

Borges and Camões

Translated by
William Baer

Jorge Luis Borges

The Borges

I know little or nothing of the Borges,
my ancestors, those Portuguese people lurking here
within my flesh, whose obscure but permanent trace
remains: their habits, their rigor, and their fear.
Shadowy, as if they'd never seen the sun,
these strangers to the processes of art
still form, indecipherably, a part
of time, of earth, and of oblivion.
And justly so, because their labors have prevailed:
they're Portugal — that famous race, at whose command,
the Great Walls of the East were breached, who sailed
out across the seas, to other seas of sand.
They are that fearless king who vanished inside
the desert, and those, back home, who swear he never died.

Jorge Luis Borges

To Luís de Camões

Without a shred of pity, time dulls the most
heroic swords. Now, sad Captain, your command
is done, and you've come home to the nostalgic coast
to die with, and within, your native land.
On distant, enchanted, foreign deserts, the flower
of Portugal was lost, unable to endure;
while Spain, no longer subdued and flush with power,
threatens your borders and unprotected shore.
So I wonder if you ever understood,
before you crossed that final shore to final rest,
that *everything* which seemed lost and gone for good —
your sword, your flag, the Orient, and the West —
would resurrect, free from the human curse
of change, in *Os Lusíadas*, your epic verse.

Luís de Camões

Mondego

Sweet, clear waters of the Mondego, sweet, kind,
and restful river of my memories,
where once misleading hopes whirled in the breeze,
misguiding me, and leaving me blind.
And now, I've gone away, sweet distant stream,
but, still, your memory overtakes me yet,
and never lets me change, or ever forget:
that the further away I am, the closer I seem.
Yes, the Fates have caused my soul to disappear
into remote and distant lands, to roam
within these seas and winds, both strange and new,
and yet, my soul, thinking of you, even here,
flies upon the wings of my sweet dreams of home,
into your lovely waters and bathes in you.

Luís de Camões*Cruel Senhora*

Cruel Senhora, I've always been wary. I knew
I needed to watch you closely in case
your doubts would surge to disaffection and erase
our love. Then I'd be ruined, since I love only you.
And now, everything I'd hope to have is lost:
you're pursuing another lover. So I detach
myself, believing your retribution will match
the sacrificial depths my love has cost:
I've given my soul, my senses, and my life to you;
I've given you everything I have within me,
and you promised love, but now, there's only disdain.
Lost and hopeless, I don't know what to do,
yet I know the day will come when this memory
will crush you down with terrifying pain.

Luís de Camões

Hippolytus

My over-confident heart, grew more and more
blinded to the evil it was capable of:
such a daring and illicit love,
such an agony never felt before.
But her eyes were like the ones that, every day,
I conjured in my foolish fantasy,
and Reason, terrified, abandoned me
to all my tempting thoughts and ran away.
O chaste Hippolytus, you took no part
in Phaedra's incestuous schemes. You never consented
to a love that blasphemed what should and shouldn't be.
So Love revenged, on me, your virtuous heart,
and now, at last, she's finally repented
for all the brutal damage she's heaped on me.

Luís de Camões

Doom

My sins, my wild loves, and Fate herself
have all conspired against me. My countless tough-
breaks and dumb mistakes have been hard enough,
especially, since all I ever wanted was love itself.
Somehow, I've survived, yet I still possess
the terrible pains of everything that's passed —
as all those whirling Furies convinced me, at last,
to never, ever hope for happiness.
Over the years of my life, I still can recall
those endless mistakes and blunders that incited Fate
to punish my foolish hopes so relentlessly.
Unfortunately, deceitful love, offered no help at all.
Oh! What could ever possibly satiate
this evil spirit for vengeance that's torturing me!

Luís de Camões

Luís de Ataíde

More than crushing countless kings, those lords
of the Orient; more than preserving the state
of India; more than eclipsing the fate
and fame of others who'd fought the heather hordes;
more — far more — than all those grand
and marvellous military campaigns, is the way
in which you now, completely unarmed, slay
the monsters and chimeras of our native land.
Over the years, accomplishing so much,
and crushing your enemies, your name is now
unparalleled in fame and majesty,
and yet, what inspires your greatest praise is how
you've vanquished, my Lord, in Portugal, such
ingratitude — such awesome jealousy!

Luís de Camões

Time

Time changes, and our desires change. What we believe — even what we *are* — is ever-changing. The world *is* change, which forever takes on new qualities. Always, we see that the “new” and “novel” are overturning the past, unexpectedly, while we retain from evil, nothing but its terrible pain, from good (if there’s been any), only the yearning. Time covers the ground with her cloak of green where, once, there was freezing snow — and rearranges my sweetest songs to sad laments. Yet even more astonishing is yet another unseen change within all these endless changes: that for me, *nothing* ever changes anymore.

Luís de Camões

Dona Maria

on her death in 1578

"Death, what have you stolen?" — "This lovely day."
 "When did you do it?" — "At the rising sun."
 "Do you have any idea whom you've taken?" — "None."
 "Who willed it?" — "God, in His inscrutable way."
 "Where's the corpse?" — "In the earth, in the cold."
 "What's become of her brightness?" — "Dark and black."
 "What says Portugal?" — "She wants her back:
 convinced that Maria deserved to live and grow old."
 "Did you kill those with her?" — "They're already dead."
 "So what says Love?" — "She can't say a thing."
 "Well, why's she so silent?" — "I've made her acquiesce."
 "So what's remains at the royal court?" — "Just dread."
 "What else?" — "Nothing. Not a single thing,
 except lamenting her vanished loveliness."

Luís de Camões

Essence

Give back your whiteness to the Easter flowers,
and your blushes to the crimson rose;
Give back to the sun the luminous light that glows
from your ravishing eyes and overpowers
our hearts. Give back your songs to the Sirens, who
filled your voice with irresistible harmony;
Give back your charms to the Graces, who now agree
they're much less elegant than you.
Give back to beautiful Venus your loveliness,
to Minerva your wisdom, talents, and refined
arts, and give back your purity to the chaste and true
Diana. Divest yourself of all you now possess,
all these gifts, and all that's left behind
is cruelty . . . the very essence of you.

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