

The Witness (from Jorge Luis Borges, *The Maker*, translated by Andrew Hurley)

In a stable that stands almost in the shadow of a new stone church, a man with grey eyes and grey beard, lying amid the odor of the animals, humbly tries to will himself into death, much as a man might will himself into sleep. The day, obedient to vast and secret laws, slowly shifts about and mingles the shadows in the lowly place; outside lie plowed fields, a ditch clogged with dead leaves, and the faint track of a wolf in the black clay where the line of woods begins. The man sleeps and dreams, forgotten. The bells for orisons awaken him. Bells are now one of evening's customs in the kingdoms of England, but as a boy the man has seen the face of Woden, the sacred horror and the exaltation, the clumsy wooden idol laden with Roman coins and ponderous vestments, the sacrifice of horses, dogs, and prisoners. Before dawn he will be dead and with him, the last eyewitness images of pagan rites will perish, never to be seen again. The world will be a little poorer when this Saxon man is dead.

Things, events, that occupy space yet come to an end when someone dies may make us stop in wonder – and yet one thing, or an infinite number of things, dies with every man's or woman's death, unless the universe itself has a memory, as theosophists have suggested. In the course of time there was one day that closed the last eyes that had looked on Christ; the Battle of Junin and the love of Helen died with the death of one man. What will die with me the day I die? What pathetic or frail image will be lost to the world? The voice of Macedonia Fernández, the image of a bay horse in a vacant lot on the corner of Serrano and Charcas, a bar of sulfur in the drawer of a mahogany desk?