

*El Muerto*, The Dead Man, is a story out of the collection *El Aleph*. Early translators of Borges seem to have kept clear of it: the famous Labyrinths does not have a version. The *fiction* presents the usual difficulties of Borges' early writing: where the narrator is present to the reader in a singular way, often, and through his diction often enough, as here. But that seems a strained thing, altogether, in the seemingly simple tale that *El Muerto* tells. The authorized translators who came later were not deterred, though, and both Norman di Giovanni and Andrew Hurley translate the story without fuss. Both give the narrator a natural voice — di Giovanni tries to make it a colloquial presence, even — seeking as if to make Borges' narrator a contemporary of theirs, speaking the Standard American natural to them. In the transcription that follows the narrator might seem to speak an old-fashioned English — antique even — will seem so to readers bred to Globish, certainly, the koine of McWorld. The reader who possesses some Spanish will frown, should he have the original to hand, at the liberties that have been taken. The traductor makes due apology.

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## The Dead Man

That someone from the barrios of Buenos Aires — a sorry fellow, so he looked, with no virtue more than his infatuation with courage — that just such a man should have roved the deserts of the Brazilian frontier, upon their wild horses, and come to captain a band of smugglers — that will seem improbable already. To such as see things so I wish to recount the destiny of Benjamin Otálora, whom no one recalls in Balvanera anymore, very likely, and who died by his own law, of a bullet, in the wastes of Rio Grande do Sul. I do not know the particulars of his venturesome life. When they are revealed to me I shall have to correct and amplify my account. For now this summary must serve.

The year is 1891. Benjamin Otálora is nineteen years old. He has the strapping frame of youth, a meagre forehead, clear, sincere eyes, the rude strength of a Basque: and a happy thrust of the dagger has proved him a valiant man. The death of his antagonist has not distressed him, nor the pressing need to flee the Republic. The big man of the parish, the man who runs Balvanera, gives Otálora a letter for a certain Azevedo Bandeira, over in Uruguay. He embarks. The night sea is stormy, the crossing difficult; and day finds him roaming the streets of Montevideo with a sadness not avowed and unconscious maybe. He does not seek out Azevedo Bandeira. Around midnight, in a bar on Paso del Molino, he finds himself between pushing drovers. A blade flashes. Otálora does not know with whom right or reason lies, but the pure savour of danger allures him, like music or dice draw other men. He parries, in the melee, the knife some drunken labourer lunges at a figure in a cloak and hat — a wide black hat belonging, so it will prove, to the said Azevedo — upon learning which Otálora will tear up his letter, wanting that Bandeira should be obliged to him and only to him.

Azevedo Bandeira is well-made: but leaves the impression, unaccountably, of some miscegenate creature. Jew and Negro and Indian mingle on his face, which almost always seems too near, his bearing is ape and tiger at once — and the cicatrice of a scar is only garnish more, like the black and bristle of his whiskers.

The confusion of drink — some emanation of the liquor as though it had been — the quarrel is gone as quickly as it came. Otálora drinks on with the drovers, accompanies their festive riot, and, with the sun already showing, goes with them to their rude dwelling in the Old City. In a courtyard behind, on its bare earth, the men throw themselves on their saddles and sleep. Otálora tallies this night obscurely against his last. He treads firm ground now, goes already among friends; and if some vague remorse disquiets him, it is only that he does not regret Buenos Aires. He sleeps till the hour of prayer, when he is woken by the man who had drunkenly assailed Bandeira. He remembers that this man had shared their night of tumult and jubilation, that Bandeira had sat him on his right, and made him go on drinking. The fellow says that their chief has called for him. In a sort of office giving on the corridor — Otálora has never seen the like, a passage with doorways let into its sides — Azevedo Bandeira sits awaiting him. A pale and disdainful woman stands beside. Her hair is a red blaze. Bandeira looks him over, proffers a cup of cane wine, declares that Otálora seems a man of spirit: and proposes that they go north, with his men, to bring over a herd. Otálora is ready; and by daybreak they are riding for Tacuarembó.

So began for him another life. Immense dawns, the odour of horses waking and sleeping, days astride their live backs. But a life readied in his blood already: for just as men elsewhere long for the sea they are born foreknowing, so we — and such as conjure with these emblems, too — we yearn always for the endless plains, to be borne on horses there, away, their hooves sounding the wide pampa. Otálora has been bred among carters and gypsies: within a year he is a gaucho. He learns to ride colts, handle the lasso, to whirl the sling with the paired balls that stun, to bring down bulls, slaughter cattle, to draw his animals with whistles, urge with them shouts, to fight off sleep, to resist pain, cold, and the heat of the sun. Only once in the course of his apprenticeship does Otálora see Azevedo Bandeira. But the man is very much present: for to be his man is to be respected and feared: and because his gauchos will all say, out at anyone at all, that Bandeira is a bigger man than any.

Some will have it that Bandeira was born on the other side of the Cuareim, in Rio Grande do Sul — which should diminish the man — but enriches him obscurely, instead, with reaches of teeming forest and endless bewildering swamp. Otálora grows to understand that the enterprises of Bandeira are manifold: and that principal among them is contraband. To

be a drover is to be a servitor: Otálora proposes to ascend: he will be a smuggler. One night two of their company are to cross the border and bring over some bales of cane. Otálora provokes one of the men, wounds him, takes his place. He is impelled by ambition and obscure fidelity: may their captain come to understand that he, Otálora, is worth more to him than all his Orientals put together, his *brasileños* and his *uruguayos* all.

One more year passes before Otálora returns to Montevideo. The city looks very grand to him as they ride in toward it. The men pick their way through the outskirts, looking about them everywhere, to the house of their chief. Their saddles are laid again in the courtyard behind. Days pass. Otálora has not seen Bandeira. His men are fearful. It is said that he is sick. A mulatto is always going up to his bed-chamber with kettles and maté. One evening they entrust this task to Otálora. He feels vaguely humiliated by this, but gratified as well.

The room has been stripped bare. From the gloom a balcony looks west. On a spreading table belts and buckles lie scattered, guns and knives, in glittering disarray. The moon is a blur in a far mirror. Bandeira lies with his mouth up and open. He dreams and moans. The vast white of the bed seems to diminish and darken him. A final vehemence of the sun flares his face. Otálora stares at the greyed head, the fissured skin, the slack jaw: it revolts him that this decayed old man should be commanding them. One blow would do to finish him he thinks: and sees in the mirror that someone has entered. It is the woman with the red hair. She is in the middle of dressing. Her feet are bare. She looks back at him with cold curiosity. Bandeira sits up and begins to talk of things in the countryside, matters of business, draining cup after cup of maté, his fingers straying in her tresses. At last he gives Otálora leave to go.

The order to go north is received many days later. They ride to a barren ranch. There is no stream, not a tree even, to gladden the place, which is like every other in the interminable plain. Stone corrals keep the lean and sickly cattle. The sun beats on them rising and setting. The Sigh is the name of this ruin.

In a crowd of workmen Otálora hears that Bandeira will not delay leaving Montevideo. He asks why, and someone explains that there is a foreigner about playing the gaucho and wanting too much to give them orders. Otálora understands that the man is joking, and is flattered that the jest should be possible already. He finds out afterwards that Bandeira has fallen out with some big man, the governor of the province maybe, who has withdrawn from him his support. The report pleases him.

Great chests of arms arrive; an earthen jar and a silver basin then, for the woman's chamber, and curtains of intricate damask; and hung with swords a rider comes one morning, wearing a cloak and a heavy growth of beard, a sullen man. His name is Ulpian Suárez: he is bodyguard to

Azevedo Bandeira, his own *capanga*. He says little, mouths his words like a *portugués*. Otálora does not know whether his reserve is hostility or disdain or rudeness only. But this much he knows: for the plan he is contriving he has to make the man his friend.

There comes into the destiny of Benjamin Otálora now a red horse, a chestnut stallion, his mane and tail black, black shod, whom Bandeira has brought from the south richly equipped. The steel of the bit and the bridle gleams, the saddle is inlaid with silver, trimmed with the pelt of a tiger. This noble creature is a symbol of Bandeira's authority: which makes Otálora, boy that he still is, covet the horse: and he comes just so to want also, with rancorous desire, the woman with the resplendent hair. The woman, the stallion, the splendid harness and saddle — these things *are* the man he aspires to destroy — the very things that make Azevedo Bandeira the chieftain he is.

The history of Benjamin Otálora deepens and complicates itself at this juncture. Bandeira is dextrous in the art of intimidation: in humiliating a man slowly, but surely, with devilish insinuations of the truth into mocking and searching lies. Otálora decides upon just such a deliberate proceeding for the difficult task he has set himself: the boy sets himself to supplant the man just so. On journeys of shared danger he secures the friendship of Suárez; confesses to him his intent; receives a promise of help from the *capanga*. Very many things happen after. Out of their series I know some few. Otálora does not obey Bandeira; is given to forgetting, or correcting, or even reversing his orders. The universe seems to conspire with him, hurries events. There is a firefright one noon, out in country by Tacuarembó, with a band of natives from Rio Grande do Sul. The soldier displaces the captain, takes command of his Orientals. A bullet pierces his shoulder. But that evening Otálora returns on the chieftain's red stallion, his blood a bright stain on the tiger's pelt, and that night he lies with the woman with the shining hair. Other versions of the story change about the order of these happenings. Some deny that they all take place on one day. In all the tellings Bandeira remains the nominal chief, however, even if the orders he gives are no longer followed. But some mixture of habit and pity will not let Otálora touch the man.

The last act of the history is set in the excitement and commotion of the last night of the year 1894. The gauchos of The Sigh consume the meat of bulls freshly slaughtered and drink a liquor that makes men rash. On an jangling guitar someone plucks out over and over a ballad of woe. At the head of the table Otálora exults, raising shout upon drunken shout, jubilation upon jubilation, a tower of giddy joy — and the emblem now, himself, of his always irresistible destiny. Taciturn between his raucous men

Bandeira lets the clamorous night run; and when its twelve strokes have struck rises like a man recalled to some duty. He steps from the table and knocks softly at the woman's chamber. She opens the door as if she had been awaiting the summons. She is in the middle of dressing. Her feet are bare. In a voice drawling and feminine the chief orders: "You and the boy have done much already. Now you are going to kiss him in front of us all." There is one brutal scene more. The woman would resist but two men take her by the arms and fling her on Otálora. Blinded by tears she kisses his face and breast. Ulpian Suárez has drawn his revolver. Before he dies Otálora understands that he has been betrayed from the beginning, that he had been condemned long since to die, that he was permitted love and command and triumph because he had been given to death already. He understands that for Bandeira he was always a dead man. With disdain almost Suárez fires.

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ghivarghese kuzhikandam