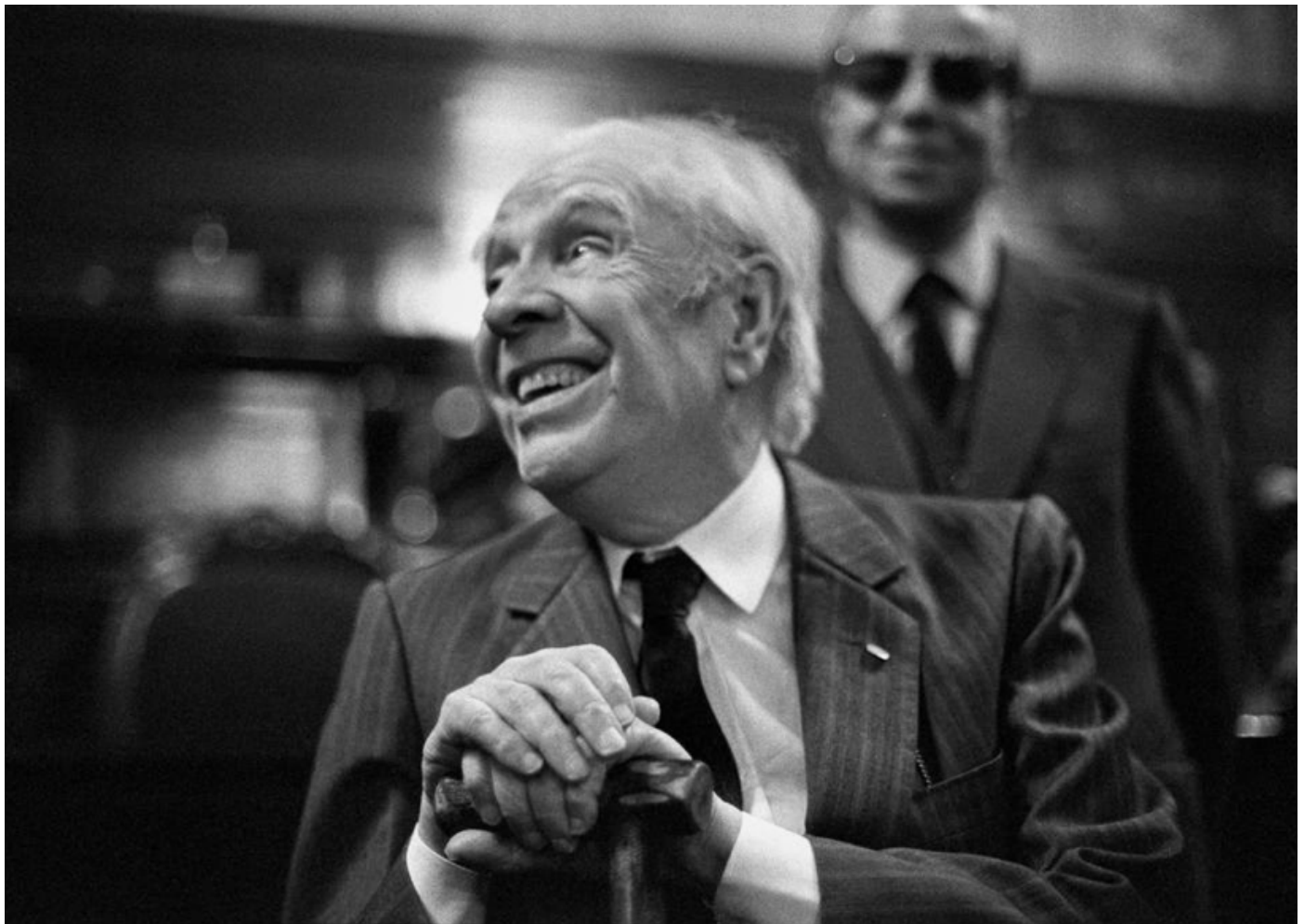
“So it is. While remorse endures, so does the crime.”

Borges and Me

It's the other one, Borges, who thinks things up. I walk around Buenos Aires and I dawdle, almost automatically now, to gaze upon the arch of a corridor or an entranceway. I receive news of Borges through the mail, and I see his name in a panel of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like hourglasses, maps, seventeenth-century typography, the origins of words, the taste of coffee and Stevenson's prose. The other one shares these tastes, but in a vain way that turns them into an actor's props. It would be excessive to declare that our relationship is hostile: I live, I permit myself to live, so that Borges can cook up his literature, and that literature justifies me. It's not hard for me to admit that he's managed to write some acceptable pages, but those pages can't save me, perhaps because what's good doesn't belong to anyone, not even to the other one, but instead to the language or the tradition. Apart from that, I'm fated to lose myself ultimately, and just a glimmer of me will be able to endure in the other one. Bit by bit, I'm giving in to him completely, although his perverse habit of falsifying and blowing things out of proportion is evident to me. Spinoza understood that all things want to persist in their being; the stone wishes to be forever a stone, the tiger a tiger. I have to stay in Borges, not in myself (if I really am someone), but I recognize myself much less in his books than in those of many other people, or in the tireless strumming of a guitar. Years ago, I tried to free myself of him, and I switched from slum mythologies to playing around with time and the infinite, but now those games belong to Borges, and I will have to come up with new things. Thus, my life is a fugue, an escape attempt. I lose everything, and everything belongs to oblivion or to the other one. I don't know which of the two of us is writing this page.

Ictiocentaurus

Licofronte, Claudiano and the Byzantine grammarian Juan Tzetzes mentioned ictiocentauri on occasion. There is no other reference to them in the classical texts. We may translate ictiocentaurus as centaur-fish; the word has also been applied to beings that mythologists have called centaur-mermen. They are amply represented in Roman and Greek sculpture. From the waist up they are men, from the waist down they are fish, and they have the front legs of a horse or a lion. Their place is among the coterie of marine gods, along with hippocampi.



Borges at Palermo. 1984. Photo by Ferdinando Scianna



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