

Ana arranged this beautiful meal in Rice Faculty lounge [with a large group of professors], and she was being very nice to David and me; David sat on one side of him, and I sat [on the other]. [Borges] always had his cane by him. He was one of those rare people that doesn't answer right away, but if you talked to him, and wanted to think about it for a while – which he often did – he would lean back, with his hands on the knob of the cane, tip his head back. I don't want to say his tongue came out between his lips, but sort of. And then, those eyes, tipped...and I remember... [I] thought he had, in fact, an inflammation. May have had, I don't know! But anyhow, that stuck. I remember especially how devoted María was to him. That was just very touching to see. Not simply his, you know, servant, but forcefully there for him, is how I would put it.

My wife (who was also present) said, "I've never seen you so at a loss for words, as when Borges said to you, at one point during the meal - more than in general chitchat, unforgettably, "tell me what you do, exactly." That comma in there, I'm putting it this way, weighed about a thousand pounds. What was - you know, "tell me what you do" that's easy, you follow – "exactly" – froze me! And David came to my rescue. He saw that we would've been silent forever. I couldn't talk. My tongue froze. I've never been so, so challenged by somebody we all revered quite a lot. I thought quickly thereafter, "I can't just answer this glibly." But of course, I wound up saying nothing.

So, a little later, the talk quickly got around to philology. You know about his great knowledge of the history of words and language. And he found out, I think through David, maybe through me, that I had had a very difficult decision deciding between turning to philology in German or literature. And we talked about one of my teachers, whom Borges knew by reputation. And this teacher was – his name was Marti Joos – a Swiss linguist – who helped crack the Japanese submarine codes, by the way, and who was the inventor of a machine that Borges knew about. So, when he found out I'd studied there, he asked me a little bit about Martin Joos.

And I probably told him my two favorite Joos stories. And I don't remember if at that point my wife sitting here [next to me] was pulling on my shirt to shut up [laughing] because...but suddenly having frozen, I just unleashed – you know, it felt like the floodgate was open. I could tell him about something, but not what I was doing.

And then afterward we sat around while dessert was taken. [The Rice Faculty Lounge] may be very different now, but there were nice, big sort of couches - leather couches, fake leather couches probably - and he sank down into the prominent one, blue, and of course we sat basically at his feet. And we were sitting on around him...every so often, you'd look up, and see everybody leaning, leaning over, leaning in.

David moderated then [at First Church], maybe with Ana, the question and answer. Was that at Finney? That was at First Church. And I remember that a little bit because [for Borges], no question was too dumb, and he never showed any irritation that one might expect.