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Borges & I

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Borges & I

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The other one, the one called María Kodama, is the one things happen to. Over the years, I have watched her through our looking glass, her dark straight hair—cut precisely at shoulder-length, turn white, her youthful features mature. And yet I believe her to contain the same dewy innocence and singularity of elegant strangeness in a sea of sameness as on the day she first met, in Buenos Aires, Jorge Luis Borges in the musty confines of the university. For María, perhaps that was a moment of complete clarity, the center of the infinite garden, at which she made a choice or the beginning of a choice. I am not sure how one at the young age of sixteen, as sure of ourselves as we felt, can make such choices. For myself, I cannot say it was the attraction of youth to age, but rather youth to knowledge, a hunger planted and fed by the same garden. How I wanted to remain with María in that garden dedicated and extending to our deepest ancestors, but she managed to escape down another path or at least she thought she had left me behind. Perhaps she had paused to notice my bewilderment, I cannot say. I saw her confident resolve, the flounce of her skirt and hair, toss away from me.

From that moment, I might catch glimpses of María, always with Borges, in newsprint, her image recalled on the stage of some international honorary degree or prestigious award or in a photograph. Though invisible, I was at times not far away. As I have said, the garden was infinite, mapped across the atlas, and so we traveled. In Venice, I saw the swoop of pigeons swirl around her passage across the vast piazza of San Marco. I watched her rise in a hot air balloon over California vineyards. In the Louvre, I too shed tears on the Daru steps at the sight of the Winged Victory of Samothrace. I saw her pet the tremendous bodies of striped tigers. Of course, these events were meant for Borges, and the meaning of being there at his side must be personal to María. She was to know the shape of constant companionship, the day-to-day routine and needs of a blind man, the acute precision of his oral memory along with the gaffs of eating and hygiene that annoy the sighted and plague the sightless. This was companionship that must fully anticipate the needs of Borges. The work of any companionship cannot be known fully by others.

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Amanuensis, scribe, secretary, nurse, cook, guide, mother, daughter, caretaker, muse, wife, lover, but principally, gardener. Gardener in the labyrinthine landscape belonging only to Borges. Thus was my invisibility transposed upon a mirror, reluctantly watchful, envious though safely at the wavering distance of the interpreting eye to its story.

But one day our forking paths would meet at the divine birthplace of Nihon, our feet crunching in unison over the pebbled gravel before the great temples of Izumo. Borges marked this mythic center calling upon the gods in a swirl of cherry blossoms, their petals falling about him in Basho's seventeen syllables. What is the garden's atlas to the blind? A geography without vistas, perspective determined by time travel, a folded and reversible map. Yet even the colorblind crave to see the color of a body's journey, to divine meaning from fascination, even if translated again and again over centuries and multiple languages, becoming if only a whisper, an ideogram splashed across skin. The skin may be accusatory, but like paper, it receives and reflects its text, memory and knowing to be interpreted by the reader. So Sei Shonagon's deft brush thrust from a silken sleeve through eight centuries to lick the ear of Borges. Thus he would pronounce the name of María, how many mornings and seas, how many oriental and occidental gardens, his Shonagon, her Genji, his Beatrice, her Virgil, his little stone on a board of chess.

Sei Shonagon lifted her head from her pillow and spoke in perfect Spanish: *A la otra, a Amelia Nagamine, es a quien le ocurren las cosas*. In the book of things that occur to young women, there might have been, had Amelia kept such a notebook, a notation about a Mexicano in the uniform of the American Army, a journalist for the *Stars and Stripes*, who covered the Tokyo war crimes trials. Instead it was the journalist and writer, Américo Paredes, who kept his notebook, musing over the beautiful features of a japonesa born in Uruguay who also spoke the educated Spanish of a diplomat. Who among the Puerto Ricans G.I.s treated by the Red Cross, in those years of Japan's occupation, followed by a war in Korea, had not fallen in love with Amelia? But it was to Américo, an older though still young man of charm and resolve, to whom Amelia tied her future. And from that moment, I might catch glimpses of Amelia, for the next fifty years always at the side of Américo.

The world of Américo was not a forking garden but a contested borderland experienced in wide swatches: the Tex-Mex border; the American occupation of a war-torn Japan; a Greater Mexico, later perhaps the mythic atlas named Aztlán. The world known to Américo was a rebellious world of men in endless war, crimes committed by enemy and ally, survival by cunning and happenstance. It would seem that Amelia remained fixed at the center of Américo's borderland in Austin, Texas, where she raised her children and kept a modest household and supported her husband's scholarly ambitions. No doubt her gracious ways domesticated this Chicano, compressing Américo's passionate anger beneath a genteel veneer. But by the time Américo Paredes was discovered to be the godfather of Chicano Studies, Amelia had discovered a borderland of her own.

Perhaps her borderland began in the four walking blocks between the university and the Lone Star state capitol, its dome looming over the Austin landscape, where Amelia

beat a mother's fury at the doors of political power. And over time, Amelia occupied the borderland radiating around the Austin State School for the disabled and handicapped, the difficult and nearly impossible terrain of access to independent living and quality of life. I followed but could never fully imagine Amelia's meticulous caretaking, her persistent and obsessive advocacy, the meaning of her life becoming the body and the brains of a child who could not do for herself. But if not the mother, then who? And what of the post-wars that Amelia had also witnessed, the amputated and disfigured lives of veterans and civilians, and if Americans, joined to plead the justice of the Fourteenth Amendment: the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education of All Handicapped Children's Act of 1975, the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act of 1980, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. I saw her there at every turn, whether as commissioned community member or spokesperson or letter-writer or petitioner at the grassroots. But I guess that Amelia was too busy to keep any lists.

So Amelia and Américo shared lives across separate though overlapping borderlands, and perhaps over the long years, each chaffed at the obsession of the other, the understood refusal of either to become completely converted to the concerns of the other. I knew this sentiment of pride of partnership, public standing side-by-side, private guilt and jealousy, but finally death silences the frailties of illness, blesses loyalty, forgets.

Some believe that Américo Paredes, desperately lonely in the borderlands of death, called his beloved wife Amelia from his grave and that she obediently followed him only two months later. But the border's paths are mysterious, and Amelia and I took the bus out of Austin, headed down the obligatory border, and tossed cherry blossoms into the Rio Grande all the way to Brownsville, pursued by corridos, haunted by Américo's serenade, fierce and tender. *Japonesa, Japonesa*, the song crooned after us. *Que sonriés tu dolor, en tus brazos orientales mitigaré mi destierro*. And from Brownsville, we caught a boat to New Orleans. On a dappled spring morning several Wednesdays after the turmoil of Mardi Gras, we met María with Borges at the Café du Monde, sipping café and chicory, teeth tearing the doughy skin of sweet beignets, lips and chins dusted in powdered sugar. Not until that moment was Américo's Tokio guitar replaced by the insistent sax interlude of King Curtis, John Lennon driving his lyrics, *you gotta live, you gotta love, you gotta be somebody, you gotta shove, it's really hard*.

Amelia's tender eyes then turned to me, smiled old pain. *A la otra*, she began, *la otra called Yoko Ono, is the one things happen to*. Our minds wander back to Tokyo, precisely firebombed; we emerged from shelter and rural escape and remember the bewildered face of a young girl, yet a child of 12 years, following her belongings in a wheelbarrow, the precarious future to be forged out of rubble and defeat. Twenty years—prestigious schooling, two marriages, and an artistic career attached variously to John Cage and Andy Warhol—later, I stood with her at the foot of a ladder in a gallery in London, watching a wealthy Beatle from Liverpool climb its rungs, awkwardly balanced at the top to decipher a message through our magnifying glass: *YES*. I suppose that privilege comes back from war with fierce defiance, grabs a fistful of burnt earth, an act of reclamation, but in Yoko's

fist, a declaration of freedom. Still, that earth could be churned back eight centuries; thus a *Grapefruit* could have the acidic taste and shape of a pillow book of instructions. The conceptual *MAP PIECE* read, *Draw a map to get lost*. And so we did. And then, *WALK PIECE: Stir inside your brains with a penis until things are mixed well. Take a walk*. And so we did.

I followed Yoko into her world made famous by John Lennon, their conceptual country of peace: Nutopia, without land, boundaries, or passports, and if laws, only cosmic. I hung around like one more groupie in their New York embassy in the Dakota, claiming diplomatic immunity. I lived inside the looking glass ballad of John and Yoko for there was nothing about the intimacy of their lives that was not made public. Two virgins displayed in full frontal nudity. Honeymoon bed-in in a sea of white sheets to give peace a chance. Among the guests: Timothy Leary, Tommy Smothers, Hari Krishnas, a delegation of the blind. West met East in the Plastic Ono Band, the oriental riff chasing the revelatory experience of first sight: *oh my love, everything is clearer in our world*. Thus John Lennon would call her name, *Oh Yoko, oh Yoko, my love will turn you on*.

In the public's mania recycling their every movement, Lennon's attachment to Yoko would seem an obsessive submission to his oriental soul mate, his continuing pursuit of answers, fascinations eventually abandoned at the foot of Sergeant Pepper, Maharishi, and primal screaming. And perhaps it was true that he had met his match, the knowledge of fatherhood and feminism in which he recreated himself as househusband, bread-maker, caretaker. This was his enlightenment, his peaceful revolution. Who then had submitted to whom? Meanwhile, I accompanied Yoko daily from the Dakota to work, to run the business of being John Lennon and Yoko Ono, unknowingly preparing for the burden of legacy, money and memory.

And in opposing seasons in Buenos Aires, María finally opened Borges's library to Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, but having embraced order for so many years, perhaps it was too late.

With his pistol in my hand, I pulled the trigger. I do not know if the man who fell was an elderly man in his eighties or a younger man half that age. I do not know if he was a learned sinologist or a Mexican folklorist or a lyricist of Jabberwocky. I do not know if he could finally see me through his blindness, through the borders, the utopia of his mind. It was his pistol and his pop. The myopic splinter of spectacles. My primal scream caged and yellowed by a judgmental media.

I do not know which of us has written this page.

Thanks:

Frank Gravier
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