

El Aleph

Jorge Luis Borges

O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself
a King of infinite space. *Hamlet, II, 2*

But they will teach us that Eternity is the standing still of
the Present, a *Nunc-stans* (as the Schools call it); which neither
they nor anyone else understand, no more than they would a
Hic-stans for an Infinite greatness of Place. *Leviathan, IV, 46*

On the burning February morning Beatriz Viterbo died, after braving an agony that never for a single moment gave way to self pity or fear, I noticed that the sidewalk billboards around Constitution Plaza were advertising some new brand or other of American cigarettes. The fact pained me, for I realised that the wide and ceaseless universe was already slipping away from her and that this slight change was the first of an endless series. The universe may change but not me, I thought with a certain sad vanity. I knew that at times my fruitless devotion had annoyed her; now that she was dead, I could devote myself to her memory, without hope but also without humiliation. I recalled that the thirtieth of April was her birthday; on that day to visit her house on Garay Street and pay my respects to her father and to Carlos Argentino Daneri, her first cousin, would be an irreproachable and perhaps unavoidable act of politeness. Once again I would wait in the twilight of the small, cluttered drawing room, once again I would study the details of her many photographs: Beatriz Viterbo in profile and in full colour; Beatriz wearing a mask, during the Carnival of 1921; Beatriz at her First Communion; Beatriz on the day of her wedding to Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz soon after her divorce, at a luncheon at the Turf Club; Beatriz at a seaside resort in Quilmes with Delia San Marco Porcel and Carlos Argentino; Beatriz

That incandescent morning in February on which Beatriz Viterbo died — after an imperious agony which had not for an instant abased itself in either sentimentalism or dread — I noticed that the metal hoardings of the Plaza Constitución bore, newly, I do not know what blandishment for cigarettes brilliantly white. The sight grieved me; and I understood that the incessant and vast universe was already parting itself from her, and that this change was the first of an infinite series. The universe will change; but I shall not, I thought with melancholy vanity. My vain devotion had, I know, sometimes exasperated her; dead, I could consecrate myself to her memory, without hope, yes, but also without humiliation. I considered, with due regard, that the 30th of April was her birthday; and to visit on that day the house on Garay street, in order to greet her father and her first cousin Carlos Argentino Daneri, was a courtesy irreproachable and even ineluctable perhaps. I would wait again in the crowded gloom of the small parlour; study once again the occasions of her many portraits. Beatriz Viterbo, in profile, the photograph coloured over; Beatriz, with a mask, at the carnival of 1921; the first communion of Beatriz; Beatriz, on the day of her wedding to Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz, a little after the divorce, at a luncheon at the Club Hipíco; Beatriz, in Quilmes, with Delia San Marco Porcel and Carlos Argentino; Beatriz, with the pekinese

with the Pekingese lapdog given her by Villegas Haedo; Beatriz, front and three-quarter views, smiling, hand on her chin ... I would not be forced, as in the past, to justify my presence with modest offerings of books — books whose pages I finally learned to cut beforehand, so as not to find out, months later, that they lay around unopened.

Beatriz Viterbo died in 1929. From that time on, I never let a thirtieth of April go by without a visit to her house. I used to make my appearance at seven-fifteen sharp and stay on for some twenty-five minutes. Each year, I arrived a little later and stay a little longer. In 1933, a torrential downpour coming to my aid, they were obliged to ask me for dinner. Naturally, I took advantage of that lucky precedent. In 1934, I arrived, just after eight, with one of those large Santa Fe sugared cakes, and quite matter-of-factly I stayed to dinner. It was in this way, on these melancholy and vainly erotic anniversaries, that I came into the gradual confidences of Carlos Argentino Daneri.

Beatriz had been tall, frail, slightly stooped; in her walk there was (if the oxymoron may be allowed) a kind of uncertain grace, a hint of expectancy. Carlos Argentino was pink-faced, overweight, gray-haired, fine-featured. He held a minor position in an unreadable library out on the edge of the Southside of Buenos Aires. He was authoritarian but also unimpressive. Until only recently, he took advantage of his nights and holidays to stay at home. At a remove of two generations, the Italian "S" and demonstrative Italian gestures still survived in him. His mental activity was continuous, deeply felt, far-ranging, and — all in all — meaningless. He dealt in pointless analogies and in trivial scruples. He had (as did Beatriz) large, beautiful, finely shaped hands. For several months he seemed to be obsessed with Paul Fort — less with his ballads than with the idea of a towering reputation. "He is the Prince of poets," Daneri would repeat fatuously. "You will belittle him in vain — but no, not even the most venomous of your shafts will graze him."

Villegas Haedo made her a present of; Beatriz, facing, and shown three-quarters, smiling, hand to her chin ... I would not be obliged, as at other times, to justify my presence with modest offerings of books ... books whose pages I learned at last to cut beforehand, so that I would not, months after, discover them intact.

Beatriz Viterbo died in 1929; and I did not thereafter let any 30th of April pass without returning to her house. I would arrive around quarter past seven, and stay for some twentyfive minutes or so; each year I appeared a little later, and stayed a little longer; in 1933 a torrential rain favoured me: and they were obliged to invite me to dine. I did not, naturally, let waste that good precedent; in 1934 I appeared when eight had already struck, with a sugarcake from Santa Fe; and as naturally as could be stayed to eat. In that manner, on these melancholy and vainly erotic anniversaries, I received the gradual confidences of Carlos Argentino Daneri.

Beatriz had been tall, frail; leant ever so slightly; and there had been in her movement a heaviness like grace — if the oxymoron is tolerable — a beginning, already, of ecstasy. Carlos Argentino is roseate, portly, greying; finely featured. He occupies I do not know what subordinate position in a library full of unreadable books, in the suburbs to the south; is authoritarian, but even so ineffectual; would have, until very recently, made the late hour or any holiday an excuse to not leave his house. At a distance of two generations the "s" of the Italians and their copious gesticulation survive in him. His activity of mind is continuous, impassioned, changeable; and above all inconsequential. He abounds in unserviceable analogies and idle scruples. He has — like Beatriz — beautiful hands, long and tapering. He suffered for some months from an obsession with Paul Fort: less for his ballads than for the idea of an irreproachable glory. "He is the Prince of the poets of France," he would repeat fatuously; "in vain would you turn on him; they will not touch him, no, not the most poisoned of your barbs even."

On the 30th of April in 1941 I allowed myself to add to the sugarcake a bottle of country wine. Carlos Argentino tasted it,

On the thirtieth of April, 1941, along with the sugared cake I allowed myself to add a bottle of Argentine cognac. Carlos Argentino tasted it, pronounced it "interesting," and, after a few drinks, launched into a glorification of modern man.

"I view him," he said with a certain unaccountable excitement, "in his inner sanctum, as though in his castle tower, supplied with telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, wireless sets, motion-picture screens, slide projectors, glossaries, timetables, handbooks, bulletins..."

He remarked that for a man so equipped, actual travel was superfluous. Our twentieth century had inverted the story of Mohammed and the mountain; nowadays, the mountain came to the modern Mohammed.

So foolish did his ideas seem to me, so pompous and so drawn out his exposition, that I linked them at once to literature and asked him why he didn't write them down. As might be foreseen, he answered that he had already done so — that these ideas, and others no less striking, had found their place in the Proem, or Augural Canto, or, more simply, the Prologue Canto of the poem on which he had been working for many years now, alone, without publicity, with fanfare, supported only by those twin staffs universally known as work and solitude. First, he said, he opened the floodgates of his fancy; then, taking up hand tools, he resorted to the file. The poem was entitled *The Earth*; it consisted of a description of the planet, and, of course, lacked no amount of picturesque digressions and bold apostrophes.

I asked him to read me a passage, if only a short one. He opened a drawer of his writing table, drew out a thick stack of papers — sheets of a large pad imprinted with the letterhead of the Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur Library — and, with ringing satisfaction, declaimed:

Mine eyes, as did the Greek's, have known men's towns and fame,
The works, the days in light that fades to amber;

pronounced it interesting, and, having drained a few glasses, undertook a vindication of Modern Man.

"I hail him" — he said with an animation unusual and somewhat inexplicable — "ensconced in the cabinet of his studio as if in the towered keep of a citadel, provided with telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, radiotransmitters, kinematographs, magic lanterns, glossaries, timetables, memoranda, bulletins ... "

He averred that for men so endowed the labour of journeying was useless; that our 20th century had transformed the parable of Mahomet and the mountain; the mountains were converging, now, toward the modern Mahomet.

So inept did these ideas seem, and so pompous and prolix their expression, that I referred them immediately to Literature; and asked him why he had not set them down in writing. He replied, as I might have foreseen, that he had done so already: these conceptions, and others no less novel, feature in the Canto Inaugural, Canto Prolegoemnal, or simply the Canto-Prologue, of a poem on which he has been working for many years now — with no *réclame*, without deafening clamour, supported always and only by the two staffs of Work and Solitude. He "throws open, first, the portals of Imagination; and takes a file, then," to whatever emerges. The poem is titled *The Earth*; it would be essaying a description of the entire planet; and does not want, I am sure, for picturesque digression and gallant apostrophe.

I prayed he would read me a passage: however brief it might be. Opening a drawer of his desk he withdrew a thick sheaf of notepaper that bore, blockprinted, the letterhead of the Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur Library, and read out with sonorous satisfaction:

I have seen, like the Greek, the cities of men,
The works, the days of various light, the hunger;
I do not correct the facts, do not counterfeit the names,
But the *voyage* of which I tell, is ... *autour de ma chambre*.

I do not change a fact or falsify a name --
The voyage I set down is... *autour de ma chambre*.

"From any angle, a greatly interesting stanza," he said, giving his verdict. "The opening line wins the applause of the professor, the academician, and the Hellenist — to say nothing of the would-be scholar, a considerable sector of the public. The second flows from Homer to Hesiod (generous homage, at the very outset, to the father of didactic poetry), not without rejuvenating a process whose roots go back to Scripture -- enumeration, congeries, conglomeration. The third — baroque? decadent? example of the cult of pure form? — consists of two equal hemistichs. The fourth, frankly bilingual, assures me the unstinted backing of all minds sensitive to the pleasures of sheer fun. I should, in all fairness, speak of the novel rhyme in lines two and four, and of the erudition that allows me — without a hint of pedantry! — to cram into four lines three learned allusions covering thirty centuries packed with literature -- first to the *Odyssey*, second to *Works and Days*, and third to the immortal bagatelle bequathed us by the frolicking pen of the Savoyard, Xavier de Maistre. Once more I've come to realise that modern art demands the balm of laughter, the scherzo. Decidedly, Goldoni holds the stage!"

He read me many other stanzas, each of which also won his own approval and elicited his lengthy explications. There was nothing remarkable about them. I did not even find them any worse than the first one. Application, resignation, and chance had gone into the writing; I saw, however, that Daneri's real work lay not in the poetry but in his invention of reasons why the poetry should be admired. Of course, this second phase of his effort modified the writing in his eyes, though not in the eyes of others. Daneri's style of delivery was extravagant, but the deadly drone of his metric regularity tended to tone down and to dull that extravagance.

[Among my memories are also some lines of a satire in which he lashed out unsparingly at bad poets. After accusing them of dressing their poems in the warlike armour of erudition, and of flapping in vain their unavailing wings, he concluded

"A stanza in all aspects interesting," he declared. "The first line secures the applause of the Professor, the Academician, the Hellenist — if not of the superficially erudite, that considerable sector of Opinion; the second turns from Homer to Hesiod — is really implicit homage, fronting the splendid edifice, to the father of didactic poetry — but not without renovating a procedure whose ancestry is in Scripture — enumeration, conjunction or congeriation; the third — Baroque, Decadent; cult purified and fanatical of Form? — consists of two twinned hemistichs; the fourth, frankly bilingual, ensures the unconditional allegiance of all those spirits who are alive to the blithe sallies of facetiousness. Nothing will be said of the rarefied rhyming, nor of the learning that permits me — without pedantry! — to gather into four lines three allusions that embrace thirty centuries freighted with Literature: first to the *Odyssey*, the second to the *Works and Days*, the third to the immortal bagatelle that has gained us the *otium* of the pen of the connoisseur ... I understand once more that modern art extracts the balsam of laughter, the *scherzo*. Surely you have Goldoni there!"

He read out at me many other stanzas, all of them obtaining his profuse approbation and commentary. They had nothing memorable in them; not even those that I judged much poorer than the first. Diligence and resignation had combined poorly with luck in their writing; and they were invested afterwards with the virtues Daneri attributed to them. I understood that the labour of the poet was not in the poems; but had gone, rather, into the inventing of reasons that would make them admirable — reasons whose elaboration transformed them for him, naturally, but not for others. The diction of the declaiming Daneri was extravagant; but his torpid versing prevented the transmission of that extravagance — save on rare occasions — to the poems themselves.

I recall, however, these lines from a satire that severely castigated bad poets:

*That one loads the poem with the bellicose armour
Of erudition; this other spreads there its splendid regalia.
Both flap in vain their ludicrous wings ...
You forget, Sirs! look out, the factor BEAUTY!*

But they forget, alas, one foremost fact — BEAUTY!
Only the fear of creating an army of implacable and powerful enemies dissuaded him (he told me) from fearlessly publishing this poem.]

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Only once in my life have I had occasion to inspect the fifteen thousand dodecasyllables of the *Polyolbion*, that topographical epic, in which Michael Drayton makes registry of the fauna, the flora, the hydrography, the oreography, the history martial and *religieuse*, of England; I am certain that that considerable even if limited production is less tiresome than the vast enterprise projected by Carlos Argentino. Well, he proposed to round up the planet in verse; and by 1941 had despatched some hectares of the state of Queensland, somewhat more than a kilometre of the course of the Ob, a metering-station for gas north of Veracruz, the principal houses of business in the parish of Concepción, the manor of Mariana Cambaceres de Alvear in Belgrano, on that street named The Eleventh of September, and an establishment purveying Turkish Baths not far from the licensed aquarium in Brighton.

attend: laid beside and aligned with the routine fencing
(we are now coming, it should be clear, from the northnortheast)
a sepulchre has wearily subsided — the colour? *blanccelstial* —
which gives to the sheepfold the aspect of an ossuary.

“Two audacities” he exulted, almost shouting — “but ransomed only, I hear you mumble, by their success. I accept. I accept. One, the epithet *routine* — its sureness denouncing, *en passant*, the tedium inevitable and inherent in the duties of the shepherd and the farmer — tedium that neither the *Georgics* nor our already laurelled *Don Segundo* had dared denounce so, in living red. The other, the energetic prosaicism *a sepulchre had wearily subsided* — which horrified Affectation will want to expunge — but which the critic virile in his tastes would value more than life itself. The entire

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Along about midnight, I left.

Two Sundays later, Daneri rang me up — perhaps for the first time in his life. He suggested we get together at four o'clock "for cocktails in the salon-bar next door, which the forward-looking Zunino and Zungri -- my landlords, as you doubtless recall — are throwing open to the public. It's a place you'll really want to get to know."

More in resignation than in pleasure, I accepted. Once there, it was hard to find a table. The "salon-bar," ruthlessly modern, was only barely less ugly than what I had excepted; at the nearby tables, the excited customers spoke breathlessly of the sums Zunino and Zungri had invested in furnishings without a second thought to cost. Carlos Argentino pretended to be astonished by some feature or other of the lighting arrangement (with which, I felt, he was already familiar), and he said to me with a certain severity,

"Grudgingly, you'll have to admit to the fact that these premises hold their own with many others far more in the public eye."

He then reread me four or five different fragments of the poem. He had revised them following his pet principle of verbal ostentation: where at first "blue" had been good enough, he now wallowed in "azures," "ceruleans," and "ultramarines." The word "milky" was too easy for him; in the course of an impassioned description of a shed where wool was washed, he chose such words as "lacteal," "lactescent," and even made one up — "lactinacious."

line, besides, is of extraordinary worth. The second hemistich initiates an animated exchange with the reader; advances upon his lively curiosity; puts a question in his mouth — *why give away your lucky find "blanccelestial"?* — and answers right away: the picturesque neologism will *suggest* the sky, which is a most important element in the Australian landscape. Without that evocation a drawing too sombre in tint would result; and the reader would be compelled to close the book, his soul struck most inwardly and incurably by black melancholy."

It was at midnight that I bid farewell.

Two Sundays after Daneri rang on the telephone; for the first time, I think, in his life. He proposed that we meet "to drink milk together at the salón-bar which the progressiveness of Zunino and Zungri — the proprietors of my house, you will remember — has opened on the neighbouring corner; a confectionery that it is important you should know." I accepted, with more resignation than enthusiasm. It was difficult to find a table; the 'salón-bar', inexorably modern, was scarcely less atrocious than my imaginings; and at the crowded tables the excited public talked of the sums Zunino and Zungri had invested without demur. Carlos Argentino feigned amazement at I don't know what exquisite arrangements of lighting — which he, I am sure, had already seen — and declared with a certain severity:

"It will be hard, for your kind, to have to acknowledge that these premises compare favourably with the haughty establishments of Flores."

He read over again, then, some four or five pages of the poem. They had been amended according to a perverse principle of verbal ostentation: where once he had written *azure* he now abounded in *azurine*, *azurent*, *azurile*; the coinage *lactous* was not ugly enough for him; and his impetuous description of a washhouse for wool had given way to *lactareous*, *lactacinous*, *lactescent*, *lactal* ... He cursed all critics bitterly; and then, most benign, dispersed among them "such as do not prepare the precious metals, nor the fuming presses

After that, straight out, he condemned our modern mania for having books prefaced, "a practice already held up to scorn by the Prince of Wits in his own grafeful preface to the Quixote." He admitted, however, that for the opening of his new work an attention-getting foreword might prove valuable — "an accolade signed by a literary hand of renown." He next went on to say that he considered publishing the initial cantos of his poem. I then began to understand the unexpected telephone call; Daneri was going to ask me to contribute a foreword to his pedantic hodgepodge. My fear turned out unfounded; Carlos Argentino remarked, with admiration and envy, that surely he could not be far wrong in qualifying with the epithet "solid" the prestige enjoyed in every circle by Álvaro Melián Lafinur, a man of letters, who would, if I insisted on it, be only too glad to dash off some charming opening words to the poem. In order to avoid ignominy and failure, he suggested I make myself spokesman for two of the book's undeniable virtues — formal perfection and scientific rigour — "inasmuch as this wide garden of metaphors, of figures of speech, of elegances, is inhospitable to the least detail not strictly upholding of truth." He added that Beatriz had always been taken with Álvaro.

I agreed — agreed profusely — and explained for the sake of credibility that I would not speak to Álvaro the next day, Monday, but would wait until Thursday, when we got together for the informal dinner that follows every meeting of the Writers' Club. (No such dinners are ever held, but it is an established fact that the meetings do take place on Thursdays, a point which Carlos Argentino Daneri could verify in the daily papers, and which lent a certain reality to my promise.) Half in prophecy, half in cunning, I said that before taking up the question of a preface I would outline the unusual plan of the work. We then said goodbye.

Turning the corner of Bernardo de Irigoyen, I reviewed as impartially as possible the alternatives before me. They were: a) to speak to Álvaro, telling him the first cousin of Beatriz' (the

laden with sulphurous acids neither, for the minting of treasures, but are able to *indicate to others the site of a treasure.*" Immediately after he censured that *prologomania* "made a mock of, already, in the inventive prolocutions of Quixote, the Prince of the Ingenious." He conceded, however, that an ornate prologue lay at the portals of the new work — but as "strong plating for the plumage of talons, for the feathering of the shaft" — and added then that he was thinking of publishing the first cantos of his poem. I understood, I thought, the singular invitation by telephone: the man was going to ask of me a preface forwarding his pedantic farrago. My fears proved groundless; Carlos Argentino observed, with rancorous admiration, that he did not think mistaken the epithet certifying the solid prestige obtained in all circles by Alvaro Melián Lafinur — *man of letters* — who, if only I undertook to ask him, would be delighted to introduce the poem. In order to evade the most unpardonable of failures I must, he said, make myself the representative of two incontrovertible excellences: the perfection of form, and the rigour of science — "because this expansive garden of tropes and figures and elegances cannot admit a single detail that severe Truth does not confirm." He added, meaningly I thought, that Beatriz had always found Alvaro distracting.

I assented, gave assent profusely; and elaborated, for all the more verisimilitude, that I could not speak with Alvaro the next day, but only on Thursday — at the intimate supper that invariably crowned the convokings of the Authors Club. (There is no such supper. But that these gatherings took place on Thursdays was irrefutable, a fact Carlos Argentino could verify in the dailies: and mention of which gave the advertisement a certain reality.) And I said then — not guessing, or clever, but somewhere between — that I would describe the curious plan of the work before broaching the matter of the prologue. We bid each other farewell; and, turning from Garay along Bernardo de Irigoyen, I faced with complete impartiality such ways through as remained to me: a) speak with Alvaro and tell him that that first cousin of Beatriz's — this explicit

explanatory euphemism would allow me to mention her name) had concocted a poem that seemed to draw out into infinity the possibilities of cacophony and chaos: b) not to say a word to Álvaro. I clearly foresaw that my indolence would opt for b.

But first thing Friday morning, I began worrying about the telephone. It offended me that that device, which had once produced the irrecoverable voice of Beatriz, could now sink so low as to become a mere receptacle for the futile and perhaps angry remonstrances of that deluded Carlos Argentino Daneri. Luckily, nothing happened — except the inevitable spite touched off in me by this man, who had asked me to fulfill a delicate mission for him and then had let me drop.

Gradually, the phone came to lose its terrors, but one day toward the end of October it rang, and Carlos Argentino was on the line. He was deeply disturbed, so much so that at the outset I did not recognise his voice. Sadly but angrily he stammered that the now unrestrainable Zunino and Zungri, under the pretext of enlarging their already outsized "salon-bar," were about to take over and tear down this house.

"My home, my ancestral home, my old and inveterate Garay Street home!" he kept repeating, seeming to forget his woe in the music of his words.

It was not hard for me to share his distress. After the age of fifty, all change becomes a hateful symbol of the passing of time. Besides, the scheme concerned a house that for me would always stand for Beatriz. I tried explaining this delicate scruple of regret, but Daneri seemed not to hear me. He said that if Zunino and Zungri persisted in this outrage, Doctor Zunni, his lawyer, would sue *ipso facto* and make them pay some fifty thousand dollars in damages.

Zunni's name impressed me; his firm, although at the unlikely address of Caseros and Tacuarí, was nonetheless known as an old and reliable one. I asked him whether Zunni had already been hired for the case. Daneri said he would phone him that very

circumlocution would permit me to name her — had piled up a poem that seemed to expand to infinity the possibilities of cacophony and chaos; b) do not speak to Álvaro. I foresaw, lucid now, that my indolence would opt for b.

From Friday onward the telephone began to disquiet my waking hours. I was indignant that this instrument, which had once produced the irrecoverable voice of Beatriz, should debase itself to a receptacle awaiting the querulous complaints, as they would be, of the deluded Carlos Argentino Daneri. Nothing came, happily — save the inevitable rancour the creature engendered, who had imposed on me a delicate task and then forgotten me.

The telephone lost its terrors; but at the end of October Carlos Argentino called. He was beside himself; and at first I did not recognize his voice. He bawled in grief and rage that "the already Unlimited Zunino and Zungri, on the pretext of enlarging their outrageous confectionery," were going to pull down his house.

"The house of my fathers! My house! The venerable inveterate house on Garay!" he cried out over and over — forgetting all his anguish, it may be, in the cadence.

To come to share his distress was not difficult. Having lived through forty years, already, every change was a hateful emblem of the passage of time. That anything should befall *that* house ... which alluded everywhere and endlessly to Beatriz ... I wanted to explain this character the house possessed — its fastidiousness — but my interlocutor, the purveyor of the planet, was not listening. He was threatening, now, that if Zunino and Zungri persisted with their ridiculous plan, then "the learned Zunni, my lawyer, shall *ipso facto* demand of them damages in full, and oblige them to pledge a hundred thousand dollars."

The mention of Zunni made an impression on me; his office, on Caseros and Tacquari, was the proverbially grave establishment. I asked if he had already been entrusted with matter. Daneri replied that he would be speaking to him that very evening. Hesitant then, and in that level and impersonal voice one resorts when some very

afternoon. He hesitated, then with that level, impersonal voice we reserve for confiding something intimate, he said that to finish the poem he could not get along without the house because down in the cellar there was an Aleph. He explained that an Aleph is one of the points in space that contains all other points.

"It's in the cellar under the dining room," he went on, so overcome by his worries now that he forgot to be pompous. "It's mine — mine. I discovered it when I was a child, all by myself. The cellar stairway is so steep that my aunt and uncle forbade my using it, but I'd heard someone say there was a world down there. I found out later they meant an old-fashioned globe of the world, but at the time I thought they were referring to the world itself. One day when no one was home I started down in secret, but I stumbled and fell. When I opened my eyes, I saw the Aleph."

"The Aleph?" I repeated.

"Yes, the only place on earth where all places are -- seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending. I kept the discovery to myself and went back every chance I got. As a child, I did not foresee that this privilege was granted me so that later I could write the poem. Zunino and Zungri will not strip me of what's mine -- no, and a thousand times no! Legal code in hand, Doctor Zunni will prove that my Aleph is inalienable."

I tried to reason with him. "But isn't the cellar very dark?" I said.

"Truth cannot penetrate a closed mind. If all places in the universe are in the Aleph, then all stars, all lamps, all sources of light are in it, too."

"You wait there. I'll be right over to see it."

I hung up before he could say no. The full knowledge of a fact sometimes enables you to see all at once many supporting but previously unsuspected things. It amazed me not to have suspected until that moment that Carlos Argentino was a madman. As were all the Viterbos, when you came down to it. Beatriz (I myself often

very intimate thing is to be confided, he said that the house was indispensable to the completing of his poem, because there was in a corner of its cellar an Aleph — and an Aleph, he explained, was one of those points in Space which contains every other point.

"It's in the cellar under the dining room," he went on, his speech quickened by anguish. "It's mine, mine; I found it in my childhood, before I was old enough for school. The stairs are steep, and my uncles wouldn't let me go down there, but someone said that there was a whole world in the cellar. They'd meant a trunk, I came to know later — but I had understood that there was a world. I stole down, turning on the forbidden stairs, fell. Upon opening my eyes I saw the Aleph."

"The Aleph?" — I mouthed the word.

"Yes, the place where all the places of the globe are, without confusion, and shown from all angles. I showed no one my find; but went to it over and over. The child could not understand that the privilege had been granted so the man would engrave, in metal as if, the poem! Zunino and Zungri shall not despoil me, no, a thousand times no. Codebook in hand, the learned Zunni shall prove that it is *inalienably* my Aleph."

I tried to reason.

"But, isn't the cellar very dark?"

"The Truth will not penetrate a rebellious understanding. If all the places of the earth are in the Aleph, then there shall all illumination be, all the lamps, all the well-springs of light."

"I shall come immediately."

I hung up before he could issue a prohibition. It is enough to know one thing in order to perceive at once a series of confirming signs, each innocuous before; and it astonished me that I had not, until this moment, understood that Carlos Argentino was mad. All those Viterbos, for that matter ... Beatriz — and I used to say this over and over to myself — was a woman, a girl, possessed of a clairvoyance almost relentless: but her negligence and distraction, her slights — there was real cruelty in her — had maybe demanded some

say it) was a woman, a child, with almost uncanny powers of clairvoyance, but forgetfulness, distractions, contempt, and a streak of cruelty were also in her, and perhaps these called for a pathological explanation. Carlos Argentino's madness filled me with spiteful elation. Deep down, we had always detested each other.

On Garay Street, the maid asked me kindly to wait. The master was, as usual, in the cellar developing pictures. On the unplayed piano, beside a large vase that held no flowers, smiled (more timeless than belonging to the past) the large photograph of Beatriz, in gaudy colours. Nobody could see us; in a seizure of tenderness, I drew close to the portrait and said to it, "Beatriz, Beatriz Elena, Beatriz Elena Viterbo, darling Beatriz, Beatriz now gone forever, it's me, it's Borges."

Moments later, Carlos came in. He spoke dryly. I could see he was thinking of nothing else but the loss of the Aleph.

"First a glass of pseudo-cognac," he ordered, and then down you dive into the cellar. Let me warn you, you'll have to lie flat on your back. Total darkness, total immobility, and a certain ocular adjustment will also be necessary. From the floor, you must focus your eyes on the nineteenth step. Once I leave you, I'll lower the trapdoor and you'll be quite alone. You needn't fear the rodents very much -- though I know you will. In a minute or two, you'll see the Aleph -- the microcosm of the alchemists and Kabbalists, our true proverbial friend, the *multum in parvo*!"

Once we were in the dining room, he added, "Of course, if you don't see it, your incapacity will not invalidate what I have experienced. Now, down you go. In a short while you can babble with all of Beatriz' images."

Tired of his inane words, I quickly made my way. The cellar, barely wider than the stairway itself, was something of a pit. My eyes searched the dark, looking in vain for the globe Carlos Argentino had spoken of. Some cases of empty bottles and some canvas sacks cluttered one corner. Carlos picked up a sack, folded

pathological explanation. The frenzy of Carlos Argentino filled me with a malign happiness: we had each been detestable, intimately, and always, to the other.

I hastened to Garay. The servant asked if I would have the goodness to wait: the young master was in the cellar, as always, developing his photographs. On the now useless piano, and beside a vase without a single flower, there smiled — more *out* of time than anachronistic — the grand portrait of Beatriz, its colouring torpid and heavy. There was no one to see us; in a desperation of *tendresse* I drew near the picture and said out:

"Beatriz, Beatriz Elena, Beatriz Elena Viterbo, beloved Beatriz, Beatriz forever lost: it is I, Borges."

Carlos entered a little after this. He spoke in a surly way; and I understood that he could think on nothing but the loss his Aleph.

"A glass of *ersatz* sherry — it's been sent for — and then you can gorge yourself in the cellar. Being laid out on your back, understand, is essential; darkness also, and immobility, and a certain ocular accomodation. Lay yourself down on the flagstones of the floor, and fix your eyes on the tenth stair, at the correct turning. I shall retreat behind the trapdoor; and you will remain there alone. Some curious rodent may frighten you — that's easily done! In a few minutes you will see the Aleph — the microcosm of the Alchemist and the Kabbalist! — our proverbial and particular fellow being, the *multum in parvo*!"

Showing me to the dining room, he added:

"Should you not see it, your incapacity, it should be clear, will not invalidate my testimony ... Descend: you should be able to entreat, very soon, *every* picture there is of Beatriz.

I went down quickly, having had enough of his inconsequential words. The cellar was scarcely wider than the spiralled stairway; and there were little pits everywhere. I looked about, in vain, for the trunk Carlos Argentino had mentioned. Some boxes full of bottles and satchels made of canvas lay piling in a corner. Carlos took up a satchel, folded it in two, and positioned it precisely.

it in two, and at a fixed spot spread it out.

“As a pillow,” he said, “this is quite threadbare, but if it's padded even a half-inch higher, you won't see a thing, and there you'll lie, feeling ashamed and ridiculous. All right now, sprawl that hulk of yours there on the floor and count off nineteen steps.”

I went through with his absurd requirements, and at last he went away. The trapdoor was carefully shut. The blackness, in spite of a chink that I later made out, seemed to me absolute. For the first time, I realised the danger I was in: I'd let myself be locked in a cellar by a lunatic, after gulping down a glassful of poison! I knew that back of Carlos' transparent boasting lay a deep fear that I might not see the promised wonder. To keep his madness undetected, to keep from admitting he was mad, Carlos had to kill me. I felt a shock of panic, which I tried to pin to my uncomfortable position and not to the effect of a drug. I shut my eyes -- I opened them. Then I saw the Aleph.

I arrive now at the ineffable core of my story. And here begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols: to signify the godhead, one Persian speaks of a bird that somehow is all birds; Alanus de Insulis, of a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere; Ezekiel, of a four-faced angel who at one and the same time moves east and west, north and south. (Not in vain do I recall these inconceivable analogies; they bear some relation to the Aleph.) Perhaps the gods might grant me a similar metaphor, but then this account would become contaminated by literature, by fiction. Really, what I want to do is impossible, for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal. In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I

“Your pillow is lowly” — he made clear — “but if you raise it up even a centimetre you will not see the least little thing: and you will remain as you are, chastised and shamed. Lower to the floor your behind now, and count out eleven steps.

I complied with his ludicrous commands; and at last was done. He closed the trapdoor cautiously; and despite a slit I afterwards made out there, the darkness seemed complete. Suddenly I understood my danger: I had got myself buried by a madman, after drinking in a poison. The bravado of Carlos was transparently his inward terror that I would not see his prodigy; and to persevere in his delusion — in order to not acknowledge that he was mad — Carlos *must kill me*. I felt a confused uneasiness, which I tried to attribute to my lying rigid and not to the operation of some narcotic. I shut my eyes, opened them. Then I saw the Aleph.

I have come, now, to the ineffable centre of my narrative: and the desperation of the writer begins. Language is all an alphabet of symbols: whose exercise presupposes happenstances that all interlocutors have some share in. How shall I transmit, then, the othernesses of the infinite Aleph — which my timorous memory can barely approach?

The mystics, in similar predicaments, are prodigal with emblems: to express the Divine a Persian speaks of a bird that in some way is all birds; Alanus de Insulis of a sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere; Ezekiel, of an angel with four faces who at the same time flies east and west, north and south ... and not vainly would I recall these inconceivable analogies: they have some relation to the Aleph. Perhaps the gods will not refuse me the luck of finding an equivalent image: but my report of it would remain contaminated by literature, by falsehood. There is no resolving, otherwise, the central problem: the enumeration, even the most partial, of an infinite ensemble. In that giant instant I witnessed a million delectable and atrocious doings: nothing astonished me as much as the fact that they all occupied, without superimposition or transparency, one point. What my eyes saw

shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive. Nonetheless, I'll try to recollect what I can.

On the back part of the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance. At first I thought it was revolving; then I realised that this movement was an illusion created by the dizzying world it bounded. The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me; I saw in a backyard of Soler Street the same tiles that thirty years before I'd seen in the entrance of a house in Fray Bentos; I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam; I saw convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of sand; I saw a woman in Inverness whom I shall never forget; I saw her tangled hair, her tall figure, I saw the cancer in her breast; I saw a ring of baked mud in a sidewalk, where before there had been a tree; I saw a summer house in Adrogué and a copy of the first English translation of Pliny -- Philemon Holland's -- and all at the same time saw each letter on each page (as a boy, I used to marvel that the letters in a closed book did not get scrambled and lost overnight); I saw a sunset in Querétaro that seemed to reflect the colour of a rose in Bengal; I saw my empty bedroom; I saw in a closet in Alkmaar a terrestrial globe between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly; I saw horses with flowing manes on a shore of the Caspian Sea at dawn; I saw the delicate bone structure of a hand; I saw the survivors of a battle sending out picture postcards; I saw in a showcase in Mirzapur a pack of Spanish playing cards; I saw the slanting shadows of ferns on a greenhouse floor; I saw tigers, pistons, bison, tides, and armies; I saw all the ants on the

was simulataneous; what I may set down, successive: for language is such. Nonetheless, I mean to recollect some things.

At the smaller part of the stair, toward the right, I saw a small sphere, iridescent, of a splendour almost intolerable. At first I thought it gyrated; then I understood that the movement was an illusion produced by the vertiginous spectacle it was enclosing. The diameter of the Aleph would have been two or three centimetres: but cosmic space stretched there without diminution. Each thing — the moon in the mirror, let us say — was infinitely many things, for I saw it clearly from all the points of the universe. I saw the populous sea, the dawn and the evening, I saw the crowds of America, I saw a silvery spiderweb at the centre of a black pyramid, I saw a ruined labyrinth—it was London— I saw fathomless eyes, scrutinizing themselves in mine as in a mirror, I saw all the mirrors of the world, and not one reflected me, I saw at a crossing of Soler street the very same flagstones I had seen thirty years ago at the entrance to a house in Frey Bento, I saw clusters, snow, tobacco, veins of metal, vapouring water, I saw convex equatorial deserts and each grain of their sands, I saw in Inverness a woman I shall never forget, I saw a violent gentlewoman, the proud corpse, I saw a cancer in the breast, I saw a circle of dried earth by a path, where before there had been a tree, I saw a manor in Adrogué, a manuscript of the first version of Pliny in English, the one by Philemon Holland, I saw at once each letter on each page — as a child I had marvelled at the letters in my shut books not mixing and losing themselves through the night— I saw the night with its companion day, I saw in Querétaro a sunset that seemed to reflect the colour of a rose in Bengal, I saw in a cabinet in Alkmaar a terraqueous globe held between two mirrors that multiplied it without end, I saw horses at dawn, their eddying manes, on a beach by the Caspian Sea, I saw the delicate hingsings of bone in a hand, I saw the survivors of a battle sending postcards, I saw in a cupboard in Mirzapur a deck of Spanish cards, I saw along the flooring of a sunroom the oblique shadows of ferns, I saw tigers, pistons, bisons,

planet; I saw a Persian astrolabe; I saw in the drawer of a writing table (and the handwriting made me tremble) unbelievable, obscene, detailed letters, which Beatriz had written to Carlos Argentino; I saw a monument I worshipped in the Chacarita cemetery; I saw the rotted dust and bones that had once deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo; I saw the circulation of my own dark blood; I saw the coupling of love and the modification of death; I saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth; I saw my own face and my own bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon -- the unimaginable universe.

I felt infinite wonder, infinite pity.

"Feeling pretty cockeyed, are you, after so much spying into places where you have no business?" said a hated and jovial voice. "Even if you were to rack your brains, you couldn't pay me back in a hundred years for this revelation. One hell of an observatory, eh, Borges?"

Carlos Argentino's feet were planted on the topmost step. In the sudden dim light, I managed to pick myself up and utter, "One hell of a -- yes, one hell of a."

The matter-of-factness of my voice surprised me. Anxiously, Carlos Argentino went on.

"Did you see everything — really clear, in colours?"

At that moment I found my revenge. Kindly, openly pitying him, distraught, evasive, I thanked Carlos Argentino Daneri for the hospitality of his cellar and urged him to make the most of the demolition to get away from the pernicious metropolis, which spares no one — believe me, I told him, no one! Quietly and forcefully, I refused to discuss the Aleph. On saying goodbye, I embraced him and repeated that the country, that fresh air and quiet were the great physicians.

seaswells and armies, I saw all the ants there are on earth, I saw a Persian astrolabe, I saw in a drawer of his writing desk the obscene letters — the handwriting made me quiver — that Beatriz had addressed — precise, unbelievable — to Carlos Argentino, I saw a monument worshipped in Chacarita, I saw the atrocious remains of what had deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo, I saw the circulation of my dark blood, I saw the meshings of love and the makings of death, I saw the Aleph, from all points, I saw the world in the Aleph, and in the world the Aleph once more and in the Aleph the world, I saw my face and my viscera, I saw your face — my head swam, I wept — because my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured thing whose name men usurp but which no man has seen — the inconceivable universe.

I felt infinite veneration, infinite sorrow.

"You have delayed there, peering and prying, where you are not called" — the voice came, abhorrent and jovial. "Rack your brains however you will, you cannot in a thousand years repay me this revelation. What a formidable observatory, my little Borges!"

The feet of Carlos Argentino spread on the topmost stair. In his rude shadow I contrived to stand and mumble:

"Formidable. Yes, formidable."

The indifference in my voice surprised me; and, anxious now, Carlos Argentino insisted:

"You saw it all, in colours?"

In an instant I had plotted my revenge. Benevolent, manifestly pitying him, nervously, evasively, I thanked him, Carlos Argentino Daneri, for the hospitality of his cellar; and urged him to profit from the demolition of the house by quitting the pernicious metropolis — which exempts no one, believe me, no one! Gently firm, I refused to discuss the Aleph. I embraced him in farewell, repeating that country air and tranquility were the two great cures.

Out on the street, on the steps of the Plaza Constitución, on the underground, every face seemed familiar. Not a single thing remained that could surprise me, I feared ... and I feared that the

Out on the street, going down the stairways inside Constitution Station, riding the subway, every one of the faces seemed familiar to me. I was afraid that not a single thing on earth would ever again surprise me; I was afraid I would never again be free of all I had seen. Happily, after a few sleepless nights, I was visited once more by oblivion.

Postscript of March first, 1943. Some six months after the pulling down of a certain building on Garay Street, Procrustes & Co., the publishers, not put off by the considerable length of Daneri's poem, brought out a selection of its "Argentine sections". It is redundant now to repeat what happened. Carlos Argentino Daneri won the Second National Prize for Literature. ["I received your pained congratulations," he wrote me. "You rage, my poor friend, with envy, but you must confess -- even if it chokes you! -- that this time I have crowned my cap with the reddest of feathers; my turban with the most caliph of rubies."] First Prize went to Dr. Aita; Third Prize, to Dr. Mario Bonfanti. Unbelievably, my own book *The Sharper's Cards* did not get a single vote. Once again dullness and envy had their triumph! It's been some time now that I've been trying to see Daneri; the gossip is that a second selection of the poem is about to be published. His felicitous pen (no longer cluttered by the Aleph) has now set itself the task of writing an epic on our national hero, General San Martín.

I want to add two final observations: one, on the nature of the Aleph; the other, on its name. As is well known, the Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Its use for the strange sphere in my story may not be accidental. For the Kabbala, the letter stands for the En Soph, the pure and boundless godhead; it is also said that it takes the shape of a man pointing to both heaven and earth, in order to show that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher; for Cantor's *Mengenlehre*, it is the symbol of transfinite numbers, of which any part is as great as the whole. I would like to know whether Carlos Argentino chose that name or whether he

feeling of living everything over again would never go. Luckily, after a few sleepless nights, I was once again let to oblivion.

Postscript, added on the first of March, 1943. Some six months after the building on Garay was pulled down, the publishers Procrusto, not daunted at all by the length of the considerable poem, launched in the market a selection of "Argentine Passages." I am at liberty to repeat what happened: Carlos Argentino Daneri received the Second National Prize for Literature. The First was awarded to the learned Aita; the Third to the learned Mario Bonfanti; unbelievably, my submission *The Sharper's Cards* did not receive a single vote — incomprehension and envy, yet once more, have triumphed.

"I received your scant congratulations," Carlos Argentino wrote me.

"The jest of Envy though you are, my lamentable friend, you will now confess — even though you choke on it! — that I have crowned my helmet with the reddest of plumes, my turban with the most *Caliphic* of rubies.

I have not myself seen Daneri for a long time now. But the dailies say he will soon give us another book: his fortunate pen — no longer delayed by the Aleph — has been consecrated to putting into verse the compendia of the learned Acevedo Díaz.

I wish to append two observations: one regarding the nature of the Aleph; the other regarding its name. The name, as is known, is that of the first letter of the sacred alphabet. That it was given to the disk of my story does not seem fortuitous. In the Kabbalah it signifies Immanent Wisdom, limitless and pure Divinity; it is also said that the letter has the shape of a man pointing to sky and earth both, in order to indicate that the world below is mirror and map to the world above; in the *Mengenlehre*, it is the symbol of the transfinite numbers, those in which the whole is no more than some few of its parts. I wish to know: did Carlos Argentino choose the name: or did he chance upon it in one of the innumerable texts the Aleph in his house would have shown him — which had just so named *another point where all other points converge*? For, incredible

read it -- applied to another point where all points converge - - in one of the numberless texts that the Aleph in his cellar revealed to him. Incredible as it may seem, I believe that the Aleph of Garay Street was a false Aleph.

Here are my reasons. Around 1867, Captain Burton held the post of British Consul in Brazil. In July, 1942, Pedro Henríquez Ureña came across a manuscript of Burton's, in a library at Santos,+ @dealing with the mirror which the Oriental world attributes to Iskander Zu al-Karnayn, or Alexander Bicornis of Macedonia. In its crystal the whole world was reflected. Burton mentions other similar devices -- the sevenfold cup of Kai Kosru; the mirror that Tariq ibn-Ziyad found in a tower (Thousand and One Nights, 272); the mirror that Lucian of Samosata examined on the moon (True History, I, 26); the mirrorlike spear that the first book of Capella's Satyricon attributes; Merlin's universal mirror, which was "round and hollow... and seem'd a world of glas" (The Faerie Queene, III, 2, 19) -- and adds this curious statement: "But the aforesaid objects (besides the disadvantage of not existing) are mere optical instruments. The Faithful who gather at the mosque of Amr, in Cairo, are acquainted with the fact that the entire universe lies inside one of the stone pillars that ring its central court... No one, of course, can actually see it, but those who lay an ear against the surface tell that after some short while they perceive its busy hum... The mosque dates from the seventh century; the pillars come from other temples of pre-Islamic religions, since, as ibn-Khaldun has written: "In nations founded by nomads, the aid of foreigners is essential in all concerning masonry.""

Does this Aleph exist in the heart of a stone? Did I see it there in the cellar when I saw all things, and have I now forgotten it? Our minds are porous and forgetfulness seeps in; I myself am distorting and losing, under the wearing away of the years, the face of Beatriz.

as it will seem, I believe there is — or there was, at least — another Aleph; and I believe that the Aleph on Garay was a false Aleph.

I shall give you my reasons. Around 1867 Captain Burton discharged in Brazil the duties of the English Consul; in July of 1942 Pedro Henriquez Ureña discovered in a library in Santos a manuscript of his, which enlarges on that mirror the East grants Iskandar Zu al-Karnayn — the Double-Horned Alexander of Macedon — in whose crystal the entire universe was reflected. Burton mentions other artefacts — sundry twins — the septuple chalice of Kai Josrú; the mirror Tarik Benzeyad encountered in a tower (1001 Nights, 272); the mirror that Lucian of Samosata was able to examine on the moon; the specular bolts that the first book of the *Satyricon* of Capella equips Jupiter with; the universal mirror of Merlin, "round and hollow and seeming a glassie world" (*The Faerie Queene*, III, 2, 19) — and adds then these curious words: "But the foregoing are merely optical instruments — putting aside their defect of not existing, of course — and the faithful who gather in mosque of Amr, in Cairo, know very well that the universe is inside one of those columns that surround the inner court ... Nobody, it is clear, can see it: but whoever brings his ear to the stone will declare that he hears within, briefly, its busy hum ... The mosque dates from the eighth century; and the columns must come from the temples of the religions Islam displaced in those parts ... because, as Ibn Khaldun has written, *in republics founded by nomads the cooperation of strangers is indispensable to the work of the mason.*"

Does it exist, this Aleph, in the privacy of its stone? Was it seen where all things were seen, and have I forgotten? Our minds are porous to oblivion; and I myself, left to the wasting years, am making false and losing the lineaments of Beatriz.

ghivarghese kuzhikandam

Norman Thomas Di Giovanni

translated in collaboration with the author