

Willis Barnstone

Thirteen Questions: A Dialogue with Jorge Luis Borges

WILLIS BARNSTONE: In case you want a hardboiled egg?

JORGE LUIS BORGES: Why of course.

WB: And I'll crack it for you.

JLB: Look here, if not, I can't break a hardboiled egg. Not a hardboiled one!

WB: It's good to bring hardboiled eggs into radio stations, no?

JLB: A fine combination I feel. Hardboiled eggs and radio stations!

WB: Borges, would you put them in a poem?

JLB: No, I wouldn't. Yet I suppose all things are right for a poem. All words are right. In fact all things are. Anything can be done, you know, but very few things can be talked about.

WB: I have some questions. Maybe wordy but your answers won't be.

JLB: They will be laconic, yes?

1. WB: We know that consciousness resides in every other human being, yet we possess an awareness of only our own mind. At times

we wake, as it were, to a puzzling knowledge of the mind's separate existence.

JLB: Well, but this is a question on the nature of solipsism, no? Now I don't believe in solipsism, because if I did I'd go mad. But of course it is a curious fact that we exist.

At the same time I feel I am not dreaming you, or, let's put it the other way, that you are not dreaming me. But this fact of wondering at life may stand for the essence of poetry. All poetry consists in feeling things as being strange, while all rhetoric consists in thinking of them as quite common, as very obvious. Of course I *am* puzzled at the fact of my existing, of my existing in a human body, of my looking through eyes, hearing through ears, and so on. And maybe everything I have written is a mere metaphor, a mere variation on that central theme of being puzzled by things. In that case, I suppose, there's no essential difference between philosophy and poetry, since both stand for that same kind of puzzlement. Except that in the case of philosophy, the answer is given in a logical way, and in the case of poetry you use metaphor. If you use language, you have to use metaphors all the time. Since you know my works (well, let the word go at that. I don't think of them as *works*, really), since you know my *exercises*, I suppose you have felt that I was being puzzled all the time, and I was trying to find a foundation for my puzzlement.

2. **WB:** *In Cincinnati when an admirer said "May you live one thousand years," you answered, "I look forward happily to my death." What did you mean by that?*

JLB: I mean that when I'm unhappy, and that happens quite often to all of us, I find a real consolation in the thought that in a few years, or maybe in a few days, I'll be dead and then all this won't matter. I look forward to being blotted out. But if I thought that my death was a mere illusion, that after death I would go on, then I would feel very, very unhappy. For really, I'm sick and tired of myself. Now, of course if I go on and I have no personal memory of having ever been Borges, then in that case, it won't matter to me; because I may have been hundreds of odd people before I was born, but those things won't worry me, since I will have forgotten them. When I think of mortality, of death, I think of those things in a hopeful way, in an expectant way. I should say I am greedy for death, that I want to stop waking up every morning, finding: "Well, here I am, I have to go back to Borges."

There's a word in Spanish, I suppose you know. I wonder if it's any longer in use. Instead of saying "to wake up," you say "*recordarse*," that is, to record yourself, to remember yourself. My mother used to say "Que me recuerde a las ocho," I want to be recorded to myself at eight. Every morning I get that feeling, because I am more or less non-existent. Then when I wake up, I always feel I'm being let down. Because, well, here I am. Here's the same old stupid game going on. I have to be somebody. I have to be exactly that somebody. I have certain commitments. One of the commitments is to live through the whole day. Then I see all that routine before me, and all things naturally make me tired. Of course, when you're young, you don't feel that way. You feel, well, I am so glad I'm back in this marvelous world. But I don't think I ever felt that way. Even when I was young. Especially when I was young. Now, I have resignation. Now, I wake up and I say: I have to face another day. I let it go at that. I suppose that people feel in different ways, because many people think of immortality as a kind of happiness, perhaps because they don't realize it.

WB: They don't realize what?

JLB: The fact that going on and on would be, let's say, awful.

WB: Would be another Hell, as you say in one of your stories.

JLB: Yes, it would be, yes. Since this life is already Hell, why go in for more and more Hell, for larger and larger doses!

WB: For two hundred years?

JLB: Yes. Well, of course, you might say that those two hundred years don't exist. For what really exists is the present moment. The present moment is being weighted down by the past and by the fear of the future. Really, when do we speak of the present moment? For the present moment is as much an abstraction as the past or the future. In the present moment, you always have some kind of past and some kind of future also. You are slipping all the time from one to the other.

WB: But obviously you have great moments of pleasure during your life.

JLB: Yes, I suppose everybody has. But I wonder. I suppose those

moments are perhaps finer when you remember them. Because when you're happy, you're hardly conscious of things. The fact of being conscious makes for unhappiness.

WB: To be conscious of happiness often lets in an intrusion of doubt.

JLB: But I think I have known moments of happiness. I suppose all men have. There are moments, let's say, love, riding, swimming, talking to a friend, let's say, conversation, reading, even *writing*, or rather, not writing but inventing something. When you sit down to write it, then you are no longer happy because you're worried by technical problems. But when you think out something, then I suppose you may be allowed to be happy. And there are moments when you're slipping into sleep, and then you feel happy, or at least I do. I remember the first time I had sleeping pills. (They were efficient of course, since they were new to me.) I used to say to myself, "Now hearing that tramway turn around the corner, I won't be able to hear the end of the noise it makes, the rumble, because I'll be asleep." Then, I felt very, very happy. I thought of unconsciousness.

3. *WB:* Do you care about literary recognition? Do you want fame?

JLB: No. No! Those things are non-existent. At the same time, when it comes to me, and it may have come to me, I feel that I should be grateful. I mean if people take me seriously, I think, well, they are wrong. At the same time I should be thankful to them.

4. *WB:* I wanted to ask *do you live for the next poem, story, or essay or conversation?*

JLB: Yes, Yes, I do.

WB: It seems to me that you're a lucky man to have unending obsessions to create and to record. *Do you know why you had that destiny of being a writer? That destiny or that obsession?*

JLB: The only thing I know is that I need those obsessions. Because if not, why should I go on living? Of course, I wouldn't commit suicide. But I should feel very unjustified. This doesn't mean I think very much of what I write. It means that I *have* to write. Because if I don't write something and keep on being obsessed by it, then I have to write it and be rid of it.

5. *WB: In the Republic, Plato spends much time seeking a definition of justice, a kind of public definition. Is this notion valid to us personally? Is your life, which ends in death, a just experiment in life, or is it a biological doublecross against both the mind and the body? Plato speaks about public justice. Given the fact of death, do you believe in private justice?*

JLB: I think that the only justice is private justice, because as to a public justice, I wonder if that really exists.

WB: Do you believe private justice exists? How do we consider morality and doomsday?

JLB: At the very moment of our lives we know whether we're acting the right way or the wrong way. We might say that doomsday is going on all the time, that every moment of our lives we're acting wrongly or rightly. Doomsday is not something that comes at the end. It's going on all the time. And we know, through some instinct, when we have acted rightly or wrongly.

WB: Is there a biological treason in life because of death?

JLB: I don't understand what you mean by biological doublecross. Biology sounds so dim to me, I wonder if I can take that word in, no?

WB: Physical, then.

*JLB: Well, physical, yes. I think I can understand that. I am a very simple-minded man. If you go in for those long fancy words, *biology* and *psychology*!*

WB: We get into language that your father might have used, right?

JLB: Yes, he might have used it, but he rarely did so, being a professor of psychology, a skeptic also.

6. *WB: I spent one year of my life, when I was a student, seeking the center of consciousness. I never found it.*

JLB: I don't think you can. It keeps eluding you all the time.

WB: But I did discover that seeking oneself was fascinating and intolerable.

JLB: Yes, it is. Of course, since I am blind, I have to do that, more or less all the time. Before I went blind, I was always finding refuge in watching things, seeing things, in reading, while now I have to go in for thinking or, since my thinking capacity isn't too good, let's say for dreaming, and in a sense for dreaming away my life. That's the only thing I can do. Then of course I have to go in for long spells of loneliness, but I don't mind that. Before I couldn't. Before, I remember I lived in a town called Adueto south of Buenos Aires; when I went on a half hour's journey and I had no book with me I felt very unhappy. But now I can spend hours and hours on end, with no books, because I don't read them. And so I don't think of loneliness as being necessarily unhappy. Or for example if I get a spell of insomnia, I don't mind about it because time slips down. It's like an easy slope, no? So I just let myself go on living. Now when I was not blind, I always had to be furnishing my time with different things. Now I don't. I just let myself go.

WB: Yet you do very much enjoy all the times you are with others.

JLB: But of course, I live in memory. And I suppose a poet should live in memory, because after all, what is imagination? Imagination, I should say, is made of memory and of oblivion. It is a kind of blending of the two things.

WB: You manage with time?

JLB: Oh yes. Everybody who goes blind gets a kind of reward: a different sense of time. Time is no longer to be filled in at every moment by something. No. You know that you have just to live on, to let time live you. That makes for a certain comfort. I think it is a great comfort or perhaps a great reward. A gift of blindness is that you feel time in a different way from most people, no? You have to remember and you have to forget. You shouldn't remember everything because, well, the character I wrote about, Funes, goes mad because his memory is endless. Of course if you forgot everything, you would no longer exist. Because you exist in your past. Otherwise you wouldn't even know who you were, what your name was. You should go in for a blending of the two elements, no? Memory and oblivion, and we call that imagination. That's a high-sounding name.

WB: I know you don't go in for high-sounding words because you're a literary man.

JLB: No, because I am too skeptical about words. A literary man hardly believes in words.

WB: *To return to my original question, as I attempted to discover myself, it was fascinating and intolerable, because the more profoundly I thought I had gone into myself, the more I disappeared until I was uncertain of everything, even of my own existence.*

JLB: Well, I think Hume said, when I've looked for myself I have never found anybody at home. That's the way the world is.

WB: One goes from reverie to nightmare.

JLB: I have a nightmare almost every night. I had one this morning. But it wasn't a real nightmare.

WB: What was it?

JLB: It was this. I found myself in a very large building. It was a brick building. Many empty rooms. Large empty rooms. Brick rooms. Then I went from one to the other, and there seemed to be no doors. I was always finding my way into courtyards. Then after a time I was going up and down, I was calling out, and there was nobody. That large and unimaginative building was empty, and I said to myself, why, of course, this is the dream of the maze. So I won't find any door, so I'll just have to sit down in one of the rooms and then wait; and sometimes I wake up. And that actually happened. When I realized it and said, this is the nightmare of the maze, and since I knew all about it, I wasn't taken in by the maze. I merely sat down on the floor.

WB: And waited it out.

JLB: I waited a moment and woke up.

WB: *You have other recurrent nightmares? What are they?*

JLB: I have two or three. At this moment I think the maze is the one that comes back to me. Then I have another one and that came out of my blindness. That is a nightmare of trying to read and of being unable to because the characters become alive, because every letter turns into other letters, and then the words at the beginning are short when I try to make them out. They are long Dutch words with

repeated vowels. Or, if not, the spaces between the lines widen out, and then the letters are branching out, and all that is done in black or red characters, on very glossy paper, and so large as to be intolerable. And when I wake up, those characters keep me company for some time. Then for a wild moment I think, I'll never be able to forget them and I'll go mad. That seems to be happening all the time. Especially after I lost my sight, I was having that dream of reading, of being unable to read because of the characters becoming alive. That is one of the dreams I have. And the others are dreams about mirrors, about masked people. I suppose I have three essential nightmares: the maze, the writing, and the mirrors. And then there are others, that are more or less common to everybody, but those are my three recurrent nightmares. I have them almost every night. They stay with me for a minute or so after I'm awake. Sometimes they come before I'm quite asleep. Most people dream before going to sleep and then they keep on dreaming a moment after they awake. They are in a kind of half-way house, no? Between waking and sleeping.

WB: It's also a place from which you gather much material for your writing, isn't it?

JLB: Yes, it is. De Quincey and so on. There is a fine literary tradition to that. De Quincey must have worked out his nightmares when he wrote them down, no? Because they're so fine. Besides, they depend on words also. While nightmares, generally, don't depend on words. What's difficult about writing a nightmare is that the nightmare feeling does not come from the images. Rather, as Coleridge said, the feeling gives you the images.

WB: That's a major distinction, because most people think the opposite. They don't think it all through.

JLB: When you write down the images, those images may not mean anything to you. It's what you get in the case of Poe and of Lovecraft. The images are awful but the feeling isn't awful.

WB: And I suppose a good writer is one who comes up with the right images to correspond to the feeling.

JLB: To a feeling, yes. Or who may give you the nightmare feeling with common objects or things. I remember how I found a proof of that in Chesterton. He says that we might think that at the end of the world there is a tree whose very shape is evil. Now that's a fine

word, and I think that stands for that kind of feeling, no? Now that tree could hardly be described. While, if you think of a tree, for example, made of skulls, of ghosts, that would be quite silly. But what we said, a tree *whose very shape* is evil. That shows he really had a nightmare about that tree. No? If not, how would he know about that tree?

WB: I've always been puzzled why my tongue moves, why words come out of my mouth or from in my head. These words are like seconds of a clock, happening, sounding almost by themselves.

JLB: But I think that before going to sleep you begin, at least I begin, to mumble meaningless sentences. And then I know that I am going to sleep. When I hear myself, when I overhear myself saying something meaningless, it's a good sign that I'll be asleep in a moment.

WB: Well, I was going to ask you, about the words happening, forming in our mouths. As long as time exists, the words come. Hence, also the thoughts. But I don't will those words, or even will to will them. They possess me.

JLB: I don't think those words stand for any meaning. At least you don't know the meaning.

WB: I don't mean the words before one sleeps. I mean all the words that are coming to you right this moment or to me. In other words, I don't know why words are coming out of my mouth right now. Some force is letting them out. I am never there manipulating them. I don't understand that. It's a kind of fundamental mystery to me.

JLB: But I suppose those words go with certain thoughts. But otherwise they would be meaningless or irrelevant.

WB: But I feel like a clock wound up in which the seconds tick, in which words come out of my mouth. I have no idea why I'm speaking to you in any half logical way now. Or why you're answering me. It's a tremendous puzzle to me.

JLB: Yes. I think you should accept that.

WB: I do accept it or I'd go mad.

JLB: Yes, that's it. You might even say that if you try to think, you go mad.

WB: Yes.

JLB: Thought should be carefully avoided, right?

WB: Well, I think if you try to think why you think, you can't think that. Yet sometimes I walk down the street and say: not who is this walking down the street, but who is this thinking he's walking down the street, and then I'm really puzzled.

JLB: Yes, and then you go to thinking: who is this thinking he's thinking he's thinking, no? I don't think that stands for anything. That's merely grammatical, they are only words.

WB: It sounds like a mirror.

JLB: You might go into a second category. You may feel a very strong physical pain. For example, you may get it through electricity or through a toothache. Then when you feel that pain, you won't feel the pain. Then, after that, you say, well, this is a toothache, and then you know that you felt the pain. Then after that you might go for a third time and say, well, I knew that I knew. But after that I don't think you can go on. You can do it successfully within the same game, because you keep on thinking the same thing over and over again. But I don't think you could do that any more than three times over. If you say, I think that I think that I think that I think that I think that I think, all of that is quite unreal after the second term, perhaps. I read a book, by John William Dunne, *Experience with Time*, in which he says that since, if you know something, you know that you know it, and you know that you know that you know, and you know that you know that you know that you know it, then there is an infinity of selves in every man, but I don't think that can be proved.

WB: What do you think of that momentary waking, which is both exhilarating and frightening, of wondering how our minds happen to be thinking and talking? I always wake to the astonishment that I exist, that I am.

JLB: When I wake up, I wake to something worse. It's the astonishment of being myself. So and so born in Buenos Aires in 1899, somebody who was in Geneva.

WB: Why aren't you the Peking Man, or someone who's going to live in five million years from now?

JLB: Well, once I thought out a kind of fantasy, which was for literary purposes. This is that at any moment we all change into somebody else. Now since you are changed into someone else, you are not aware of it. For example, at some moment I will be changed into you. You will be changed into me; but since the change, the shift, is complete, you have no memories, you don't know that you are changing. You're changing all the time, you may be the man in the moon, yet will not know about it, since when you became the man in the moon, you become the man in the moon with *his* past, with his memories, with his fears, with his hopes, and so on.

WB: The past self is obliterated.

JLB: Yes, you may be changed into somebody else all the time, and nobody would know. Maybe that kind of thing is happening. It would be meaningless, of course. It reminds me of a story, only a story, but things are only good for literary purposes! But for not too good literary purposes, for trick stories.

7. **WB:** This is a question I hadn't intended to ask. *There is a powerful force, always in us, to move out from ourselves to reach the world. It shows itself in all ways: sexually, by writing, by talking, by touching. . . .*

JLB: Well, living.

WB: By living. We are only ourselves and yet there exists the strongest impulse to destroy our solitude by including more in it. Sappho has a fragment where she sums it up. She says, "I could not hope/to touch the sky/with my two arms." Her thought represents that compelling life force to reach out.

JLB: If I understand you, you say that we're running away from ourselves all the time, and that we have to do so.

WB: We're trying to expand to be more, to reach, to touch outside our own circle.

JLB: I suppose we are. But I don't think you should worry about that. You should not feel unhappy about that. Though, you know we can't do it, or we can't do it utterly, only in an imperfect way.

WB: We cannot do it, but part of the art of living is to go through the

motions of doing it, and it makes for writing, it makes for love, it makes for all the things that bind people together.

JLB: Since we're given, what? threescore years and ten, and we have to furnish them somehow, why not attempt those things? And after all, we have a life span. If not, you'd be utterly bored.

8. *WB:* Let me ask you. *You obviously value your future work as more important than earlier achievements.*

JLB: Well, I have to.

WB: *Anything less would be fatal. Yet, I'm surprised that you seem to consider your recent books of poems as less important than earlier books of poems.*

JLB: I know them only too well.

WB: I'm convinced that your new poems are your most powerful, both in their intelligence and passion; the latter is often expressed in a personal despair you do allow in your stories or essays.

JLB: No, I think that you are wrong. You think of my poems as being good. You read them through the light of the early poems, but had these poems come to your notice as being the work of an unknown poet, you'd toss them away. Don't you think so? When you read something written by a writer whose work you know, then you read those last pieces as the last pages in a long novel, but those pages would make no sense without the pages that came before them. When you think of a poet, you always tend to think of his last poem as a fine poem; but taken by itself, it may not be.

WB: Yes, but the last poems also help the early poems, because they contribute to the cumulative personality of the voice. Without those last poems your earlier poems would be heard less fully.

JLB: Well, I suppose they are helping each other.

WB: Because they create one total voice. When Blake says something amusing, it's partly amusing because usually he doesn't say anything amusing, and therefore we say, "Ah, there's Blake being witty in an epigram."

JLB: He's generally long-winded and ponderous!

WB: To continue this question, to me your new poems are your most powerful in terms of intellect and passion.

JLB: Let's hope so. I don't think of them in that way. They are mere exercises. Besides, as I feel lonely for something, I feel homesick, those poems are merely experiments in being back in Buenos Aires or in running away from things. They are merely meant to be used for padding the new book I'm writing. But I do hope you're right.

WB: As you stand before a mirror or record a dream in the poems, your precise delineation of pathos is a quality lost to modern poetry. It is well that you do not overesteem your recent poems, but you should know that you're probably wrong in your judgment.

JLB: But I hope I'm wrong! I'm glad to be convinced by you, only I can't. I don't want to be right. Why should I be right? Why should I insist on the fact that I'm writing very poor stuff?

9. *WB:* *Is there a poem usually lurking in your mind that you stumble on? Is it an act of recognition of a common thing, as when you suddenly remember that you love your mother or father? Is it that you fall upon a poem, or does the poem fall on you?*

JLB: I would say the poem falls on me, and even more in the case of a short story. Then I am possessed. Then I have to get rid of it, and the only way to get rid of it is to write it down. There is no other way of doing so, or else it keeps on.

WB: You say your poems are mere exercises, but what are they exercises in?

JLB: I suppose they are exercises in language. They are exercises in the Spanish language, in the euphony of verse, exercises in rhyming also. Since I'm not too good a rhymmer, I try to get away with it. And they are also exercises in imagination. In the case of a story, I know that I must think out a story, clearly and coherently, and then I can write it down. If not, I can't. If not, the whole thing would be a jumble of words. It should be more than that. A story should mean not only the words, but something behind the words. I remember reading—maybe it was one of Stevenson's essays: "What is a

character in a book? A character in a book is merely a string of words," he said. Now I think that's wrong. He may be a string of words, but he should not leave us the impression of being a string of words. Because when we think of Macbeth or Lord Jim or Captain Ahab, we think of those characters as existing beyond the written words. We are not told everything about them, but there are many things that have happened to them that surely existed. For example, we are told about a character doing such and such a thing. Then the next day he does another thing. Now the writer doesn't say anything about it. We feel that he had his nights of sleep, that he has had his dreams, that things happened to him that we are not being told about. We think of Don Quixote as having been a child, though there is not a word concerning Don Quixote's childhood in the book as far as I remember. So the character should be more than a string of words. And if he is not more than words, he would not be a real character. You wouldn't be interested in him. Even in the case of a character who exists, let's say, within ten lines. "Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well, Horatio." That character exists by himself. Yet he only exists as a string of words within ten lines, or perhaps even less.

WB: And in someone else's mouth. He never even presents himself on stage.

JLB: Yes, in someone else's mouth, and yet you think of him as having been a real man.

WB: And feel compassion for him.

JLB: And feel compassion for him. Shakespeare had Hamlet in a graveyard. He thought that making him handle a skull, a white skull, Hamlet was in black, all that would have made a quite effective picture. But since he couldn't be holding the skull and not saying a word, he had to say something. And so, Yorick came into being through that technical necessity of Shakespeare's. And he came into being forever. In that sense, Yorick is far more than a string of words. I suppose Stevenson knew all that, since he was a writer, since he created many characters, and those characters were far more than a string of words.

WB: And in ten words, he outsmarts time forever.

JLB: Yes, that's very strange, eh?

WB: I have a very personal question.

JLB: The only interesting questions are personal questions. Not those of the future of the Republic, the future of America, the future of the cosmos! These things are meaningless.

WB: I think these questions have all been rather personal.

JLB: They should be personal.

10. WB: Do you have paternal feelings toward your friends? Or is this word paternal completely irrelevant?

JLB: No, they're not paternal . . .

WB: Everyone is an equal?

JLB: Brotherly, fraternal, rather than paternal. Of course, being an old man I'm expected to be paternal, but really I'm not. Because, after all, I think it is rather sad. Now, Macedonio Fernández thought that paternal feelings were wrong. He said to me: "What do I have in common with my son? We belong to different generations. I'm fond of him, but that's my mistake. He's fond of me, that's his mistake. We shouldn't really care for each other." Then I said to him, yes, that doesn't depend on the rule. You may care for him in spite of those arguments. And suppose that your arguments are made because you think that you are worrying too much over him, or you feel that you haven't done right by him. There's quite a lot of nonsense about fathers not being allowed to love their sons and sons not being allowed to love their fathers.

WB: Go on.

JLB: Of course he had abandoned his family. There's a very obvious explanation: the fact that he had left them to live his own life.

11. WB: To go from fathers to reverie, you speak much of dream. What do you mean by dream? How is a dream different from any other state of wakefulness?

JLB: Because a dream is a creation. Of course, wakefulness may be a creation: part of our solipsism and so on. But you don't think of it in that way. In the case of a dream, you know that all that comes from yourself, whereas, in the case of a waking experience, many

things may come to you that don't come out of yourself, unless you believe in solipsism. Then you are the dreamer all the time, whether waking or sleeping. I don't believe in solipsism. I don't suppose anybody really does. The essential difference between the waking experience and the sleeping or dreaming experience must lie in the fact that the dreaming experience is something that can be begotten by you, created by you, evolved out of you.

WB: But not necessarily in sleep.

JLB: No, no, not necessarily in sleep. When you're thinking out a poem, there is little difference between the fact of being asleep or awake, no? And so they stand for the same thing. If you're thinking, if you're inventing, or if you're dreaming, then the dream may correspond to vision or to sleep. That hardly matters.

12. WB: I have two more questions, Borges. Like all of us, you are a selfish man. You have dwelled on yourself, have explored and exploited your own mind and transmitted your observations to others.

JLB: Well, what else can I do? I shouldn't be blamed, I shouldn't be held to blame for that.

WB: Because you have transmitted your self-observations to others, you are surely not selfless. Yet the fact of giving your work to others, as you also offer a kind of Socratic conversation to others, is an act of generosity of a curiously rare ethical breed.

JLB: I think I need it, because I'm enjoying it also.

WB: Yet I fear that this breed of ethical generosity is becoming extinct, and that one like you, protected by blindness and loyalty to earlier authors, may not appear again. Then I worry a bit more and become optimistic and think that this ethical man and artist will occur again.

JLB: He or she will be lost forever and ever!

WB: *Are you an ethical man?*

JLB: Yes, I am essentially ethical. I always think of things in terms of right and wrong. I think that many people in my country, for

example, have little feeling for ethics. I suppose in America people are more ethical than in my country. People here, for example, generally think of a thing as being right or wrong, the war in Viet Nam, and so on. But in my country you think of something as being profitable or unprofitable. That may be the difference. But here Puritanism, Protestantism, all that makes for ethical considerations; while the Catholic religion makes for pomp and circumstance only, that is, for essential atheism.

WB: Before my last question, I want to throw in this. There's a lot of fun in you, Borges, you're very childlike, you enjoy things, you have a tremendous humor.

JLB: Well, I should, after all. I wonder if I'm really grown up. I don't suppose anybody is.

13. **WB:** No, none of us is. My last question. *When I was unhappy in the past, in love, some foolish things like that. . . .*

JLB: No, not foolish. Those things are a part of every human experience. I mean the fact of loving and not being loved, that is a part of every biography, no? But if you came to me and said, I am in love with so-and-so. She's rejected me. I think that every human being can say that. Everyone has been rejected, and has rejected also. Both things stand out in everyone's life. Someone is turning down someone or being turned down. It's happening all the time. Of course, when it happens to us, as Heine said, then we're very unhappy.

WB: *Sometimes when I was unhappy I wanted to die, but I knew that this was just a sign that I wanted to live.*

JLB: I have thought of suicide many times, but I've always put it off. I say, why should I worry, since I have that very powerful weapon, suicide, and at the same time I never used it, at least I don't think I ever used it!

WB: *Well, you've almost answered my question. I wanted to say that the thought of suicide was merely a sign of wanting to live, that even the false suicide I often conceived was a desperate wish to live, more fully, better.*

JLB: When people think of suicide, they only think of what people

will think about them knowing that they committed suicide. So in a sense they go on living. They do it out of revenge, generally speaking. Many people commit suicide because they are angry. It is a way of showing their anger and revenge. To make someone else guilty for what you do, which is remarkably wrong.

WB: Suicide is largely a young man's romance, a false door young people sometimes step into. But what about the converse? Why the passion to live? Why that passion that drives the young to death and the writer to his pen? Why the consuming passion to live?

JLB: If I could answer that, I could explain the riddle of the universe, and I don't think I can, no? Since everybody else has failed. I've known many suicides. Many of my friends have committed suicide. In fact, among literary men in my country, suicide is fairly common, perhaps more than in this country. But I think that most of them have done it out of a desire to spite somebody, to make somebody guilty of their own death. In most cases that is the motivation. In the case of Leopoldo Lugones, I think he was trying to turn somebody else into a murderer.

WB: Sometimes there's a weariness, a desire to be released, when people are very sick.

JLB: Of course, there's another kind of suicide. When a friend of mine knew he had a cancer, he committed suicide, which was a reasonable thing to do. I wouldn't hold that against anybody. I think that it was right.

WB: I don't have any more questions unless you have a question you'd like to ask me.

JLB: No, I would like to thank you for your kindness and for this very pleasant conversation, because I thought of it as an ordeal, and it hasn't been an ordeal. On the contrary, it has been a very pleasant experience. You were very generous to be feeding me, giving me your own thoughts, pretending that I really thought them out. You've done everything, been handling me very deftly all the time, and I'm very grateful to you. Thank you, Barnstone.

WB: Thank you, Borges.