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## ARTICLES

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### A Death in Geneva: Jorge Luis Borges, 1899–1986

By ANA CARA-WALKER Even cyclical time cannot recover what has passed; at most, it offers a chance for ritual celebration, the occasion for an anniversary. All too aware of Heraclitus' river, the clepsidra's last drop, the "recondite sand that slides away" in the hourglass, Jorge Luis Borges confronted the arbitrary limits of time, of destiny: "a line of Verlaine I shall not recall again," "a mirror that has seen me for the last time," a street "which unawares I have walked down for the last indifferent time," "a door I have locked until the end of the world," a "person, in this house, to whom we have said, without knowing it, farewell." For everything, he knew, there is a cipher. The date 14 June 1987 marked the first anniversary of his death.

In the spring of 1986, thanks to a grant from the National Endowment from the Humanities, I traveled to Geneva. With me I carried half a dozen translations of *milonga* poems by Borges, which David Young and I collaborated to deliver into the English language. Along the way Borges offered suggestions, corrections, approval. The trip was another chance to put our English *milongas* to the test and to elicit answers (anecdotes, musings, explanations) about Borges's participation in the Argentine *milonga* tradition.

I arrived on Sunday afternoon. Maria Kodama met me in the lobby of the Hôtel L'Arbalète, where she and Borges were staying. She had just completed a lesson in Arabic—a way of passing time, of keeping the world open. We relaxed in her room, where red roses, potted plants, stacked letters, newspaper articles, phone numbers, and notebooks had accumulated over the last months. Borges had quietly left Buenos Aires, not intending to return. Now he rested in the adjacent room. I knew he was ill, but on the phone Maria assured me that he welcomed visitors, that work cheered him, and that many friends and acquaintances had been by to see him. Marguerite Yourcenar had left just a day or two before my arrival. It had been a moving and humbling experience, Maria revealed, to watch these grand and wise contemporaries converse about the mysteries of the universe in their own language. Periods of silence might be interrupted by a question from Yourcenar: "Will we find our way out of the labyrinth, Borges?"

Teatime came and Maria and I joined Borges next door. Stunned by how thin he looked, I was nevertheless comforted by his warm and gracious manner, his

light blue suit, his white shirt, his tie, and his slippers. "My father told me a gentleman never goes in public in his shirtsleeves," I remember him saying. Maria corroborated this when she recalled how Borges had spent hours under a hot springtime sun in New Orleans listening to the annual Jazz and Heritage Festival: Borges in a suit surrounded by people and players who wore practically no clothes at all. After our strawberry tarts and tea, Borges and I addressed his *milongas*. Fashioned after the traditional, often improvised, verbal art of countryside gaucho men and singers from the Buenos Aires outskirts, Borges's *milonga* poems sing the deeds of ordinary folk, historical events, and local heroes. I began with "Milonga for Don Nicanor Paredes": "I'd like to strum a chord now; / I won't sing loud or long. / Don Nicanor Paredes / Is the subject of my song." Borges's face lit up. He nodded, he smiled. He listened carefully, delighted by each stanza. Suddenly he interrupted. "No, no," he said forcefully; "he never shouted!" The eighth stanza, which ended, "He'd put a sudden end to it / With a shout or a riding whip," violated Borges's sense of Paredes as a taciturn man whose authority and command were quietly stated. "But Borges," I protested, "the original reads like that." "It couldn't," he said simply; "he never shouted." I turned to the Spanish and read: "Cuando entre esa gente mala / Se armaba algún entrevero, / El lo paraba de golpe, / De un grito o con el talero." Borges thought a minute. He repeated the stanza to himself. He leaned back and edited. "No," he insisted softly; "'shout' will not do."

In his references to the *milongas* he was lovingly faithful to each of his characters, to their legends, and to the Buenos Aires of a time when the Maldonado Stream had not yet been channeled underground. All the characters were real, he had repeatedly told me, except for Manuel Flores, whom he had invented in a *milonga* for a Mexican film. Events, or at least their stories, were also true: the case of the brothers Iberra, the knife of Juan Muraña, the death of Albornoz.

He was particularly fond of Paredes, however, whose name he had been careful to change from Nicolás to Nicanor "out of respect for his living relatives." The first story he wrote, Borges claimed, was about Paredes. (Was it "Streetcorner Man" he was thinking of, later retold as "Rosendo's Tale"?) From Paredes also he had learned the proverb "En casa del jabonero / El que no cae se refala" (At the soapmaker's place, / You slip if you don't fall). Borges liked repeating it with

the same humorous and defiant tone used by neighborhood thugs and dandies.

Paredes evoked for Borges not only a lost world of caudillos and *compadritos* which the writer only witnessed from a distance, but also the neighborhood of his youth, Palermo. A year earlier, when I first read Borges a draft of "Milonga for Don Nicanor Paredes," he was moved to tears by the content, if not by the translation, of the second stanza: "I didn't see him sick or dying, / I didn't see him stiff and dead. / I see him alive and feisty, / Patrolling his neighborhood." He knit his brow, then his eyes welled up. Overcome by a private vision of his barrio, he repeated in Spanish: "Lo veo con paso firme, / Pisar su feudo, Palermo." He wiped his cheek and said, "Maria, I think I'm going to cry."

Two things were clear by the end of our meeting, one explicitly stated, the other tacitly suggested: rhyme was essential to the milonga form, and Palermo would have to be mentioned. Now, in Geneva, the resulting revisions pleased him: "I didn't see him sick or wasted, / I didn't see him when he died. / I see him patrolling Palermo / With a sure and easy stride."

In the course of the afternoon it became evident that despite his willing disposition, Borges now tired more easily. We resolved to take a break and continue the next day. Maria invited me to share her room during my stay in Geneva. This close proximity to Borges made possible short but more frequent exchanges during the next four days.

Maria's company during quiet hours late at night, our walks through Geneva, our shared coffees and meals, were an unexpected gift. Her brilliance, humor, and sensitivity touched me in ways that in the past had been overshadowed by Borges. We talked about literature, people she had met, places they had seen, vague plans for the future. We recalled the pleasure of Borges's company at meals, when his observations, etymologies, tastes, and inquisitiveness delighted all those at his table. On those occasions, subjects ranged from the sublime to the inane. Once, at an inn in Pennsylvania, he began to muse about how everything in America (as he referred to the United States) was served on a bed of lettuce, thus opening the way for the absurd. Fantasy was matched, however, when Borges told how once, when he was in California, even his scoop of ice cream had been presented on lettuce leaves. He tried ideas out on people, testing opinions and playing with words. If "everness" was possible, was "neverness" viable? Did I know the meaning of the word *jazz*, which he whispered with relish in my ear? Playfully dirty, anonymous milonga verses and rhymes followed. Then back to jazz—but he couldn't remember where he had heard a specific piece. "Was it the Kool Jazz Festival?" I asked. "No, no. Hot jazz. It was hot jazz," he said.

Following Borges's specifications, Maria had looked for an apartment in Geneva's Vieille Ville. Borges had always dreamed of living there, and Maria had come upon the perfect place off a tiny cobblestoned street, in

a passageway, on the second floor of an old unnumbered house. Beautifully remodeled, the apartment still needed minor furnishings before the two of them could move in. Maria and I shopped for sheets and blankets, some kitchen utensils, a chaise longue for Borges, several odds and ends. Arrangements were made for a cook. The move was delayed a few days, however, in spite of Borges's impatience.

Once again we tackled the milongas. Borges was alert and lucid. He liked the English version of "Milonga for Jacinto Chiclana." This was the first milonga he wrote, and one of his favorites. As I read the individual stanzas in translation and he repeated them in Spanish, the understated humor and irony of his own verses made him smile: "As soon as he was aware / Of the wound and all the bleeding, / He thought that prolonging his stay / Would hardly show good breeding." All that bleeding, of course, is not in the original, and I wondered what Borges might think. "The rhyme is more important than a literal translation," he assured me, happily accepting the variation. The sound of the milongas, their cadence, their rhythm, are essential to their poetry, he explained. His milongas, and milongas in general, were meant to be recited aloud, to be sung, to be remembered by folks the way one might recall portions of a ballad or lines from blues songs. Rhyme, therefore, is an important device, as is the use of ordinary language given a poetic turn. Also essential is the sense that each verse is the fruit of inspiration and improvisation, while at the same time a part of tradition. On various occasions Borges had repeated, "It is not I who have written these milongas; it is all the criollos I carry in my blood."

Sometimes witty or humorous, at other times metaphorical or political, milonga stanzas give the impression of having rolled off the tongue of traditional verbal artists, local men-of-words. In this vein, "Milonga for Jacinto Chiclana" moves from an apparently casual but persistent recollection to an artistically crafted "affectionate salute." Like the poetry of traditional milonga singers, this dedication, this praise poem composed by Borges, is a gift of words and remembrance, sure to perpetuate the memory of all that is "coded" in Jacinto Chiclana's name. Similarly, Alejo Alborno (and men like him), who "died as if it didn't matter," is celebrated and made immortal in "Milonga of Alborno": "I think he'd be pleased to know / Someone was telling his story / In a milonga. Time / Is oblivion and memory." Apparently mundane stories were thus made universal by Borges and transformed in milongas into unofficial history. Conversely, history was retold and given human dimensions in an alternative vision of the Argentine "conquest of the desert" ("Milonga del infiel") and in an intimate perspective of the Falklands War ("Milonga del muerto").

While Borges rested, I visited Geneva. Maria told me some of his favorite places during his youth in that city. I began to understand why Borges had returned. His private *Atlas* (1984) of places and people, things and thoughts, words and images shared with Maria

Kodama, offered a clue: "Of all the cities on the planet, of the various, intimate homelands a man searches for and gradually earns in the course of his travels, Geneva seems to me the most propitious for happiness." Here he had cultivated his intellect and come in contact with ideas that later informed most of his writings: "I owe to it, as of 1914, the revelation of French, of Latin, of German, of expressionism, of Schopenhauer, of the doctrine of the Buddha, of Taoism, of Conrad, of Lafcadio Hearn, and of a nostalgia for Buenos Aires." Here also he had begun to forge his soul; to Geneva he owed the revelation "of love, of friendship, of humiliation, and of the temptation of suicide." The city's modesty—or discretion—was in keeping with Borges's spirit: "As opposed to other cities, Geneva is not emphatic. Paris does not ignore that it is Paris, decorous London knows it is London, Geneva barely knows it is Geneva."

On my way to the Musée de l'Horlogerie et Emailerie I saw two men playing chess. Each chess piece was the height of a chair. The black-and-white board, mapped on the ground, marked the boundaries of each move, of free will and span. I thought of Borges: "God moves the player and he the piece. / What god behind God originates the scheme / Of dust and time and dream and agony?" I passed the Horloge Fleurie—more decorative than exact, more seasonal than digital, unable to keep pace with quartz and Swiss store-window watches. Inside the Musée the measure of time was exhibited historically: sun clocks, water clocks, sand clocks, oil lamps, candles, weights, pendulums, and the spring clock. Measure gave way,

however, to fantasy and symbol, to metaphor and allegory in the display. At a prescribed time a hammer struck, a group of figures were set in motion—a hunt or chase, gods and goddesses, the apostles. A cock above crowed three times. Ulysses and Penelope were reunited.

I returned to L'Arbalète. Borges no longer wore a suit. After resting, he called me in. Silence predominated in our exchange. I held his hand. "How many more hours?" he asked rhetorically. "It's as you say, Borges," I answered, taken aback; "for everything there is a cipher." "Yes," he smiled; "a given number of times we go to sleep, a given number of times we awaken . . ."

On Tuesday we had our last meeting on the milongas. He told of the brothers Iberra and noted that David Young and I had failed to include in our translation the lines where one brother lays the other on the train tracks (a stanza which appears in the collected works but not in the version of *Para las seis cuerdas* with the Héctor Basaldúa illustrations). Asked if the incident was true, he narrated and confirmed the tale while the echo of the last verses went through my mind: "And now I've told it all. / It's not a pretty fable. / It's the same old tale of Cain / Who keeps on killing Abel." Silence followed. I asked if he was tired. He took a minute to answer, and then, as if asking a question, he said, "But people have forgotten my milongas." I assured him many had not. My own love for the tradition and for his poems motivated the translations and the desire to make his milongas known to others. Touched by this, he leaned forward and thanked me.



ANA CARA-WALKER, JORGE LUIS BORGES, AND MARIA KODAMA  
AT OBERLIN COLLEGE, MAY 1983 (Photo: Edsel Little)

He considered some of his milongas to be among his best poems, yet he insisted, "When I write a milonga, I want the reader to forget that I am a man of letters." He wanted to merge his voice with that of anonymous and popular poets. Several of his compositions have been set to music and recorded by contemporary singers. Asked why he had "condescended to the milongas," he replied: "I have not condescended. I have elevated myself to them!"<sup>1</sup> It pleases me to know he spent his last hours of work reciting these poems.

On Wednesday the day had come to move to the apartment. Maria had decided it, I suspect, after a talk with Borges's doctor Patrick Ambrossetti, who had respected Borges's wishes not to enter a hospital. At last Borges would live in the Vieille Ville. Maria and I packed their things. Letters emerged from drawers, an unfinished manuscript, winter coats now unnecessary, Borges's shoes, books (two by Kipling, *The Jungle Books* and *Kim*, sent by Yourcenar after her visit). In my rented car we moved the packages, hangers, and suitcases; Patrick's car transported Borges. The transition was quick and quiet. All publicity was to be avoided. Personnel from L'Arbalète guided us out through the back exit, down the service elevator, past the kitchen.

By now Borges kept to his bed. He rested peacefully in his new room. Maria, at his side, described the apartment, answering every question. "The bedroom is full of light, with windows overlooking rooftops and the steeple of a church. The walls are beautiful, wood-paneled, the color of sand." She guided Borges's hand over the panel molding. He began to memorize the room. I recalled another bedroom he had shown me in Buenos Aires. He had wanted me to see it during one of my visits to the Maipú Street apartment. Small, tidy, it had a single bed, a glassed bookcase with privileged volumes, on the wall some plaques and awards, walking canes at the foot of the bed, an hourglass on a shelf. "Maria gave me the tiger after I had written 'Tigres azules,'" he said, looking at the wall. Made of papier-mâché, the bas-relief of a blue tiger in motion hung over the bed. Now, in Geneva, that other room seemed so distant. Satisfied with Maria's description, he lay back and fell into silence. "Are you all right, Borges?" Maria asked. "Yes," he answered. "This is the happiest day in my life."

Borges's mortality became more dramatic. I was no longer with the "other," the immortal Borges of "Borges and I." His physical frailty and needs showed up a humanity often unseen but always underlying his every creation and act. I'd had a glimpse of this the very first time I called on him in Buenos Aires. On that occasion we talked at length about criollismo, James Joyce, Lewis Carroll, nostalgia, family histories, and anecdotes. He told me that he liked Frost better than Sandburg. After some time the maid interrupted us to announce lunch. "I will have to leave you," Borges excused himself. I helped him over to the dining-room table. He sat at the head, alone. The maid set before him a bowl of soup. Silently, he began to eat; I showed

myself to the door. Sandburg crossed my mind: "I saw a famous man eating soup . . ." I had hated to leave him then as much as I regretted my departure now.

Maria accompanied me to the Gare Cornavin. I was scheduled to take a train to Paris and leave for New York Saturday morning. With some time to spare, we went into a coffee shop next to the station. It was difficult to say good-bye, to make light. It was clearer than ever, in my farewell with Maria, that Borges had carefully chosen his soul's partner. A sinister clock teased us from the wall. The digits on its face were placed counterclockwise, as if one could go against time. The mirror reflection on the opposite wall, however, dictated my departure.

On the train I pulled out *La cifra* (1981) and *Los conjurados* (1985).<sup>2</sup> I was struck by Borges's anticipation of death. The beauty and perfection of several poems and essays were also underlined by a note of sadness, pain, and courage, especially in his last book. The events of the last years had been difficult for Borges. The Falklands War, for instance, had deeply disturbed him. His "Milonga del muerto" sings the death of one man among his brothers. More poignant is his account of "Juan Lopez and John Ward." One, born by the stillness of the River Plate, professed his love for Conrad, revealed to him in a classroom on Viamonte Street. The other, from the outskirts of the city where Father Brown strolled, had studied Spanish to read *Don Quijote*. "They would have been friends, but they only saw each other once, face to face, in some islands of too much importance, and each one was Cain, and each became Abel." Borges's love for England, intimately expressed in "A Certain Island" ("Here we are the two of us, secret island. / No one can hear us. / Between two dusks / we will share what we love in silence"), and his faithfulness to Buenos Aires and Argentine tradition made the war for him all the more absurd. He once described the conflict as "two bald men fighting over a comb."

Also disturbing and revealing are the dreams he recounts in his last volume, declaring in his prologue that they were actual gifts of the night, or the dawn. He had protested about terrible nightmares in Buenos Aires, Maria told me, which now had ceased in Geneva. Had the hope or enlightened vision of "Los conjurados" made this possible in part? This final essay tells of a group of men of different races who profess different religions and speak diverse languages: "They have taken the strange resolution to be reasonable. They have resolved to forget their differences and accentuate their affinities." The event takes place in Central Europe and dates from 1291: "The cantons now are twenty-two. Geneva, the last of them, is one of my homelands. Tomorrow they will be the whole planet. In case what I say is not veridical, let us hope it will be prophetic."

At Kennedy Airport, upon my return, I heard Borges was dead. The questions posed in a poem entitled "The Web," published by the *New Yorker* just a

week or so before my trip, were now answered in the newspapers. "Which of my cities / am I doomed to die in?" Borges had asked. In what language would his death be pronounced? At what hour would it take place? "These questions are / digressions that stem not from fear / but from impatient hope," he clarified. "They form part of the fateful web / of cause and effect / that no man can foresee, / nor any god."

With Borges's death, the twentieth century has changed. He was among the last nineteenth-century men, with a love for "hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee, and Stevenson's prose." Now I mourn him with joy and sorrow, the way he mourned his own dead: "Tonight I can cry like a man, I can feel that tears run down my cheeks, because I know that on earth there's not a single thing that's mortal and doesn't project its shadow. Tonight you have told me without words, Abramowicz, that we must enter death the way one enters a feast."

Indeed, he entered death like a feast, with courage, lucidity, and happiness. At last Providence had unbound him from "the sad habit of being someone and from the weight of the universe." His gifts of fiction, ethics, wit, tradition, and hope remain with us into the twenty-first century and beyond.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps for a shorter period, so will the more modest anecdotes we read and tell. But then, "Every memorable man runs the risk of becoming coined through anecdotes," Borges wrote honoring his dear friend Xul Solar; like him also, "I now help to make that inevitable fate come true."

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<sup>1</sup> Carlos Cortínez, "Con Borges," *Anales de la Universidad de Chile*, January-December 1967, pp. 142-43.

<sup>2</sup> For reviews of *La cifra* and *Los conjurados*, see respectively *WLT* 57:2 (Spring 1983), p. 255, and 60:2 (Spring 1986), p. 293.

<sup>3</sup> On Borges, see *BA* 45:3 (Summer 1971), pp. 381-470, and *WLT* 58:1 (Winter 1984), pp. 57-58.

## Three Milongas

By JORGE LUIS BORGES

### *Milonga for Jacinto Chiclana*

I remember now: Balvanera.  
On a night long ago it came:  
Somebody casually mentioned  
Jacinto Chiclana's name.

And something was said about  
A streetcorner fight, risked lives;  
Time gives us a backward glimpse  
Of a duel with gleaming knives.

Who knows why Chiclana's name  
Should be pursuing me?  
I'd like to know more about him—  
What kind of man was he?

An obliging soul, I imagine.  
I see him distinguished, tall,  
Never raising his voice,  
ready to risk it all.

A firmer step may never  
Have walked upon this earth.  
In love or war, it may be,  
No one has matched his worth.

Beyond the courtyard trees  
Balvanera's towers rise,

And on a random corner  
By chance somebody dies.

I can't make out the features.  
I see the men, their strife  
Under the yellow streetlight;  
I see that snake, the knife.

As soon as he was aware  
Of the wound and all the bleeding,  
He thought that prolonging his stay  
Would hardly show good breeding.

Only God knows how much  
Goodness that man could claim.  
Gentlemen, I'm just singing  
What's coded into his name.

There are things you do in life  
You'd just as soon forget.  
Having shown courage is one thing  
You never have to regret.

Courage is always better,  
And hope is an absolute.  
Here's Jacinto Chiclana's milonga,  
An affectionate salute.