

“The House of Asterion”

by Jorge Luis Borges

from his story collection

Labyrinths, 1962, p.138-140

*The House of
Asterion*

And the queen gave birth to a
child who was called Asterion.

Apollodorus: *Bibliotheca*, III, I

I know they accuse me of arrogance, and perhaps of misanthropy, and perhaps of madness. Such accusations (for which I shall extract punishment in due time) are derisory. It is true that I never leave my house, but it is also true that its doors (whose number is infinite)¹ are open day and night to men and to animals as well. Anyone may enter. He will find here no female pomp nor gallant court formality, but he will find quiet and solitude. And he will also find a house like no other on the face of the earth. (There are those who declare there is a similar one in Egypt, but they lie.) Even my detractors admit there is not *one single piece of furniture* in the house. Another ridiculous falsehood has it that I, Asterion, am a prisoner. Shall I repeat that there are no locked doors, shall I add that there are no locks? Besides, one afternoon I did step into the street; if I returned before night, I did so because of the fear that the faces of the common people inspired in me, faces as discolored and flat as the palm of one's hand. The sun had already set, but the helpless crying of a child and the rude supplications of the faithful told me I had been recognized. The people prayed, fled, prostrated themselves; some climbed onto the stylobate of the

¹The original says *fourteen*, but there is ample reason to infer that, as used by Asterion, this numeral stands for *infinite*.

The House of Asterion

temple of the Axes, others gathered stones. One of them, I believe, hid himself beneath the sea. Not for nothing was my mother a queen; I cannot be confused with the populace, though my modesty might so desire.

The fact is that I am unique. I am not interested in what one man may transmit to other men; like the philosopher, I think that nothing is communicable by the art of writing. Bothersome and trivial details have no place in my spirit, which is prepared for all that is vast and grand; I have never retained the difference between one letter and another. A certain generous impatience has not permitted that I learn to read. Sometimes I deplore this, for the nights and days are long.

Of course, I am not without distractions. Like the ram about to charge, I run through the stone galleries until I fall dizzy to the floor. I crouch in the shadow of a pool or around a corner and pretend I am being followed. There are roofs from which I let myself fall until I am bloody. At any time I can pretend to be asleep, with my eyes closed and my breathing heavy. (Sometimes I really sleep, sometimes the color of day has changed when I open my eyes.) But of all the games, I prefer the one about the other Asterion. I pretend that he comes to visit me and that I show him my house. With great obeisance I say to him: *Now we shall return to the first intersection* or *Now we shall come out into another courtyard* or *I knew you would like the drain* or *Now you will see a pool that was filled with sand* or *You will soon see how the cellar branches out*. Sometimes I make a mistake and the two of us laugh heartily.

Not only have I imagined these games, I have also meditated on the house. All the parts of the house are repeated many times, any place is another place. There is no one pool, courtyard, drinking trough, manger; the mangers, drinking troughs, courtyards, pools are fourteen (infinite) in number. The house is the same size as the world; or rather, it is the world. However, by dint of exhausting the courtyards with pools and dusty gray stone galleries I have reached the street and seen the temple of the Axes and the sea. I did not understand this until a night vision revealed to me that the seas and temples are also fourteen (infinite) in number. Everything is repeated many times, four-

teen times, but two things in the world seem to be only once: above, the intricate sun; below, Asterion. Perhaps I have created the stars and the sun and this enormous house, but I no longer remember.

Every nine years nine men enter the house so that I may deliver them from all evil. I hear their steps or their voices in the depths of the stone galleries and I run joyfully to find them. The ceremony lasts a few minutes. They fall one after another without my having to bloody my hands. They remain where they fell and their bodies help distinguish one gallery from another. I do not know who they are, but I know that one of them prophesied, at the moment of his death, that some day my redeemer would come. Since then my loneliness does not pain me, because I know my redeemer lives and he will finally rise above the dust. If my ear could capture all the sounds of the world, I should hear his steps. I hope he will take me to a place with fewer galleries and fewer doors. What will my redeemer be like?, I ask myself. Will he be a bull or a man? Will he perhaps be a bull with the face of a man? Or will he be like me?

The morning sun reverberated from the bronze sword. There was no longer even a vestige of blood.

"Would you believe it, Ariadne?" said Theseus. "The Minotaur scarcely defended himself."

For Marta Mosquera Eastman

Translated by J. E. I.