

**"El Sur"**  
**Jorge Luis Borges**  
***Ficciones* (1944 and 1956)**  
**Translation by William Little©<sup>1</sup>**

The man who got off the boat in Buenos Aires in 1871<sup>2</sup> was known as Johannes Dahlmann, and he was the minister of an evangelical church. In 1939, Juan Dahlmann,<sup>3</sup> one of his grandchildren, was the director of the city library on Córdoba Street,<sup>4</sup> and he saw himself as profoundly Argentinian. His maternal grandfather was a man named Francisco Flores. He'd been in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, and he died on the Buenos Aires frontier run through by one of the Catriel Indians' spears.<sup>5</sup> In the conflict between his two different family backgrounds, Juan Dahlmann—perhaps influenced by his Germanic blood—chose the side of that romantic forebear, the one with the romantic death. A picture frame with the daguerreotype of a bearded and expressionless man, an old sword, the happiness and the courage of certain kinds of music, habits expressed in stanzas from the *Martín Fierro* poem,<sup>6</sup> the long years, lethargy, and solitude, those things fostered that rather willful but never ostentatious *criollo*<sup>7</sup> spirit. By making some sacrifices Dahlmann had succeeded in saving the farmhouse and Surrounding buildings of an old hacienda in the *Sur*<sup>8</sup> that had belonged to the Flores family. One of his fondest memories was the image of the fragrant eucalyptus trees and the long rose-colored house that once was crimson. Duties and maybe even indolence had kept him in the city. Summer after summer he was not satisfied with the abstract idea of ownership and the certainty that his house was waiting for him in a precise location on the plains. During the last days of February 1939 something happened to him.<sup>9</sup>

Blind to all blame, destiny can be merciless in the face of the least distraction. That afternoon, Dahlmann had received an incomplete copy of Weil's *Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>10</sup> Anxious to examine this find, he didn't wait for the elevator but rather rushed to climb the stairs; in the semi-darkness something brushed his forehead. A bat or a bird? On the face of the woman who opened his door he saw horror engraved, and the hand with which he wiped his forehead was covered with blood. The edge of a recently painted door jamb that someone had forgotten to close had caused that wound. Dahlmann managed to sleep, but by early morning he was already awake, and from that moment on the flavor of all things was awful. A fever wore him out, and the illustrations in the *Thousand and One Nights* were only good for adding images to his nightmares. Friends and relatives visited him and, with unctuous smiles they told him again and again that they thought he looked fine. Dahlmann heard them in a sort of weak stupor, and it amazed him that they didn't realize he was in hell. A week passed as if it were a millennium. One afternoon, his usual doctor appeared with a new doctor,

and they took him to a clinic on Ecuador Street<sup>11</sup> because he was in urgent need of an x-ray. In the hired car that took them there, Dahlmann thought that, finally, in a room that wasn't his, he could sleep. He felt happy and talkative; as soon as he arrived, they removed his clothes, shaved his head, tied him down on a gurney with metal straps, blinded him dizzy with bright lights, listened to his heart with a stethoscope, and a man wearing a Surgical mask stuck a needle in his arm. He was nauseous when he awoke in a cell that was like a dank pit, and, in the days and nights that followed the operation he realized that until then he nearly had been in a suburb of hell. Ice in his mouth didn't leave the slightest trace of freshness. During those days Dahlmann hated every detail about himself; he hated his identity, his physical needs, his humiliation, the bristly beard on his face. He endured the treatments stoically, for they were very painful, but when the Surgeon told him he had come close to dying from septicemia, he began weeping in misery for his sad fate. The physical suffering and the constant foreboding during his sleepless nights had not left him enough time to think about anything as abstract as death. On another day the Surgeon told him he was recovering and that very soon he could return to his hacienda to recuperate fully. Incredibly, the promised day arrived.

Reality likes symmetry and faint anachronisms. Dahlmann had arrived at the clinic in a hired car and now a hired car took him to Avenida Constitución.<sup>12</sup> After the oppressive heat of summer, the first cool days of autumn were like nature's symbol of his destiny rescued from fever and death. At seven in the morning the city had not lost the smell that night gives an old house. The streets were like long hallways, and plazas were like patios. Dahlmann recognized the city joyfully and tinged with vertigo. A few seconds before his eyes noticed them, he recalled the street corners, the cinema marquees, the subtle diversity of Buenos Aires. In the yellow light of the new day all things were returning to him.

Nobody is unaware of the fact that the *Sur* begins on the other side of Avenida Rivadavia.<sup>13</sup> Dahlmann was wont to repeat that that's not a just a standing custom, but rather that whoever crosses that street enters an older and steadier world. From inside the car he searched among the newly constructed buildings for the grillwork window, the brass knocker, the arched doorway, the entryway, the cozy patio.

In the terminal's main hall<sup>14</sup> he noted that he still had thirty minutes. He suddenly remembered that in a coffee shop on Calle Brasil—a few meters from the Irigoyen House<sup>15</sup>—there was an enormous cat that let itself be petted by the clients as if it were a disdainful divinity. He entered. The cat was there, asleep. He ordered a cup of coffee, he added sugar slowly, he tasted it (he had been denied that pleasure in the clinic), and, while smoothing out the cat's black coat, he thought that that contact was illusory and that they were separated by a pane of glass, because man lives in time moment after moment, but the magical animal lives in the present, in the eternity of an instant.

The train was waiting alongside the length of the next to last platform. Dahlmann went from car to car and he finally found one that was nearly empty. He placed his suitcase in a luggage net. When cars lurched forward, he opened it and, after some hesitation, took out the first volume of the *Thousand and One Nights*. Travelling with this book, which was so linked to the story of his misfortune, was an affirmation both that that misfortune had been erased and a joyous and secret challenge to the frustrated forces of evil.

On both side of the train the city gradually broke apart into separate suburbs. First this view of them and then the sight of truck gardens and small farms delayed the start of his reading. The truth is that Dahlmann read very little. The magnet mountain and the genie who has sworn to kill his benefactor were—who can deny it—marvelous,<sup>16</sup> but not much more than the morning and the fact of being. Such joy distracted him from reading about Shahrazad and her superfluous miracles. Dahlmann simply would close his book and let himself be alive.

Lunch—with broth served in shiny metal bowls as it had been during the now long-ago summers of his youth—was yet another tranquil and rewarding delight.

*Tomorrow I'll wake up at the hacienda*, he would muse, and it was as if he were simultaneously two men: one who was moving through an autumn day and his country's geography and one who was locked up in a clinic and being put upon by methodical staff employees. He saw long, unplastered brick houses set at an angle watching trains pass without ending. He saw horsemen on dirt roads. He saw ditches and ponds and ranches. He saw long, luminous clouds that looked like marble. And all these things were random, like prairie dreams. Also, he thought he recognized trees and crop fields that he couldn't possibly name because his personal knowledge of the hinterland was much less than his nostalgic and literary knowledge.

Once he drifted off asleep and the momentum of the train was in his dreams. The unbearable white sun of twelve noon had already turned into the yellow sun that precedes sunset, and soon it would turn red. Also, the train car was different. It was no longer the one it was when it left the platform in Constitución Station: the plains and the hours had run through it and transfigured it. Outside the railroad car's moving shadow lengthened toward the horizon. Neither towns nor other signs of human presence disturbed the earth's bare essence. All was vastness, but at the same time it was intimate, and, in any case, secret. In the boundless countryside, sometimes there was nothing but a single bull. The solitude was perfect and perhaps hostile, and Dahlmann suddenly suspected he was travelling into the past and not only toward the *Sur*. The conductor interrupted that imaginary speculation of his by telling him, upon seeing his ticket that the train would not stop at the usual station but rather in another one that came earlier, one that Dahlmann was scarcely acquainted with. (The man added an

explanation that Dahlmann tried neither to understand nor to hear, for how things worked didn't matter to him.)

The train came to a laborious stop nearly in the middle of open country. The station stood on the other side of the tracks. It was little more than a platform and a shed. No transportation was to be had, but the station chief supposed he might be able to get one at a general store about ten to twelve blocks away.

Dahlmann undertook the walk as a small adventure. The sun had already gone down, but the expiring sunset added excitement to the vivid and silent plains before night would erase it. Less to avoid exhaustion than to make those things last longer, Dahlmann continued walking slowly, breathing in the fragrance of clover in the air with solemn joy.

The emporium once upon a time had been painted bright red, but the years had softened that violent color for the better. Something in its sad architecture reminded him of a steel engraving, perhaps in an old edition of *Paul et Virginie*.<sup>17</sup> Some horses were tethered to the hitching post. Dahlmann, from inside, thought he recognized the shopkeeper; then he realized he'd been fooled by the fact that the man looked like one of the employees in the clinic. After hearing about Dahlmann's situation, the man said he'd have the carriage hitched up. To add another layer to that day's events and to kill time, Dahlmann decided to eat at the general store.

At another table some ruffians were eating and drinking loudly. At first, Dahlmann didn't notice them. On the ground, propped up against the counter, a very old man, stationary like an inanimate object, was curled up. His advanced age had shrunk and polished him as streams do to a stone or as the succeeding generations pass judgment on men. He had a dark complexion, small, and dried up, and he seemed outside time, in a kind of eternity. Contentedly, Dahlmann took note of the kerchief, the flannel poncho, the long peasant trousers, and the wine butt, and he said to himself, recalling useless arguments with people from the Northern districts or with from the province of Entre Ríos,<sup>18</sup> that there are gauchos of his ilk only in the *Sur*.

Dahlmann found a seat near the window. Darkness began settling over the countryside, but its scent and sounds were could still reach him through the iron bars on the window. The store owner brought him sardines first and then roast beef. Dahlmann washed them down with several glasses of red wine. Idly, he savored the tart flavor while letting his gaze—by now it had become rather sleepy—wander around the place. The kerosene lamp hung from one of the beams. At the other table the usual customers numbered three: two of them looked like ranch hands, and the other one, with features both Asian and awkward, was drinking with his slouch hat on. Dahlmann suddenly felt

something brush lightly against his cheek. There, next to the plain glass of cloudy wine, on one of the table cloth's stripes, was a spit ball. That's all. But someone had thrown it at him.

The men at the other table seemed oblivious of him. Perplexed, Dahlmann decided nothing had happened, so he opened the tome of the *Thousand and One Nights* in an attempt to avoid reality. Another spit wad hit him a few minutes later, and this time the farmhands laughed. Dahlmann told himself he wasn't frightened but it would be silly if a convalescent like him were to be dragged into a melee. He chose to leave. He had just stood up when the owner approached him and exhorted him in an alarmed tone of voice:

"Señor Dahlmann, don't pay attention to those guys; they're pretty high."

Dahlmann wasn't surprised that the other man knew who he was now, but he felt those conciliatory words actually were making the situation worse. Earlier the farmhands' provocation had an accidental quality to it, as if it weren't personal. Now it was directed against him and against his name and his neighbors would know about it. Dahlmann pushed the owner aside. He confronted the farmhands, and he asked them what they thought they were doing.

The ruffian *compadre*<sup>19</sup> with the Asiatic features stumbled to his feet. One step from Juan Dahlmann, he shouted insults at him as if he were a very long way off. He was pretending to exaggerate how drunk he was, and that exaggeration was both ferocious and mocking. Among curses and obscenities, he tossed a long knife into the air, followed it with his eyes, caught it deftly, and invited Dahlmann to fight. In a tremulous voice the owner protested that Dahlmann was unarmed. At that precise moment something unforeseeable happened.

From a corner in the room, an old over-wrought gaucho (in whom Dahlmann saw a cipher of the *Sur*—that is, of his version of the *Sur*) threw him a naked dagger, which came to rest at his feet. It was as if the *Sur* had decided that Dahlmann should accept the duel.<sup>20</sup> Dahlmann bent over to pick up the dagger, and he sensed two things. First, that that nearly instinctive act committed him to fight. The second, that, in his clumsy hand, the weapon would fail to protect him, but rather that it would justify them killing him. Like all men he had once played with a dagger, but his idea of hand-to-hand combat didn't go beyond the idea that thrusts should be made upward with the cutting edge held inward. He thought: *they wouldn't have allowed such stuff to happen in the clinic.*

"Let's take this outside," said the other man.

The went out, and if Dahlmann felt hopeless, neither did he feel any fear. As he was crossing the threshold he thought that dying in a knife fight out in the open and on the attack would have been liberating for him, a joyous fiesta, on the first night in the clinic when they stuck him with the needle. He thought that, back then, if he had been able to choose or to dream his death, this is the death he would have chosen or dreamed.

Dahlmann is firmly clutching the knife, which perhaps he will not know how to wield, and he sallies onto the prairie.

---

<sup>1</sup> This translation is based on the 1956 edition of *Ficciones* published by Emecé Editores, S.A., Buenos Aires, 187-195. "El Sur" is the last short story in the second of the two groups of stories that comprise *Ficciones*. The first is known by the title of the first group of eight stories, "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941), and the second is called "Artifices" (1944). It is either instructive or incidental to note that in 1930 Borges joined the editorial board of *Sur*, one of the most important of all Latin American literary journals and that the first part of *Ficciones* was published by *Sur* in 1941. In a postscript to the 1956 edition of "El Sur," Borges mentions that he added three stories to *Ficciones* that year, one of which was this story. In fact, "El Sur" was first published in the literary journal *Sur* on February 8, 1953. For an important critical article on Borges and the tricky literary genre of translation, see: William Little, "Translating Borges, or the Fly in the Ointment". *East-West Journal*, U.Hawaii, 1988, pp. XXXXXXXXX

<sup>2</sup> In 1871, Juan Domingo Sarmiento (date) was the enlightened president of Argentina. Sarmiento was an educator, politician, and prolific writer, one of whose major works is the major biographical-historical book *Facund: civilización y barbarie* (1845).

<sup>3</sup> Dahlmann: as far as I can tell the word *Dahl* does not exist in German. *Mann*, of course, means 'man.' For this reason it is possible that there is no special or symbolic meaning encoded in the name Dahlmann aside from the fact that half of his ancestry is Germanic.

<sup>4</sup> Córdoba is an east-west avenue that runs through the heart of downtown Buenos Aires. As a biographical point of reference, Calle Maipú, where Borges lived at the end of his life, crosses Córdoba and is about eight blocks west of the port of Buenos Aires.

<sup>5</sup> Catriel Indians were an indigenous tribe of about 4,000 people who lived in the vast grassland region of Argentina known as Las Pampas. In 1872, they signed a peace treaty with the central government.

<sup>6</sup> *Martín Fierro* (1872 and 1879) by José Hernández (1834-1886) is a long epic poem in which a gaucho narrator extols the ideals and virtues of the freedom-loving, independent, and "authentic" character of the Argentinean gaucho whose rural lifestyle was opposed to the modernizing and progressive policies of President Sarmiento (see #3 above). *Martín Fierro* is the prime artifact of the literary genre known as gauchesque poetry. As Borges' narrator indicates in "El Sur," the character Martín Fierro and the ballad-like poetry of the epic poem once represented the Argentinian national character among literary scholars, readers around the world, and not a few Argentinians.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Criollo* (creole) is a Spanish term that was once used to identify those Spanish Americans of Spanish ancestry who were born in the Americas.

<sup>8</sup> Sur means south. The reason why I have left this term in Spanish is because the word South has such a strong connotation (i.e., the Confederate states of the U.S.A.) that the English toponym might interfere with the reader's readiness to inhabit a parallel but different sense of place connoted by the vast southern, western, and interior regions of Argentina designated by the term Sur.

<sup>9</sup> In an elegant and interesting blog [<http://bares.elSur.org/archives/30-days-with-borges-day-30-el-Sur/>], a blogger named Jeff Berry comments on this short story. In particular he notes that there may be a biographical subtext to this "something" that happened to the protagonist Juan Dahlmann:

There's an incident in the story that occurred in the real life of Borges. We are told in the story that Dahlmann had hit his head on a "recently painted casement window that somebody had forgotten to close". That actually happened to Borges on Christmas Eve 1938.

Borges was seriously injured and spent a week lying in bed, delirious with insomnia and hallucinations. One night he lost the ability to speak, was rushed to the hospital for emergency Surgery and spent a month near death. After he recovered, Borges entered the greatest period of his writing career. I often wondered what went through his mind during his sickness and how it impacted his later writings. *El Sur* gives us some hint of that.

Perhaps it would have been good for Mr. Berry to give both Borges, in his Autobiographical Essay (1970, pp. 242-243) and Emir Rodríguez Monegal (*Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography*, 1978, 320) some credit for this information. Borges father, Jorge Guillermo Borges Haslam, died in 1938 after a long illness. Using a Freudian analysis of Jorge Luis Borges' life and works, Rodríguez Monegal says this about the episode to which Berry alludes in his blog:

If the Surface of Borges' life was altered very little by Father's death, the full impact of his absence was enormous. An accident that Borges had on Christmas Eve 1938 reveals how deeply he had been affected. The episode has been described at least twice by him. In his "Autobiographical Essay" he has this to say:

It was on Christmas Even of 1938—the same year my father died—that I had a severe accident. I was running up a stairway and suddenly felt something brush my scalp. I had grazed a freshly painted open casement window. In spite of first-aid treatment, the wound became poisoned, and for a period of a week or so I lay sleepless every night and had hallucinations and high fever. One evening, I lost the power of speech and had to be rushed to the hospital for an immediate operation. Septicemia had set in, and for a month I hovered, all unknowingly, between life and death. (Much later, I was to write about this in my story "The South") (Rodríguez Monegal, 320).

Rodríguez Monegal adds that Borges changed the dates from the autobiographical one to the fictional one, and he edits various elements from his own life to those that find their way into the story. To give you an idea of a Freudian interpretation of both Borges' life and his art, Rodríguez Monegal says that, following the

---

accident, which is the crux of the story, “Borges temporarily became (like Father) an invalid totally dependent on Mother gives the whole episode another coloration. The accident can then be seen as a way of perpetuating his dependency, a refusal to enter fully into maturity” (322).

<sup>10</sup> In 1837 to 1841, Gustav Weil (1808-1889) wrote in German and published the first complete translation of the famous collection of ancient Arabic, Persian, and Indian tales narrated by Shahrazad, the *Thousand and One Nights*.

<sup>11</sup> The north-south street Calle Ecuador crosses Córdoba twenty-two blocks to the west of Maipú.

<sup>12</sup> Constitución Avenue is an east-west street twenty-two blocks south of Córdoba Avenue. Nowadays Constitución is one block south of the main east-west highway that cuts through Buenos Aires, Autopista 25 de Mayo.

<sup>13</sup> Rivadavia a district at the extreme NW of the Buenos Aires Province, whose political function in Argentina is somewhat like the District of Columbia in the U.S.A. Rivadavia *partido* borders the province of La Pampa. The region was and is dominated by the cattle industry and the farming of wheat and corn. Also, the large east-west Avenida Rivadavia also demarcates the north and south sides of Buenos Aires itself. North-south street names change when crossing Rivadavia. The name Rivadavia in Argentina is famous. Bernardino de la Trinidad González Rivadavia y Rivadavia (1780-1845) was Argentina's first president (1826-1827); he was active in the Revolution of May 25, 1810, and he was the central figure in the triumvirate that governed Argentina until 1812. His action and name are virtually synonymous with strong centralized government and the army.

<sup>14</sup> The narrator uses the single English word *hall* for this giant room. Without wishing to give away where Dahlmann is, it appears that he's in a train station. The terminal that serves the southern region of Argentina is the Estación Plaza Constitución (Constitution Square Station), which is located eighteen blocks south of Rivadavia Avenue on, of course, Constitution Square. The station was built and remodeled between 1864 and 1925. The first railroad that used it was British. The main hall remains one of the biggest in the world.

<sup>15</sup> Irigoyen refers to Juan Hipólito del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús Irigoyen Alem (1852-1933), who, after earning his middle class living as a schoolteacher, was elected president of Argentina twice (1916-1922 and 1928-1930) as the anticorruption leader of the Radical Party. Irigoyen declared Argentina neutral during World War I. During that war Argentina became suddenly prosperous by selling beef on the world market. The Depression that started in 1929 caused an economic collapse in Argentina, which led to civil unrest. An army *golpe de estado* overthrew him and his government in 1930. He was placed under house arrest and died three years later in Buenos Aires. In the 1920s Borges himself was an ardent support of Irigoyen. Irigoyen's house was later torn down for urban renewal.

<sup>16</sup> The story of the Magnet Mountain is found in the Third Kalandar's Tale in the *Thousand and One Nights*. This tale starts with the sinking of the Magnet Mountain; then the tale's princely narrator swims to an island in which there is a buried trapdoor that opens onto a stairway, which goes down to a subterranean chamber where a young man is living in splendor. The genie who killed his benefactor is found in the Tailor's Tale.

<sup>17</sup> *Paul et Virginie* (1787) is a famous melodramatic lacrimose Neoclassical novel by Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1737-1814). The protagonists of the title fall in love but die tragically in a shipwreck. The novel prefigured the Romantic ideal of young lovers living in ideal nature but dying in tragic circumstances.



---

<sup>18</sup> Entre Ríos is a province in NE Argentina just north of the Buenos Aires province and just west of Uruguay on the western bank of the Uruguay River. As it was in the 1940s, Entre Ríos remains an agricultural region, producing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rice, soybeans, wheat, corn, citrus, and cattle.

<sup>19</sup> The Spanish term Borges uses for this character is *compadrito* (diminutive guy, little guy, or, pejoratively, ruffian). When Borges' family returned from Europe to Buenos Aires in 1921, twenty-two year-old Jorge explored the city's neighborhoods he hadn't known before including the south side (hence, this story's focus on the South—*el Sur*). But as biographer Edwin Williamson notes (p. 90), the neighborhood the family settled in first, the Recoleta district known as the "Tierra del Fuego" (Land of Fire, like Argentina's extreme southern tip) was overrun by *compadritos*, toughs.

<sup>20</sup> In his brief discussion of "El Sur" (The South), critic Edwin Williamson opines that in this scene dealing with the challenge to engage in a knife fight Borges "indulged the fantasy of taking up arms against Perón" (318). (Perón was Argentina's populist dictator from 1943 to 1955, and this story was published in 1953.) Williamson recalls that Borges' father once had given his young son a knife so that he could fight back against bullies at school. Then Williamson says this about the story, knives, and Borges' relationship with a woman with whom he was "besotted":

Indeed, while working on "The South," Borges was also writing a critical study of *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* with the assistance of Margot Guerrero (whom he was to credit as a collaborator when it came out as a book in 1953). He was immersing himself once more in the world of gauchos, knives, and duels, the standard topics of Argentine "barbarism," which, as he knew, Mother thoroughly disliked. This was a sign, I would say, that his romance with Margot had put him in a mood to rebel against the sword of honor, and Dahlmann's taking up the dagger against the bullyboys in the tavern is a reflection, I believe, of the self-confidence Borges drew from his relationship with her" (318-319). (WTL notes: "barbarism" refers to the dichotomy between barbarity and civilization in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's seminal analysis in 1845 of the Argentine national syndrome; "Mother" refers to Borges' own mother; "the sword of honor" refers to Borges' mother's approach to autocratic patriotism.)