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FOR THE LOVE OF *BORGES*

AS AN INTIMATE COMPANION AND WIFE, MARIA KODAMA SHARED THE DARK AND LIGHT SIDES OF THIS RENOWNED MAN OF LETTERS IN THE LAST CHAPTER OF HIS LIFE

The year 1996 marked the tenth anniversary of the death of Jorge Luis gorges, Argentina's greatest writer, variously hailed as the father of Latin American magic realism, a master stylist of the Spanish language, and, some even claim, the world's last literary giant. Around the globe, commemorative events unfolded over several months, paying tribute to his genius and his achievements. But the prelude to all this, held during November 1995 in Buenos Aires's municipal Centro Cultural Recoleta, emphasized the man himself, his humanity, his heart: From *Borges* to Maria Kodama, an exhibition of forty-two paintings by the cream of Argentine artists, each selected to illustrate a line or verse the poet had dedicated to the woman he loved.

Borges and Kodama were married during the waning days of the writer's life, after a unique and intense friendship. Why was their story honored with such a display? Unless they are celebrities in their own right, spouses of famous writers often remain anonymous. But Kodama has been set apart from other helpmates, most obviously because *Borges* was blind. By forty, this lifelong scholar who called books the most agreeable feature of his destiny, could not read the printed page or write down his own thoughts. "A slow nightfall," as he described his progressively darkening condition, had left him with only contours and the color yellow, then, later in life, nothing. He had to be accompanied wherever he went--by his mother, accommodating friends, tiresome sycophants, and near-strangers. Kodama replaced them all. A slight, self-effacing presence next to a towering myth, she proved the ideal guide and much more.

"She was not just someone to take him by the arm but someone knowledgeable who shared his interests and sense of humor. She really changed his life," says literary expert Rolando Costa Picazo. There was a change in *Borges*'s poetry as well, reflecting the discovery of love and the awakening of passion.

Now, as widow, Kodama is a public figure, so uniquely identified with her husband that it is difficult to find a parallel. Her presence brings his memory into focus; ceremonies honoring *Borges* are scheduled around her availability. On display at one of these occasions, Kodama is as elegant as any Argentine society matron. More casually soignee, she would fit right into the cosmopolitan ambiance of, say, Paris's Left Bank, but in Buenos Aires, she is noticed, her half-

Asian lineage obvious in the most proudly European of Latin American cities. While the unpretentious cafes and restaurants that Kodama favors benefit from word of her discreet patronage, she has also become fair game for the literary paparazzi.

There is no doubt that Kodama fascinates because *Borges* was fascinating--with his unabashed anglophilia, esoteric predilections, impish sense of humor, occasional malapropisms, and a stoic capacity to endure blindness, as well as public humiliation (especially when Juan Peron demoted him from director of the National Library to inspector of poultry and rabbits) and the perennial denial of the Nobel Prize. But fascination by association makes it easy to forget that Kodama and *Borges* met, if not as equals, at least on common ground, four years after their first introduction, when he began to tutor her in Old English, his academic specialty, which he had started learning in 1955, after he knew he had lost his sight. She was sixteen at the time, still in high school. "He asked me if I was interested, and I said I was. We would meet at a cafe and he would bring me the books and we would read," she recalls.

Why on earth would an Argentine teenager want to study Old English? Kodama credits her Japanese father with cultivating her interest early on. "I like ancient languages," she explains. "Additionally, since childhood, I've been fascinated by epic literature and poetry, courtly love, and the novels of chivalry. It was a kind of literature that wasn't normal for children in Buenos Aires, but it was normal for me, possibly because of the upbringing my father gave me. Instead of fairy tales, he told me Japanese legends, especially the story of the Forty-Seven Ronin, and the history of the feudal struggles, and I liked that world that he would describe to me, of people full of principles and valor. I think that was the strongest point of the beginning of the friendship with gorges, but it was by accident. Logically no girl in Buenos Aires was interested in those subjects; I just happened to be because of my father."

By the early 1960s Kodama had enrolled in his classes, held, diabolically, on Saturday afternoons and Sundays at the University of Buenos Aires. Outside of class they studied Icelandic together. As gorges's disciple, she became his assistant, regularly reading to him the materials he needed to prepare his lectures. "It was like part of an apprenticeship," she explains. "We would begin by studying and suddenly he would say to me, 'Let's stop this,' or 'Help me,' or 'Read me this,' or 'Look for this book'. But it wasn't a job, it was more like part of something normal between friends."

In appearance, they seemed an unlikely pair, this exotic gamine and the creole patrician. Although common interests bridged a gap in their ages of some forty-five years, the friendship began decorously and remained that way. She never called him anything but gorges; in his writings, he always refers to her by her full name; they addressed each other formally, as usted, until his dying day. From the start, Kodama says, the established rules were respect, sincerity, and trust.

Borges delighted in female conversation and companionship, but his friends and biographers say that, after his sexual initiation, in a belle epoque Swiss brothel, his romances were generally platonic. Like many Argentine bachelors of his generation, he lived with his mother. Leonor Acevedo was overprotective by most standards and is supposed to have derailed at least one potential marriage. But she had also seen her husband gradually lose his own sight to the genetic disorder afflicting six generations of his family, and, as she grew old and frail, she urged her son to find a suitable wife, meaning one willing to take care of him.

So *Borges* married Elsa Astete "fete" Millan, a widow he had met when she was seventeen and he was twenty-seven and had scarcely seen since. For a while, the union was highly romanticized, especially by young people who credited *Borges* with an ardor that had burned some forty years, as he waited for the lady to be free. Kodama harbored no hard feelings at the time and today has nothing but kind words for Millan. By all accounts though, Acevedo disapproved of the choice,

observing the bride did not speak English. When the newlyweds traveled to Harvard, Acevedo's predictions of a mesalliance immediately proved true. Three years later, in 1971, the couple divorced as best they could under the Argentine law of those unforgiving times, which prohibited remarriage. *Borges* moved back into the apartment he owned with Acevedo, by then a wraith of ninety-five, and he turned increasingly to Kodama. "After his mother died," she says, "life went weaving a different story."

At first that story read like a Jane Austen novel. *Borges* was charming with women, as disposed to piropos, or compliments, as any Argentine male. But he was too inhibited to go much further, and so was Kodama.

"When I saw *Sense and Sensibility*, I didn't know why I was laughing so hard," she smiles. "The situation wasn't humorous; it was really rather desperate. But when I got home, I suddenly realized it was like seeing myself in the mirror, that I saw in the movie the reflection of the beginning of my relationship with gorges. He was a Victorian gentleman, and I was immensely shy. Everything went on in the midst of misunderstandings, all very funny, until he finally spoke up."

Even before that moment though, *Borges's* passion had flowed onto the pages he was writing, and, for the first time ever an erotic component appeared in his love poetry. "A woman's being afflicts my whole body," he despaired in the final line of "The Threatened Man," from *The Gold of Tigers*, a poem a clef written in 1972. The key is Kodama, and she permeates this perfect jewel faceted with the rush of emotions overwhelming a man who had thought himself well beyond the age for the panic and pangs of new love.

Borges's allusions soon became explicit; his last four volumes of poetry, *Historia de la noche*, *La cifra*, *Atlas*, and *Los conjurados*, are all dedicated to his muse: "I now pronounce her name, Maria Kodama," he wrote in one of them. "How many mornings, how many seas, how many gardens of the Orient and the Occident, how much Virgil."

Kodama considers these dedications the greatest evidence of *Borges's* love for her, and Costa Picazo agrees. "For gorges," he says, "for whom literature is the deepest and most penetrating experience, a book is proof of love. Book, love; love, Maria Kodama. Once he starts naming her, he can't stop naming her, proclaiming her, like a constant invocation, a magic word, a mantra. She is his joy, his passion, and his consolation. I once heard *Borges* say, 'When something ends, something else begins.' With Maria's entry into his life, everything that went before has ended; she begins the last happy chapter, the definitive one."

Borges's final chapter spanned his final decade, when he was in demand worldwide, and the couple traveled nonstop. His first invitation with Kodama, cosponsored by the University of Michigan and the Argentine Fulbright Commission, was memorialized with a photograph that appears in one of the literary biographies. I am in that picture, standing between *Borges* and Kodama, and the author has generously identified me, a very junior diplomat, as the cultural affairs officer of the United States Embassy. *Borges* had requested his Fulbright grant include arrangements for a companion, which the Department of State had found reasonable given his handicap. So this was the companion, I thought when I met Kodama, who looked as fragile and defenseless as he did. "Don't worry about me," said gorges, reading my mind. "Maria will take care of everything in her ubiquitous way." Secure and happy, he would refuse to go anywhere without her.

Kodama did her best to change gorges's perspective that, for a blind man, travel was "like changing armchairs," as he had once told the *New Yorker*. "I never felt that he was old or blind," she says. "I tried to see to it that he could do whatever he wanted, in the greatest safety, without

limiting his freedom, because he was a very independent person."

Wherever they went, they continued to work in tandem. He encouraged her to develop her own creative bent, and she began to write short stories. Eventually, they collaborated on *Atlas*, a coffee-table volume of reflections on their wanderings, with a text more visual than its photographs of, for example, a Canadian totem, an archetypical Parisian brioche, street corners in Mallorca and Buenos Aires, a hot air balloon ride, and the two of them on hallowed Shinto ground, outfitted in white kimonos. There are no armchairs in any of the pictures and only a few shots of a sedentary gorges. In one of them he is *tete a tete* with a live tiger (a favorite animal, he used to say, because of its yellow color) who, he wrote, licked his face and rested its claw on his head.

When they weren't working, the couple composed haiku, studied classical Arabic, and went to the movies. gorges, who preferred films with a soundtrack as important as the picture, adored *West Side Story*, *Psycho*, and *Lawrence of Arabia* and insisted on sitting through them over and over, which Kodama didn't mind. She remembers with amazement a Bergman film in Geneva. Aware of the impossibility of being read the French subtitles, *Borges* tagged along with the group anyway, and he pieced together the plot from the Swedish dialogue by drawing on his knowledge of English, German, Icelandic, and Anglo-Saxon. Usually though, he preferred to rely on Kodama's perceptions.

"He said he had never known a person who felt beauty as I did," she remembers, "and that from the tone of my voice he realized when something was very, very beautiful. According to him, when I said, 'How beautiful!', it was almost like something painful, so he felt that it was really beautiful. It was a marvelous relationship.

Yet, they didn't marry because, Kodama insists, she refused all his proposals. "We were already, as young people say nowadays, a couple," she explains. "When his mother died, he said that the situation was going to become public, and that he was a Victorian gentleman and he wanted to get married. But I come from a divorced home, a rather chaotic background, and I had suffered a lot because of the problem between my parents. For me, marriage is not the best state; I don't believe in it. So I told him I didn't want to get married, that it wouldn't change our relationship, that I was never going to leave him. Then he asked, 'But wouldn't you like to sign Maria Kodama de *Borges*?' "*Borges* was referring to the tradition that dictates that a married woman in Spanish-speaking societies add to her maiden names the possessive *de*, meaning belonging to, and her husband's family name. "I said," she continues, "I don't want to be anybody's [Maria Kodama]. Would you sign *Borges de Kodama*?" According to her, *Borges* exclaimed that he would be delighted to right then and there, if that was all it took, and would start a new fashion. "Before I die," he implored her, "which will be long before you, I want us to marry." Kodama says she answered, "Very well, gorges, I understand that you're a Victorian gentleman and so that you can die in peace, I give you my promise." And she adds, "That is how it stood, as a promise and nothing more until the time came."

Shortly before he died, *Borges* reminded her of the promise, announcing he wanted a church wedding with Greek Orthodox rites. That was too much for Kodama, who was not religious, so on April 26, 1986, they were married in a civil ceremony through a power of attorney in Paraguay, a formality divorced Argentines often used to solemnize remarriage before the laws changed. In keeping with Kodama's preferences, there was no publicity; *Time* reported the milestone a month later, under the heading, "Marriage Revealed." Most of the couple's friends were more relieved than surprised, but some have never forgiven the marriage and to this day continue to question gorges's capacity and Kodama's motives. "People were jealous of her," explains Costa Picazo, "people who belonged to his past. They felt displaced."

Following a cycle of lectures and awards in Italy, gorges's health declined seriously, and he asked to be taken to Japan. "He told me," Kodama says, "that he thought it would be much more poetic to go down as 'Jorge Luis gorges, born in Buenos Aires August 24, 1899, died in Nara on such and such a date.' And I said, 'If you're sick, I need to be able to community with the people who will have to take care of you and so do you. In Japan, that's not possible.'"

So *Borges* decided on Geneva, which is where he succumbed to liver cancer on June 14, 1986. The New Yorker reported a final Borgesian shiver at the news of his death. Only twelve days earlier, the magazine had published Alastair Reid's translation of a poem in which *Borges* speculated he might die in Geneva. In keeping with his last request, Jorge Luis *Borges* was laid to rest in the city's Cimetiere des Rois; Kodama marked his grave with a stone inscribed in Icelandic.

For some, who still see *Borges* as a multilingual, multicultural internationalist, the wish to be buried in Switzerland confirmed a suspicion that he had rejected his birthplace. Had *Borges* considered the disappointment his choice might cause in Buenos Aires? "He thought his Argentine audience had his work to enjoy, something much more important than his cadaver," Kodama explains, "and that there is also a tendency here [in Argentina] towards necrophilia which was best avoided." She also points out that *Borges* had dedicated his last book, *Los conjurados*, to Geneva, as well as to her. "It's a love song to Swiss tolerance," she says. "I think that in some way he was trying to remind us of a people who forget their differences and try to make a better world."

Borges's idealization of Switzerland might ring strange today, but it was grounded in personal experience. In 1914 his family traveled to Europe for an extended holiday only to be caught by the most destructive cataclysm the world had ever seen. For five years they found a safe haven in Geneva, where *Borges* completed his education at the Lycee Jean Calvin, far happier than he had been as a partially sighted, uncoordinated adolescent on the rough-and-tumble schoolyards of Buenos Aires.

Over the decade following gorges's death, Kodama was sorely tried. gorges's nephew petitioned for his uncle's body to be returned to Buenos Aires, which she resisted and the Swiss courts denied. Along with a former household servant, the nephew also contested the will naming Kodama sole beneficiary. *Borges* had owned little in the way of personal possessions or real estate and, because of intricacies in the title, Kodama deeded their downtown Buenos Aires apartment to his only sibling, Norah gorges. At issue was a single asset, gorges's work. Kodama cannot or will not discuss its value, saying only that her husband left her "half his soul": Poetry, short stories, and essays translated into thirty-three languages.

After nine years of litigation, Kodama prevailed, only to face the beginning of an onslaught of books, talk shows, and other commentary timed to coincide with the 1996 tributes and those expected during the centenary in 1999. Obviously welcome are new editions of *Para las seis cuerdas*, a series of milongas; *El otro, el mismo*, poems written between 1930 and 1976; *Dialogos Borges-Sabato*; *Siete conversaciones con Jorge Luis gorges*; and the complete works in French and English. Of the eighteen biographies published or in progress in the United States, France, and Argentina, Kodama finds most are "normal and correct." But, as Octavio Paz once observed, publicity has turned *Borges* "into one of its victim-gods." Outwardly, Kodama has not reacted to sensationalism, innuendo, or speculation, preferring instead to concentrate on her mission.

Borges's work, his widow says, must reach the greatest possible readership. To that end, she crisscrosses Argentina, lecturing and visiting secondary schools to explain how gorges's writings are accessible at many levels, and, like ancient palimpsests, lend themselves to a lifetime of re-reading and rediscovery. She also established and presides over the *Fundacion Internacional Jorge*

Luis *Borges*, headquartered in a fine old mansion on Calle Anchorena, where yet another series of Borgesian coincidences converge.

The rooftop terraces overlook the garden of the house in which *Borges* wrote Kodama's favorite story, "Las ruinas circulares." Convinced she would not be able to afford it, Kodama first asked to see the property for a glimpse of the adjacent garden about which her husband had often spoken. As it turned out, the realtor had attended the 1986 memorial service in Geneva, and the owners, a father and son living in Europe, had often followed *Borges* and Kodama as they strolled around Geneva and confessed to some innocuous eavesdropping. Within two weeks, the mansion was hers, at her price, its chandeliers and draperies included as a gift.

The building serves as a museum where gorges's furniture, one-thousand-book library, diplomas, and decorations are arranged to re-create his universe. In addition to organizing seminars and lectures on his work and that of other great writers, the foundation hosts concerts, exhibitions, and other cultural events.

"My responsibility is to try to make this work continue to bear fruit, to be like a seed falling on fertile ground so that other people learn from it," Kodama explains.

Through the foundation, she is already preparing a multisite centennial extravaganza to be inaugurated in Paris, with the appearance of the second volume of the collected works in French, then continued in Geneva, Venice, Rome, Madrid, Lisbon, London, and New York before returning to Buenos Aires, where, on August 24, it will culminate, but not conclude, in a one-hundredth birthday jubilee.

The success of Kodama's foundation has surely been confirmed by the subsequent appearance of a rival organization in a much more imposing building across town. Founded by the owner of a number of priceless first editions, it functions in grand fashion, sponsoring a wider variety of cultural activities. Kodama turned down the presidency and consequently must tolerate a forum for voices she would rather ignore. There and elsewhere, she definitely has her detractors, and they complain that she has appropriated gorges's legend along with his persona, leaving no room for others who consider themselves part of it. But many people who loved *Borges* as Kodama did, for himself, agree with Costa Picazo who says, "She keeps the memory alive. Without her, it would have been fragmented."

Last June 14 a phalanx of supporters closed ranks behind Kodama, resplendent in an alabaster jacquard suit and accessories, her luxuriant Oriental hair attractively graying and impeccably coiffed. The occasion was the first of the tenth-anniversary observances, a noontime baptism of Buenos Aires's municipal auditorium at the Centro Cultural Recoleta. The city's secretary of culture unveiled a plaque designating the hall "El Aleph," after a well-known short story chosen to symbolize the life's work of the author. Formerly a chapel, the auditorium is only steps from Recoleta Cemetery, the resting place of the powerful and the prominent, where many Argentines would prefer *Borges* were buried. "I will not lie here," he had written, referring to Recoleta in one of his final poems, "but will be part of oblivion." *Borges* was wrong about oblivion, of course, and if he had his way about where he lies, perhaps Recoleta can now claim at least his spirit.

Looking rather better than the lithesome Modigliani ladies to whom she has been compared, Kodama opened the ceremony with a letter she had written to her husband on the day of his death. "Haste entonces," she ended, "until then." Like gorges, her agnosticism acknowledges an afterworld.

The formalities that day honored *Borges* for having served so well both literature and his beloved Buenos Aires, whose streets and barrios he celebrated to universal acclaim. They also commended

his choice of a partner.

"*Borges* used to say, 'Maria is a samurai,'" concluded writer Alina Diaconu. "The code of these Japanese warriors is strict and implacable. Their duties are rectitude, courage, courtesy, loyalty to the feudal lord, self-control, stoicism in the face of physical or mental suffering, and a sense of honor. From what Maria Kodama's struggle has meant . . . it has been demonstrated once again that in his appraisals, *Borges* didn't make mistakes."

The Borgesian circle is almost too perfect. The noble master and his steadfast retainer seem out of a story scripted from the lore of Kodama's childhood Or from an Anglo-Saxon epic, an Icelandic saga, an Arabian night. After all, societies everywhere require ideals, and these demand devotion and dignity. Gracias, Maria Kodama, the crowd seemed to say, and the applause echoed, gracias.



*La dicha [Happiness], by Roberto Duarte, oil on canvas From the exhibition From **Borges** to Maria Kodama*

PHOTO (COLOR): IF A WOMAN SHARES MY LOVE, MY VERSE WILL GRAZE THE TENTH SPHERE OF THE CONCENTRIC HEAVENS "Browning Resolves to Be a Poet" Jorge Luis *Borges*





*THE PRESENCES WHICH RULE THIS CURIOUS WORLD HAVE LET ME DREAM OF YOU
BUT NOT COMMAND YOU "The White Deer"*

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): WHY DOES A MAN REQUIRE A WOMAN TO LOVE HIM?
LET'S SEE "The Iron Coin"

PHOTO (COLOR): El beso humano y la tension del arco, [The Human Kiss and the Tension of
the Arc], by Luis Felipe Noe, mixed media

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): MARIA KODAMA AND I HAVE SHARED THE JOY AND
SURPRISE OF FINDING SOUNDS, LANGUAGES, TWILIGHTS, CITIES, GARDENS AND
PEOPLE, ALL OF THEM DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT AND UNIQUE Prologue, Atlas

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by Paula Durbin

Paula Durbin is a lawyer, dancer, and writer and a previous contributor to Americas. Photographs of artworks are courtesy of Mosto & Rojas Arte. Photographs of Jorge Luis *Borges* and Maria Kodama are courtesy of Fundacion Internacional Jorge Luis *Borges* (except where noted).

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