POSTSCRIPT

JORGE LUIS BORGES: A DAY IN THE LIFE

The first book written by the late Argentine master, "Fervor of Buenos Aires," was published in Buenos Aires seventy years ago this month, launching one of the rare literary careers of the century. This memoir is written by his nephew.

BY MIGUEL DE TORRE BORGES

THAT day—shall we say a Wednesday in the spring of 1945?—he awoke at eight o'clock. Despite the insomnia that often troubled his nights, he had slept reasonably well. Several times the chimes of the Torre de los Ingleses had sounded without his hearing them. The arched iron beams of insomnia were receding now. The maid raised the blinds—jalousies that opened onto a balcony overlooking Maipú Street in the center of Buenos Aires, and put down on the dark wooden table—with one large drawer and three smaller ones—a tray with only a cup of coffee and milk.

Seated on the bed, with his bare feet on the floor, he drank the coffee slowly and gazed around his room. It was not actually a bedroom but the dining room of the small apartment, separated from the living room by sliding doors that were always kept closed. Aside from the table and the bed, the room held two bookcases, an old painted wooden chair whose seat cushion bore a "Dame à l'Unicorne" embroidered by his sister (my mother, that is), two watercolors by Xul Solar, and a pitiless American lithograph that depicted a terrified prisoner kneeling with his hands bound behind his back and a stone tied around his neck, who was about to be thrown into a river by several armed men—a scene that could have served as an illustration for one of the stories in his own "Universal History of Infamy," published a decade before, when he was thirty-five years old.

He went into the bathroom, adjusted the water temperature, waited for the tub to fill, and then lay submerged for a long time. Wrapped in a terry-cloth robe, he returned to the bedroom and dressed, in clothes that had been laid out for him by his mother the night before. He owned only two or three suits, all well worn—a condition that he was unaware of, because of his poor eyesight, but that would not have interested him—with bulges at the level of his knees. He dressed, as always, with his own peculiar touches, tucking his shirttail into his undershorts, buttoning all three buttons of his suit jacket (which made him look as if he were wearing a girdle), and clipping his fountain pen into the upper outside pocket of his jacket.

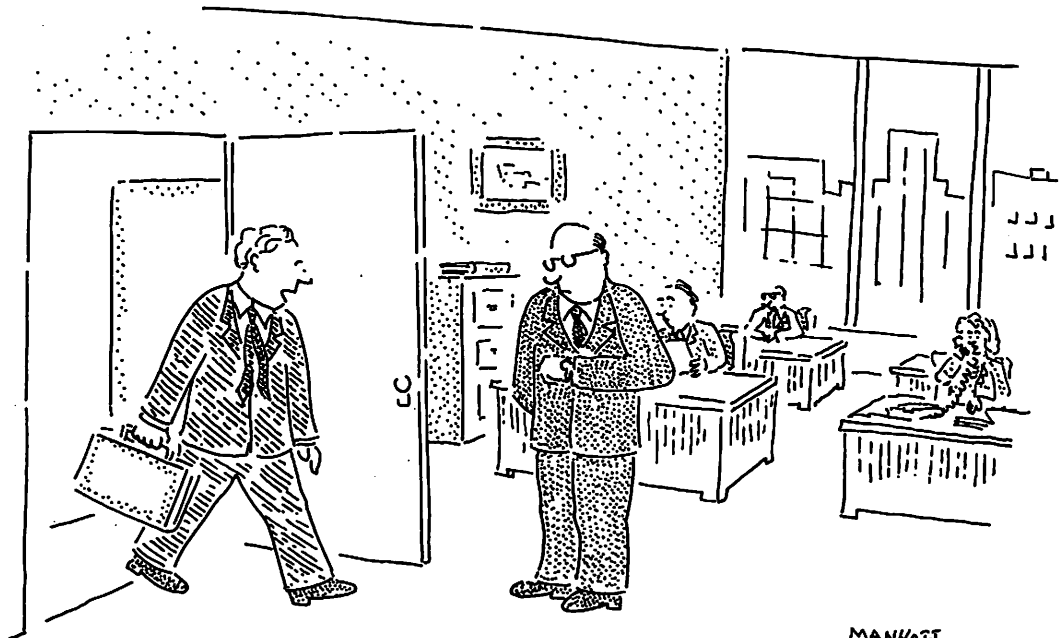
Now he raised the glass front of the first shelf of the bookcase nearer the head of his bed, removed the first volume of "The Works of the Late Edgar A. Poe" (New York, 1850), opened it to the front flyleaf, extracted a ten-peso note and placed it, folded in half, in a black leather billfold that he habitually carried in his inside coat pocket. He picked up the copy of *La Nación*—already read by his mother—with his fingertips, tucked it under his arm, and, moving stiffly, went down to the street and crossed over to the Plaza San Martín. There he lifted his arm, allowing the newspaper to drop onto a park bench. He had a habitual distrust of the news. Free of his burden, he walked down Florida Street to a barbershop on the corner of Viamonte. While the barber shaved him, chatting about soccer and politics, Borges was composing a poem:

> The bullets buzz on this last afternoon.
> There is wind, laden with ashes,
> the day and the shapeless battle decline,
> and the victory belongs to the others . . .

Once again on Florida, he walked in the sunshine to Cangallo, turned there, and entered Mitchell's, a bookstore. The solicitous clerk, who never learned his preferences, offered him a newly arrived book on chemistry and a book on golf, both of which he declined. Alone, he moved about among the shelves and tables and eventually bought a thriller—"They Were Seven," by Eden Phillpotts. If it was any good, he might have it translated and then published in the Seventh Circle, a popular series of English-language detective novels that he supervised, along with Adolfo Bioy Casares. Now, holding the book in his right hand, he strolled briskly back home along Florida. Once arrived, he sat down at his table and for some time wrote laboriously in ink on the cross-lined pages of a composition notebook. In one passage, he wrote: "I saw a copy of Philemon Holland's first English edition of Pliny; I saw all at the same time every letter of every page . . . ; I saw night and today's day; I saw a sunset in Querétaro that seemed to reflect the color of a rose in Bengal; I saw my empty bedroom; I saw in a study in Alkmaar a terrestrial globe between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly."

His mother called him for lunch. They ate soup, well-done steaks, a salad of lettuce and tomato with parsley. They had oranges for dessert, and drank cool tap water and a cup of herb tonic afterward. He rose from the table and set aside a history book for the trip to work—a nearly hour-long streetcar journey—that awaited him. During nine years of such journeys, he had already read in this manner two or three different translations of "The Divine Comedy," and "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," "Orlando Furioso," and most of the works of Léon Bloy and Bernard Shaw. Now he was well into the tenth and final volume of "The History of the Argentine Republic," by Vicente Fidel López. His mother, removing an ornate silver top from an old crystal flask, moistened his handkerchief and his head with cologne, then straightened his hair with a brush and a metal comb, and accompanied him to the elevator, where they said goodbye.

He waited on a street corner not far



"Sorry I'm late, chief—I fell back when I should have sprung ahead."

that they might overthrow him one day, so his natural instinct is to put them in jail or get rid of them. It's happening not just in Egypt but in Saudi Arabia and Libya as well."

"How many times have you been to Afghanistan?" I asked.

"I can't remember how many times. I've been there a few times," he said. His voice turned melancholy. "We would go from Pakistan to the forward positions inside Afghanistan."

"With Gulbadin Hekmatyar?" I asked.

He avoided a direct answer. "I went in with all of the mujahedin leaders," he said.

"What do you think of Hekmatyar?" I asked.

"How many other leaders are you going to ask me about?" he said.

"Only two," I replied. "Ayatollah Khomeini and Hassan Al-Turabi."

"They are all great men, who tried to help their religion and serve their countries," he said. "I admire them all enormously."

I asked him if he felt that the news media's tendency to compare him with Ayatollah Khomeini was justified.

"I serve my religion and I call for the establishment of an Islamic state. That's all I'm asking for. And when this state is established in Egypt I will be a servant to this state. I am not looking for leadership."

"But if you were offered the position of Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar"—the most prominent religious office in the country—"I presume that you wouldn't turn it down?"

"If I wanted to be the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, I would be that right now."

I asked Sheikh Omar how a poor, blind, diabetic child could rise from the slums to become a leader of Egypt's largest militant Islamic group.

"With the help of Allah. There was no one turning point for me. But Allah helps whomever he wants. How could the Afghan people have expelled a superpower? It was only with Allah's help."

"What about the three billion dollars supplied by the C.I.A.?" I asked.

The Sheikh roared with laughter. Then he said, "Without Allah, it would not have been possible with three *hundred* billion dollars. Allah is the stronger partner of the two. The U.S. government had been trying to destroy the Soviet Union since 1945. It could never have done it alone."

Many people in Cairo, both Egyptians and foreign diplomats, were highly skeptical of the report that Sheikh Omar's United States visa was granted in error, and I had been reliably told that Hassan Al-Turabi had intervened on the Sheikh's behalf, assisted by United States intelligence officials who had known Sheikh Omar during the days of the Afghanistan war. So I now asked him to tell me exactly how he had got his visa in Khartoum.

"In a very natural way, like anyone else," he replied. "Through the proper channels. And I am going to give you no more details."

"But how could so many United States government departments have made so many mistakes, and at so many different times? There is wide speculation that the United States government sponsored your admission here."

"I suggest that you pose those questions to your own government," he said.

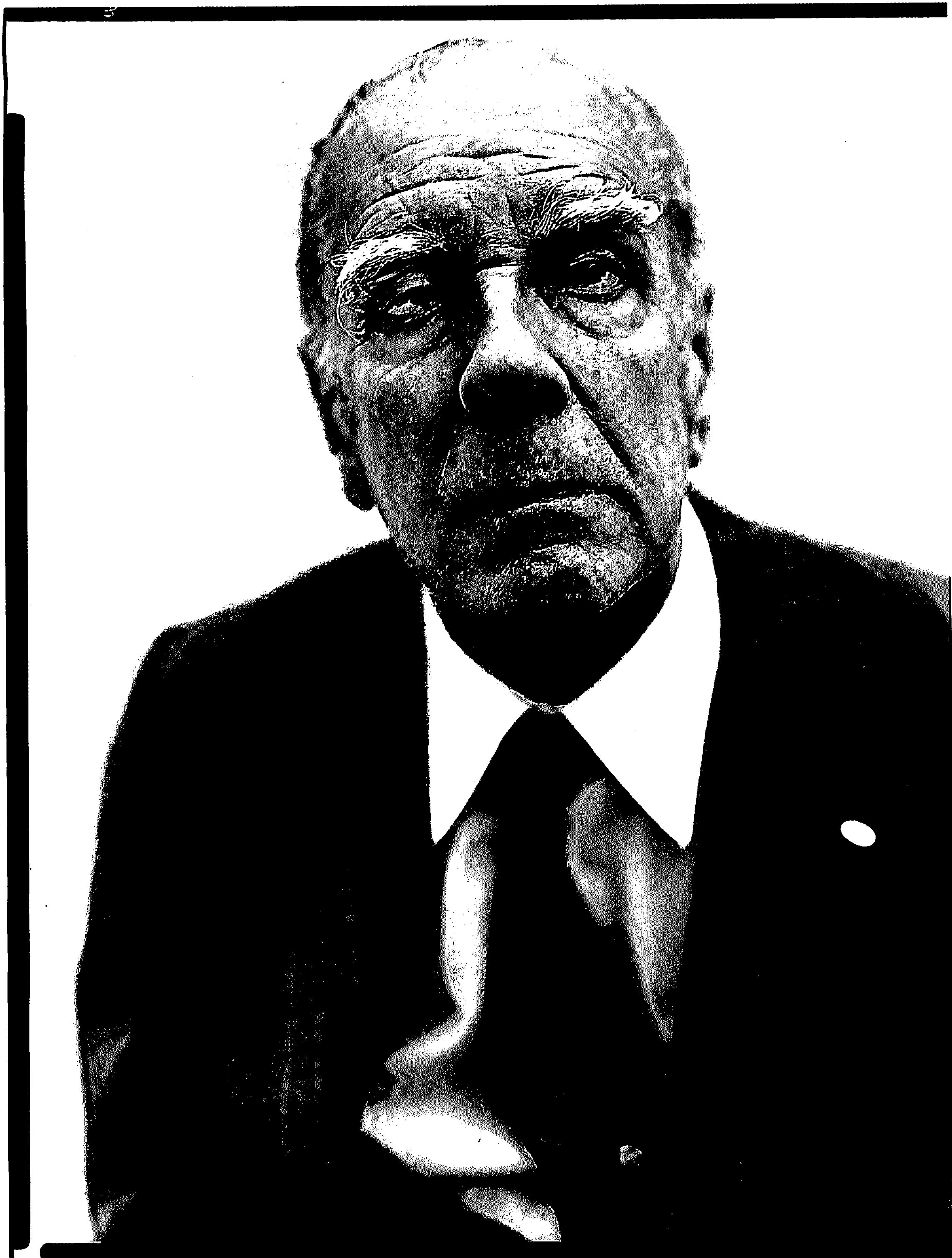
Sheikh Omar had been animated during our two-hour interview, but now he seemed tired, his chin resting on his chest. He suffered from both diabetes and a heart condition, and many of his supporters have become increasingly concerned about his failing health. Only the week before, on the final day of Ramadan, he had sent a taped message to his followers around the world, which was played in all of Egypt's popular mosques. In the message, which he called "A Will to the People of Egypt," he had said, "The end of my life and the time to meet Allah is near." So I asked Sheikh Omar if he was dying, and what the message meant.

He rested his head on the back of the sofa and didn't reply immediately. After a few seconds, he turned toward me and said, "When the F.B.I. is asked why they are following me, they say it's because I have many enemies"—militant Jewish groups and the Egyptian government—"and they are protecting me from them. So it's possible that something could happen—quite possible."

I asked Sheikh Omar about his connection with Gama'a and Al-Jihad.

"I am merely a Muslim scholar who speaks the truth," he said.

I persisted, and he laughed and said, "Enough, enough! Describe me as the spiritual mentor of Gama'a." ♦



Jorge Luis Borges, photographed by Richard Avedon in New York City, April 30, 1976.

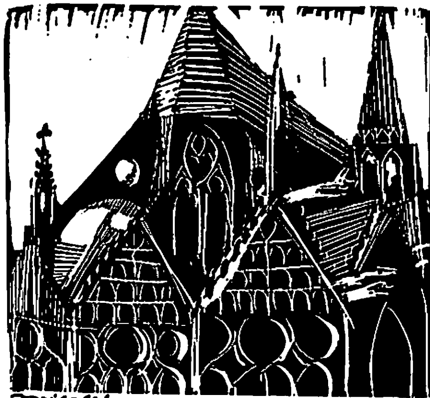
from the house, boarded the No. 7 streetcar, sat down, and—accustomed to blending the music of the words with the clatter of the car—opened the book, even though his ophthalmologist had repeatedly warned him of the danger to his weakened eyes of reading in poor light and in a moving vehicle. From time to time, as the No. 7 swayed off into the southwestern part of town, he raised his eyes and viewed with satisfaction the old houses, the alleyways, the tenements, the stone lions guarding a doorway on Jujuy Street, the vacant lots, and even the curious modern Art Deco façades that marked his familiar passage. When he came to page 386 of the "History" and read, "Molina did not count on the forces that Colonel Don Isidoro Suárez headed in the north. That brilliant cavalry leader had replaced Colonel Pacheco as commander of the border," he may have felt, at this mention of Suárez, who was his great-grandfather, a certain joy swelling his breast, and lifted his gaze for a moment from the text.

At the end of his trip, he descended from the streetcar, walked three blocks, and entered an austere, gloomy two-story building, the Miguel Cané Municipal Library, where he performed the duties of a third-class assistant. He sat down at his desk and took up the numbing daily task of classifying no more than a hundred books—the limit he had set himself in order to avoid drawing attention to the cultivated sloth of his fellow-workers. Later on in the afternoon, taking refuge from his oppressive task, he went up to the flat roof of the library, seated himself with his back to a low wall, and continued his reading of Kafka's "The Castle." In bad weather, he would have taken refuge in the basement to read, and there, perhaps, to translate something by Virginia Woolf or by Faulkner. One day in the basement, he had written: "The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons, whose circumference is unattainable."

At dusk, he came down and visited the stacks, where he affectionately caressed the spines of several much-consulted reference works—perhaps pausing this time before the twenty-nine-volume panorama of the marvellous Eleventh-Edition Encyclopædia Britannica, whose location he could have found with his eyes closed. A bit later, he left the library and walked to the combined grocery store and bar around the block, on the corner of Muñiz and United States. He leaned on its tin-covered counter, asked for a shot of gin, and drank it in a single gulp. A certain passivity and loneliness had encouraged in him over the years this ritual of going into a bar for a drink.

On this day, he soon returned to the library and resumed his labors. A woman friend arrived to pick him up, and they departed together. This was an occurrence that happened with sufficient frequency to attract the attention of his co-workers, particularly the women. The elegantly dressed and noticeably perfumed ladies—a rare sight here in the southern outskirts of the city—who stopped by to keep an evening rendezvous with their colleague were the same women whose photographs often appeared on the society pages of *El Hogar*. Another anomaly that had aroused the interest of his fellow municipal employees was an article that one of them had found on page 411 of Volume II of the Espasa Encyclopedia's appendix, published in 1931 (with an accompanying photograph of a personage with mustache and bow tie), on the subject of one Jorge Luis Borges. The colleague pointed out the extraordinary coincidence of there being two individuals with the same name, but when Borges told him that they were one and the same man, he did not believe it.

Borges and his visitor (to return to our Wednesday) took the streetcar back into town. They went to a movie on Lavalle Street and then dined at the restaurant in Retiro train station, chatting and laughing gaily. He accompanied his friend to her house and returned to his own home before midnight. As always, his mother was waiting for him, reading



in bed. He sat down, in a rocking chair at her bedside, and talked about the movie he had just seen. It was "Marie-Louise," filmed in Switzerland and full of clouds and mountains and beautiful skies. It was nothing much, but he would see it again if she would come with him. He asked how her translation of Machen's "Tree of Life" was coming along, and added that Mandie Molina Vedia had already begun work on the illustrations. The Bioy Casareses—Adolfo and Silvina—had just returned from their *estancia*, and now he and Adolfo would be able to resume work on their film script. They were moving slowly now, but getting to know the characters better. The important thing was to come up with the continuity and certain little symmetries and surprises. And speaking of which, in that sentimental Scottish film he'd seen last week, he had suddenly noticed a very young actor who had reminded him of Miguelete. (And here, having imagined myself into an imaginary ancient conversation between my uncle and my grandmother, I will leave them together and withdraw.)

Later that night, he entered his room, undressed, and slipped into a long white nightshirt, of the sort he had worn as a boy and would wear for the rest of his life. He got into bed and, lying on his back, read for a while by the dim light of an overhead bulb. He closed the book at last, but then got up and checked the bookcases, as usual, to make sure that the books in Spanish were properly placed, with the titles on their spines running upward, from bottom to top, so that the next morning he would not find that the words had fallen from their pages, as happens with books that sleep upside down. Satisfied, he turned out the light, settled back into bed with his arms lying along his sides, and, listening to every word, murmured softly in English, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name . . ." ♦

(*Translated, from the Spanish, by Donald A. Yates.*)

Her lover was a noncommissioned officer who had an apartment off base. Ms. Edwards could live off base as long as she maintained a bed in the barracks and returned there every morning at 5 for revelry.—*Toledo Blade.*

Tell it to the Marines.