

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986)

A PERSONAL ANTHOLOGY

Edited and with a Foreword by Anthony Kerrigan

CASTLE BOOKS

1967

INFERNO I, 32

In the final years of the twelfth century, from twilight of dawn to twilight of dusk, a leopard looked upon some wooden planks, some vertical iron bars, men and women who were always different, a thick wall and, perhaps, a stone trough filled with dry leaves. The leopard did not know, could not know, that what he craved was love and cruelty and the hot pleasure of rending and the odor of a deer on the wind; and yet something within the animal choked him and something rebelled, and God spoke to him in a dream: *You live and will die in this prison, so that a man I know may look at you a certain number of times and not forget you and put your figure and your symbol in a poem which has its precise place in the scheme of the universe. You suffer captivity, but you will have furnished a word to the poem.* In the dream, God enlightened the rough beast, so that the leopard understood God's reasons and accepted his destiny; and yet, when he awoke, he felt merely an obscure resignation, a gallant ignorance, for the machinery of the world is overly complex for the simplicity of a wild beast.

Years later, Dante lay dying in Ravenna, as little justified and as much alone as any other man. In a dream, God revealed to him the secret purpose of his life and labor; in wonderment, Dante knew at last who he was and what he was and he blessed his bitter days. Tradition holds that on awakening he felt he had received and then lost something infinite, something he could not recuperate, or even glimpse, for the machinery of the world is overly complex for the simplicity of men.

—Translated by ANTHONY KERRIGAN

THE OTHER TIGER (1961)

And the craft createth a semblance.

—Morris, *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876).

I think of a tiger. The half-light enhances
the vast and painstaking library
and seems to set the bookshelves at a distance;
strong, innocent, new-made, bloodstained,
it will move through its jungle and its morning,
and leave its track across the muddy
edge of a river, unknown, nameless
(in its world, there are no names, nor past, nor future
only the sureness of the passing moment)
and it will cross the wilderness of distance
and sniff out in the woven labyrinth
of smells the smell peculiar to morning
and the scent of deer, delectable.
Among the slivers of bamboo, I notice
its stripes, and I have an inkling of the skeleton
under the magnificence of the skin, which quivers.
In vain, the convex oceans and the deserts
spread themselves across the earth between us;
from this one house in a remote lost seaport
in South America, I dream you, follow you,
oh tiger on the fringes of the Ganges.

Afternoon creeps in my spirit and I keep thinking
that the tiger I am conjuring in my poem
is a tiger made of symbols and of shadows,
a sequence of prosodic measures,
scraps remembered from encyclopedias,
and not the deadly tiger, the luckless jewel
which in the sun or the deceptive moonlight

follows its paths, in Bengal or Sumatra,
of love, of indolence, of dying.

Against the symbolic tiger, I have planted
the real one, it whose blood runs hotly,
and today, 1959, the third of August,
a slow shadow spreads across the prairie,
but still, the act of naming it, of guessing
what is its nature and its circumstances
creates a fiction, not a living creature,
not one of those who wander on the earth.

Let us look for a third tiger. This one
will be a form in my dream like all the others,
a system and arrangement of human language,
and not the tiger of the vertebrae
which, out of reach of all mythology,
paces the earth. I know all this, but something
drives me to this ancient and vague adventure,
unreasonable, and still I keep on looking
throughout the afternoon for the other tiger,
the other tiger which is not in this poem.

—Translated by ALASTAIR REID

A YELLOW ROSE

The illustrious Giambattista Marino, whom the unanimous
mouths of Fame—to use an image dear to him—proclaimed
the new Homer and the new Dante, did not die that after-
noon or the next. And yet, the immutable and tacit event
that happened then was in effect the last event of his life.
Laden with years and glory, the man lay dying in a vast
Spanish bed with carved bedposts. It takes no effort to
imagine a lordly balcony, facing west, a few steps away,
and, further down, the sight of marble and laurels and a
garden whose stone steps are duplicated in a rectangle of
water. A woman has placed a yellow rose in a vase. The
man murmurs the inevitable verses which—to tell the
truth—have begun to weary him a little:

*Blood of the garden, pomp of the walk,
gem of spring, April's eye . . .*

Then came the revelation. Marino *saw* the rose as Adam
might have seen it in Paradise. And he sensed that it existed
in its eternity and not in his words, and that we may make
mention or allusion of a thing but never express it at all;
and that the tall proud tomes that cast a golden penumbra
in an angle of the drawing room were not—as he had
dreamed in his vanity—a mirror of the world, but simply
one more thing added to the universe.

This illumination came to Marino on the eve of his death,
and, perhaps, it had come to Homer and Dante too.

—Translated by ANTHONY KERRIGAN