

Robert Mezey and Dick Barnes

Eight Poems by Jorge Luis Borges

1. Rain

Evening, a sudden clearing of the mist,
For now a fine, soft rain is freshening.
It falls and it did fall. Rain is a thing
That no doubt always happens in the past.

Hearing it fall, the senses will be led
Back to a blessed time that first disclosed
To the child a flower that was called the rose
And an extraordinary color, red.

These drops that blind our panes to the world outside
Will brighten the black grapes on a certain trellis
Out in the far, lost suburbs of the town

Where a courtyard was. The rain coming down
Brings back the voice, the longed-for voice,
Of my father, who has come home, who has not died.

2. *To Luis De Camoëns*

Without regret or anger, time shall burr
The heroic swordblade. Penniless and sad,
You sought the land you had longed for from abroad,
Oh captain, so that you might die in her,
With her. The flower of Portugal had died
In the enchanted wilderness, and the tough
Spaniard, who earlier had been driven off,
Menaced again her unprotected side.
I wonder whether, this side of that last
River to cross, you humbly realized
That that flag and those arms you had so prized,
Lands of the East and West, all that was lost,
Would live, aloof from men's inconstancies,
In your *Æneid* of the Portuguese.

3. *Blind Pew*

Far from the sea and from the lovely war
(For so love praises most what has been lost),
This blind, foot-weary pirate would exhaust
Road after English road or sodden moor.

Barked at by every dog from every farm,
Laughingstock of the young boys of the village,
He slept a poor sleep, trying to keep warm
And freezing in the black dust of the ditches.

But in the end, on far-off golden beaches,
A buried treasure would be his, he knew;
This softened some the hardness of his path.

You are like him—on other golden beaches
Your incorruptible treasure waits for you:
Immense and formless and essential death.

4. Allusion To A Ghost Of The Nineties

Nothing is left. Only Muraña's knife.
Only the brief account in the grey twilight.
I don't know why he haunts me night after night,
That murderer I never saw in life.
Palermo was meaner then. The yellow wall
Of the jail loomed above the outskirts slum
And the mud streets. Through that jungle he started from
Wandered the squalid knife, as shadows fell.
The knife. The face has long since been erased,
And of that mercenary, whose cold trade
Was simple courage, everything has decayed
Except a flash of steel and a dim ghost.
And though it blacken marble, let time's flame
Spare Juan Muraña's hard, unyielding name.

5. *In Memoriam A. R.*

The vagaries of chance or the precise
Laws that govern this dream, the universe,
Permitted me to walk our mortal course
A pleasant part of the way with Alfonso Reyes.

He knew the art, completely known to none,
Not Sinbad nor Ulysses nor their hands,
Of sailing from one land to other lands
And living everywhere like a native son.

If memory sometimes pierced him with its arrow,
He worked that violent metal into song,
The noble alexandrine, stately, slow, and long,
The fourteen-syllable threnody's burden of sorrow.

In all these ardent labors he was aided
By human hope, and by its light got written
The sturdy verse that still is not forgotten,
And Spanish prose refreshed and renovated.

Beyond My Cid, off to the war again,
And the great herd that hopes to remain obscure,
He tracked the fleeting prints of literature
Down to the meanest slums of our thieves' jargon.

In Marino's gardens, equal in their beauty,
He tarried awhile, but deep inside him stirred
Something essential and deathless that preferred
The trials of scholarship and sacred duty.

Or say, rather, that he preferred to tend
The gardens of meditation, where Porphyry

Set in the midst of darkness and lunacy
The Tree of the Beginning and the End.

The indecipherable providence
That metes out the extravagant and the stark,
Gave most of us the sector or the arc,
But to you, Reyes, the whole circumference.

You went in search of the sadness or élan
Hidden by frontispieces and renown;
Like Erigena's God, you wished to be no one
So that you might at last be every man.

What brilliance your style attained, that precise rose
Unfolding in delicacies and plenitude;
To the Lord's wars the ancestral soldiering blood
Raced back once more, making a joyful noise.

Where can he be (I ask), my Mexican friend?
Does he now contemplate, with all the dread
Of Œdipus before the Sphinx, the unswayed
Archetypes of the Face or of the Hand?

Or does he wander, as Swedenborg prayed to do,
A world more real and closer to perfection
Than this one, which is scarcely a reflection
Of that high welter and heavenly hullabaloo.

If (as the arts of lacquer and ebony show)
Memory shapes its intimate Eden, then
There are already in glory better men,
A better Cuernavaca and Mexico.

Only God knows the colors destiny
Presents men's eyes beyond the ephemeral;

I walk these streets, thinking of death, and still
Very little from that world reaches me.

I know just one thing. That Alfonso Reyes
(Wherever the waves have carried him), awake,
Eager as always, will happily undertake
The laws and mysteries of another place.

Let us yield up to the matchless and diverse
The bays and songs of triumph and renown;
And let no tears of mine defile this verse,
Which our commemorating love sets down.

6. *A Key In Salonika*

Abarbanel, Farías or Pinedo,
Persecuted and driven out of Spain
By the unholy Inquisition, still retain
The key to a certain dark house in Toledo.

All liberated now from hope and fear,
They look at it in the last light of day:
Its bronze speaks of the past, the far away,
Old fires, and quiet suffering year by year.

Now that its door is fragments, it has thinned
To a cipher for the Diaspora, for the wind,
Like to that other key of the Second Temple,

Which someone flung up when the Roman legion
Fell on the Jews to make them an example,
And which a hand reached down for out of heaven.

7. *Snorri Sturluson*
(1179 - 1241)

You, who left to posterity an unsparing
Tribal mythology of ice and flame,
You, who made fast in words the violent fame
Of your forebears, their ruthlessness and daring,

Were stunned to feel, as the mythic swords towered
Over you one evening, your insides churning,
And in that trembling dusk that bides no morning
It was revealed to you you were a coward.

Now in the Iceland night the heavy seas
Tower and plunge in the salt gale. Your cell
Is under siege. You have drained to the lees

A shame never to be forgotten. Now
The sword is falling above your pallid brow
As in your book repeatedly it fell.

8. *Rafael Cansinos-Assens*

The image of that people, stoned or scorned,
Immortal in their endless martyrdom,
Kindled a kind of sacred dread in him
As he sat sleepless and the candle burned.
He drank like one who drinks a noble wine
The Psalms and Canticles of Holy Scripture
And came to feel, that sweetness and that rapture
And, above all, that destiny were his own.
Israel called him. In an intimate hush
Cansinos heard her as the prophet heard
On the secret mountaintop the unseen Lord
Speaking in tongues of flame from a burning bush.
Oh may his memory stay with me forever.
I leave the rest for glory to uncover.