

The Island of Anamorphoses

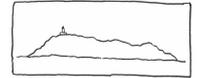
Jesper Andreasson's version

The tears of Borges

I walked up and down the deserted lobby of the Hotel Tre Infiniti, anxiously awaiting his arrival. He had long been a literary hero of mine and I was dying to tell him so. But that is not why I'd come to that small obscure island of Sasuelo, or only partially. I was there to present him with the manuscript, three handwritten pages in loopy and fervent cursive, double-spaced, wide-margined, indeed a very short piece. This brief and terrifying composition about a forlorn writer at the zenith of his ruin didn't belong to me, however. It was, as my late grandmother had claimed to my mother, who had then, in turn, claimed it to me, the original manuscript of *The Island of Anamorphoses*, a story considered fabled or lost by the quickly diminishing circles of the literati. My grandmother had been given the piece by the author himself, none other than Borges, her lover at the time. As the tale went, he gave it to her on the night they broke up, or rather hurled it in her direction when she ended things with him, a drunken, fiery, interminable night in Buenos Aires, as my mother explained it. Borges, inconsolable and weeping, wiped his tears with the pages before flinging them across the room, declaring the story, with true South American gravity, a gift of his spurned love.

I now held these pages tightly but not too tightly—they felt frail—in fear that the wind would rush in through the open French doors of the foyer and take them out and throw them into the Mediterranean (despite that there was no breeze that day, the island positively blazing with sun, the leaves of the cherry laurel trees beyond the terrace motionless).

The man I was meeting, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, the Belgian novelist, had put up a kind of literary SOS, a signal flare on the Internet, for anyone who might come across this document. On his charmingly outmoded website, he had posted that he'd do almost anything to get his hands on it. He didn't say why, which didn't really matter. I hoped that giving him the composition would inspire a literary friendship or mentorship, in the vein of Tolstoy and Chekhov, of master and student; I was a fledgling writer of twenty-six at that time, you see, even less known than that strange fragment of land in the sea that was and is Sasuelo.



Anyway, the quality of the text was fair, even readable in parts. Some of the sections were scarcely more than a blur, it's true, sentences trailing off into nothing in the margins, the ink having lost its grasp on the paper with time or with carelessness or neglect on the part of the owner, my grandmother. Or perhaps the words had been wiped away by the acerbic tears of Borges himself.

As I paced by the French doors, simultaneously feeling the interior's cool air conditioning on one side of my body and the heat from outside on the other, I realized that he was late, my guest, Jean-Philippe, twenty-six minutes to be exact. I thought this odd; when I'd phoned him the evening before, and also that morning to reconfirm the appointment, he had sounded very enthusiastic.

"I look forward to meeting you," he'd said in his spirited English (which wasn't bad, he simply had an accent), "I can't wait to get my hands on the story."

From bravado or nerves or a desire to please, I don't know, I'd found myself talking up the quality of the pages, telling him that they were in "near-mint" condition with only "occasional" lapses in the text.

Now, as I strode back and forth in the entrance hall, I felt dread, panic, as I looked down at the shabby passages. More words had dropped off since breakfast, and right before my eyes, whole paragraphs seemed to be sinking into the fragile paper.

He appeared, then, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, in the flesh, stepping in from the sweltering day, wearing a white cotton suit, V-neck t-shirt, and sandals, looking more like a tourist than the scholarly giant I'd imagined. I spoke only a quick hello as I jogged past him and out the doors with Borges's vanishing words of scorned adoration.

Where was I going? I didn't know. But I couldn't show him what I'd brought.

I ended up at the edge of the patio, gazing out at the lifeless sea, unstirred by any breeze.

I sensed a presence beside me; it was Jean-Phillippe.

"Is this it?" he said, gesturing to the manuscript.

I nodded vaguely.

"May I?" he said.

After a moment, I handed it to him.

He flipped through the pages. "They're blank." Then, clapping me on the shoulder, he added, "You know, I didn't expect much after speaking with you on the phone. But this was a surprise even for me." He smiled, not happily or cruelly. It was more like an



automatic facial movement that he had rehearsed by the mirror before coming to meet me, expecting he would have to employ it, expecting that this precise thing would occur; in other words, it was an expression of absolute indifference.

“Safe travels back to Los Angeles,” he said, giving me back the document.

He was right—there wasn’t a single word on them.

Then he left, heading round the side of the Tre Infiniti, his flip-flops flapping in the silence.

I watched as his cab accelerated swiftly up into the barren hills. The slopes seemed as empty as the pages in my hand, as my grandmother’s affection for Borges, as Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s respect for me.

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