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Merciless Mnemosyne: A Gloss on a Story by Borges

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Editor's Note: This essay was submitted in response to Sam Hasegawa's splendid Borges parody "[Piazzolla and I](#)," which appeared in our last issue.

I remember Funes the Memorious. That is, I remember reading "Funes the Memorious," a story by Jorge Luis Borges, in the estimable translation by James E. Irby. In "Funes" we are introduced to a young man who not only possesses an infallible memory, but a perception of the physical world so acute as to surpass that which is endurable. Ireneo Funes, we are told, "knew by heart the forms of the southern clouds at dawn on the 30th of April, 1882," and could "fully and intuitively grasp" every moment-to-moment permutation of hairs in the tossing mane of a horse, or the precise patterns made by cattle continuously shifting on a hill, or the fluctuation of each individual flame in the uninterrupted dance of a fire, at any point — or, indeed, at all points — in that dance. Years after the fact, one supposes, he could evoke the exact configuration of wrinkles in his mother's nipple as he nursed, with both eyes open, on a wet November morning; he could replay, with unimpeachable faithfulness to the least detail, the percussive tapestry of ripples woven by every raindrop ever to have pelted the surface of a pond in his watchful presence. By such lights, the memories conjured by Marcel's madeleine are nothing to write home about.

I say that I remember "Funes the Memorious," but obviously I do not remember it, or the act of reading it, in the same sense that Funes, were he to have read it, would remember it. While I may have taken note, for instance, of the way the relative brightness of each page would flare and fade as clouds correspondingly veiled and then unveiled the sun as it swam through the east windows of my studio late in the day, I cannot summon to the present moment, with any degree of certainty, the specific intensity of the light at such-and-such a point in the progress of my reading, or the actual dimness of each passing shadow upon the page. I can only remember that shadows did, in fact, pass, and that the sunlight waxed and weakened, weakened and waxed, upon the open book.

A book lies open in the reader's lap. The page, brilliant as the tale it contains, is momentarily stained by a shadow. Perhaps the shadow obscures only half the page; perhaps the words, "Funes, lying on his back on his cot in the shadows, could imagine every crevice and every molding in the sharply defined houses surrounding him," are bathed in light, while the words that follow it are, for the moment, darkened. Perhaps, for the time it takes the shadow to pass, the reader shuts his eyes, recalls a thin cot and a fumbling hand in a damp room, and limns the mental image of a girl he was smitten by in the seventh grade. He remembers her name, but the details of her face are vague, and as a hedge against forgetting her entirely he must, perforce, invent new lines for her smile, a new sharpness to her cheekbones, a wholly different tint to her hair and tilt to her head. He also remembers the three, or thirteen, or twenty-seven times she teased him, and the effect such teasing had upon him; but as all these distinct scenarios in which he was humiliated by her nascent flirtatiousness have now coalesced in his memory, he must fabricate a whole new sequence, a whole new history, for those instances of teasing — perhaps, in the process, obsessively reliving some, relegating others. At this very moment he recalls her on a wet November morning, calling his name in the schoolyard and then, as he turns, averting her eyes and collapsing into a spasm of giggles with her cohort of equally devilish friends. Perhaps it happened, perhaps not.

"Perhaps" is a word of signal importance to poets; it is a word whose provenance and function are wholly unknown to Funes. He can elicit, with the accuracy of an atomic clock, the precise second at which the sun set on a certain Wednesday in a winter long since fled, and every gradation of apricot, rose, mauve, and magenta that accompanied each stage of its demise. What he cannot do is change any value, tweak any color, alter any nuance of that sunset. In his mind it is permanently fixed, and permanently dead. Memory, for Funes, is neither malleable, nor interactive, nor in any way suspect or playful; he is in thrall to Mnemosyne in her cruelest, most implacable aspect, utterly unable to collaborate with, critique, or override her. As such, he is the antithesis of the artist.

I remember, as I have said, encountering "Funes the Memorious" many years ago on a day of exquisite play between light and shadow, a day I recall with messy inexactitude and may, in retrospect, have fabricated. And I remember thinking that Ireneo Funes inhabits that same desolate stretch of Tartarus where Ixion eternally tumbles on his wheel, where the Danaides draw water through sieves, and where Sisyphus pushes his monumental rock — a rock that is no metaphor for the oppressiveness of the literal, but the thing itself.

DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*. ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby. Trans. James E Irby. New Directions, 1964.

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