



## **TRANSLATING BORGES: *LAS COSAS***

by  
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Here is a sonnet by Jorge Luis Borges—a tender, autumnal, nostalgic tribute to the material objects that support us while we live our lives.

### **Las cosas**

El bastón, las monedas, el llavero,  
la dócil cerradura, las tardías  
notas que no leerán los pocos días  
que me quedan, los naipes y el tablero,  
un libro y en sus páginas la ajada  
violeta, monumento de una tarde  
sin duda inolvidable y ya olvidada,  
el rojo espejo occidental en que arde  
una ilusoria aurora. ¡Cuántas cosas,  
limas, umbrales, atlas, copas, clavos,  
nos sirven como tácitos esclavos,  
ciegas y extrañamente sigilosas!  
Durarán más allá de nuestro olvido;  
no sabrán nunca que nos hemos ido.

A perfect translation of a poem would preserve everything. It would preserve meaning, order, sound, rhythm, rhyme-scheme, syllabic structure—everything.

Perfection is not possible. The sensible thing is to investigate meaning first, and then see what else can be done. So I begin with a plain prose translation.

*El bastón, las monedas, el llavero,*

Literally, this says, “The cane, the small change, the key-ring”. But these are personal items. In English I say “my key-ring” not “the key-ring”. So:

My cane, my small change, my key-ring,

*la dócil cerradura, las tardías*

Only “tardías” needs thought. Literally, it means “late”. Borges’ notes are not late. They are neglected, delayed, overlooked. His return to them is overdue (that is, they are late as an overdue library book may be late). I leave “late” for the moment, but understand that I may have to say something else when I have a better feel for the shape and tone of the whole poem. So:

the obedient lock, the late

*notas que no leerán los pocos días que me quedan,*

There is a problem with the subject and verb in this phrase. Literally the phrase reads “that the few days that remain to me will not read”. This does not seem quite right in English. Days do not “read” anything. Borges means something like “for whose reading the few days that are left to me are not enough time”; and there does not in English seem to be an adequate construction available to convey that meaning with “days” as the subject. I stay literal for the moment, but again I understand that I may have to say something else later. So:

notes that the few days that are left to me will not read,

*los naipes y el tablero, un libro y en sus páginas la ajada violeta,*

This is a list that translates easily (although I note that, given the mention of playing cards, “tablero” may be best rendered as “card-table”). So:

playing cards and table, A book and in its pages the faded violet,

*monumento de una tarde*

“[M]onumento” is an odd word. Objects are not usually kept as “monuments”. But Spanish has perfectly good words for “souvenir” and “memento”. I have to assume that Borges means “monument”. So, for the moment:

monument to a night

*sin duda inolvidable y ya olvidada,*

“[Y]a” often means “already”, but can mean “now”. “Already” gives an impression of the passage of only a little time after a recent event. If Borges has only few days left, and the violet is a reminder of an unforgettable night, it is likely that much time has passed. I prefer “now” here. And I keep in mind that I may later want to render “and” as “yet” or “but”. So:

no doubt unforgettable and now forgotten

*el rojo espejo occidental en que arde una ilusoria aurora.*

This is straightforward. “[A]rde” can be “burn” or “glow”. An illusory sunrise reflected in a mirror probably does not “burn”. So:

the red western mirror in which glows an illusory sunrise

*Cuántas cosas,*

Several on-line translations start this sentence with an inverted question mark. This makes no sense. Borges is not saying *How many things are there?* He is saying *How many things there are!* He is not counting, he is marvelling, and grateful. The printed version I consult uses an exclamation mark.

In English we say *How many things there are!* but not *How many things!* We say So many things! So:

So many things,

*limas, umbrales, atlas, copas, clavos,*



There are two things to note. I have in my mind a picture of some domestic interior. It is unlikely that there will be a metal-worker's file there. So probably "limas" means "nail-files". And "key" has already been used in "key-ring". So, for the moment:  
files, doorsills, atlases, glasses, keys,

*nos sirven como tácitos esclavos,*

This means what it says:  
they serve us like unspeaking slaves,

*ciegas y extrañamente sigilosas!*

"[S]igiloso" can mean discreet or secretive. For the moment, I prefer secretive. So:  
blind and strangely secretive!

*Durarán más allá de nuestro olvido; no sabrán nunca que nos hemos ido.*

These 2 lines are straightforward:  
They will endure long after our oblivion; they will never know that we have gone.

Putting this together, I have the following (which in the Spanish has the rhyme scheme shown):

### **Things**

My cane, my small change, my key-ring, **A**  
the obedient lock, the late **B**  
notes that the few days that are left to me **B**  
will not read, playing cards and table, **A**  
A book and in its pages the faded **C**  
violet, monument to a night **D**  
no doubt unforgettable and now forgotten **C**  
the red western mirror in which glows **D**  
an illusory sunrise. So many things, **E**  
files, doorsills, atlases, glasses, keys, **F**  
they serve us like unspeaking slaves, **F**  
blind and strangely secretive! **E**  
They will endure long after our oblivion; **G**  
they will never know that we have gone. **G**

Now, do I think I can I preserve the meaning, order, sound, rhythm, rhyme-scheme, and syllabic structure of Borges' sonnet? I do not. My English version is too far from the sound and rhythm of the Spanish for there to be any hope of preserving them.

All I can do is—

- try for meaning, rhyme-scheme, and syllabic structure; and
- do as little violence to the actual meaning, and the order in which the concepts are presented, as I can.



Given Borges' rhyme-scheme, I approach the poem by couplets. But I bear in mind that the poem comprises four quatrains and a final couplet, and that each quatrain comprises two couplets. So in each quatrain, the two couplets will have to be crafted in such a way that together they convey as much as I can contrive of Borges' meaning.

*My cane, my small change, my key-ring,*  
....  
*will not read, playing cards and table,*

The word "llavero" is quite specific. It means "key ring". So if I am to preserve the order of the items on the list, the last word of the line must be "ring"; and the last word of line 4 must rhyme with it.

Also, I find that I need more syllables in the first line than my prose translation provides. If I insert (an unnecessary) "old" before "cane", expand "small change" to "pocket change", and insert "and" before the last item on the small list the line contains, Borges' syllabic count is maintained.

The word "naipes" is also quite specific. It is not a word for cards generally, but only for playing-cards. "[P]laying" rhymes with "ring", so should if possible be used at the end of line 4. So:

My old cane, my pocket change, and my key-ring,  
.....  
days still left me, the table and the playing-

*the obedient lock, the late*  
*notes that the few days that are left to me*

I can gain the extra syllables I need in line 3 by expanding "lock" to "door-lock", and rendering "late" as "overdue".

Line 4 is more difficult. For Borges' construction (which supposes that days may "read" notes) I substitute a simple passive. This has the advantage that my word order then enables me to end the line with "few", which rhymes with "overdue".

So:  
the obedient door-lock, the overdue  
notes that will not be read again in the few

The first quatrain is therefore:  
My old cane, my pocket change, and my key-ring,  
the obedient door-lock, the overdue  
notes that will not be read again in the few  
days still left me, the table and the playing-

*A book and in its pages the faded*  
.....  
*no doubt unforgettable and now forgotten*



I have moved “cards” over from line 4 to line 5 (so as to enable the “ring”/“playing” rhyme). Even so, I need more syllables in line 5 than the prose translation provides. In English I probably press a flower “between” pages rather than in them. If I then substitute a “dry and” for “the”, Borges’ syllabic count is maintained (with “dry” being another strictly unnecessary word.)

In line 7, I find for the first time that I may have to manipulate the language a little. I can end line 5 with “faded”, but then need a rhyme for it in line 7. And line 7 needs the contrast between “unforgettable” and “forgotten”. In the end, the best I can come up with is to omit “forgotten”, and speak in terms of something that has “evaded memory”. Also, I need an extra syllable, and insert an unnecessary “once”. So:

cards, a book, and between its pages, dry and faded,  
.....  
no doubt unforgettable once, that now has evaded  
[memory]

*violet, monument to a night*

.....

*[memory,] the red western mirror in which glows*

In line 6, I find, yet again, that I need more syllables. The violet therefore becomes the “little” violet and (for all that Borges says “monument”) I use “memorial” for its extra syllable. And given that Borges can no longer remember the night, I say “some” night rather than “a” night.

It is not immediately obvious what a “western” mirror is. But given that the sun rises in the East, its glow will come in through the eastern windows of a room, and a mirror that reflects the glow will be on the western wall of the room.

I need a rhyme for “night”, so introduce the word “bright”, and postpone “glow” until the next line.

So:

the little violet, memorial to some night,  
.....  
memory, the red mirror on the west wall where the bright

The second quatrain is therefore:

cards, a book, and between its pages, dry and faded,  
the little violet, memorial to some night,  
no doubt unforgettable once, that now has evaded  
memory, the red mirror on the west wall where the bright

The third quatrain is the most difficult, and I find I need to move some meaning around.

*an illusory sunrise. So many things,*

.....

*blind and strangely secretive!*

“[G]low” has been postponed until line 9, but does not need to appear immediately. I transform “[in which] an illusory sunrise” into “[the bright] illusion of a sunrise” and then insert “glow” (as “glows”).

I have a problem with Borges' exclamation mark. It is not customary in English to begin a sentence with an exclamation mark. But nor is it customary in English to postpone an exclamation mark until the end of a 16-word sentence when the exclamation itself is contained in the first two words. I decide to split the sentence into two.

There is also the matter of rhyme. Whether I say "discreet or secretive" in line 12, something in line 9 is going to have to rhyme with it. Borges say of these things that they serve us. So if I expand "So many things" into "So many things that serve", I have a pararhyme with "secretive" (and also give myself extra syllables).

I can also insert "to everything" and "yet" into line 12, and increase the number of syllables without altering meaning.

So:

illusion of a sunrise glows. So many things that serve!

.....

blind to everything, and yet strangely secretive.

*files, doorsills, atlases, glasses, keys,  
they serve us like unspeaking slaves,*

I have already used the word "key" in translating "llavero" as key-ring, and do not want to use it again. And it would be satisfying to find a good rhyme for "slaves". So I decide to omit "keys" entirely, and substitute a word that rhymes with "slaves". (Or I can treat line 11 as saying "like unspeaking slaves they serve us" and find a good rhyme for "serve us".) "Umbral" is a threshold or doorstep—an architectural feature. An architrave is also an architectural feature. So with the insertion of "household" into line 11 for syllabic reasons, I decide upon:

Nail-files, atlases, glasses, sills, architraves,—  
they stand there like unspeaking household slaves,

The third quatrain is therefore:

illusion of a sunrise glows. So many things that serve!  
Nail-files, atlases, glasses, sills, architraves,—  
they stand there like unspeaking household slaves,  
blind to everything, and yet strangely secretive.

*They will endure beyond our oblivion;  
they will never know that we have gone.*

The last couplet is relatively easy. There is a rhyme there already. In the prose translation, I have had to use the pronoun "they" twice, with the subject of each Spanish verb being bound up in the form of the verb. I find I do not like the effect of beginning these final lines with the same word. I therefore begin line 14 with "and".

And in line 14 I have a choice of saying that these objects will not know that we "have" gone (an action) or "are" gone (a situation). The uninhabited room is, I think, a situation, rather than the result of an action. I choose "are".

So, with the insertion of “even” for syllabic reasons, the final couplet is:  
They will continue long after our oblivion;  
and will never even know that we are gone.

My poetic translation of the poem is therefore:

### **Things**

My old cane, my pocket change, and my key-ring,  
the obedient door-lock, the overdue  
notes that will not be read again in the few  
days still left me, the table and the playing-  
cards, a book, and between its pages, dry and faded,  
the little violet, memorial to some night,  
no doubt unforgettable once, that now has evaded  
memory, the red mirror on the west wall with its bright  
illusion of a sunrise. So many things that serve!  
Nail-files, atlases, glasses, sills, architraves,—  
they stand there like unspeaking household slaves,  
blind to everything, and yet strangely secretive.  
They will continue long after our oblivion;  
and will never even know that we are gone.

This is all very well. A reasonable equivalence of meaning has been achieved; and the syllabic structure of the original has been preserved. But there has been a price. The translation is more wordy than the original. Some elegance has been lost.

What if I abandon my self-imposed requirement to preserve the syllabic structure of the original? What if I rely on meaning and rhyme-scheme alone? Not only can I omit the unnecessary words I have inserted, I can also substitute shorter synonyms for some of the necessary expressions I have used.

Surprisingly little needs to change.

The one problem I have is “clavos” in line 10. I decide to translate it directly as “key”, and hope that “key-ring” in line 1 is far enough away not to echo. I end up with a leaner, less lyrical poem—more accurate, but more English and less Spanish.

### **Things**

Cane, small change, key-ring,  
the obedient lock, the overdue  
notes that the few  
days left me will not read, the table and playing-  
cards, a book, and between its pages, dry,  
a violet, monument to some night  
(no doubt unforgettable) that has now slipped my  
mind, the red mirror on the west wall, with its bright  
illusory sunrise. So many things!  
File, doorsill, atlas, glass, key,



like slaves they serve us, strangely  
secretive, blind and unspeaking.  
Long after we are forgotten, they will carry on,  
and never know that we are gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

### *Appendix*

#### **Las cosas**

El bastón, las monedas, el llavero,  
la dócil cerradura, las tardías  
notas que no leerán los pocos días  
que me quedan, los naipes y el tablero,  
un libro y en sus páginas la ajada  
violeta, monumento de una tarde  
sin duda inolvidable y ya olvidada,  
el rojo espejo occidental en que arde  
una ilusoria aurora. ¡Cuántas cosas,  
limas, umbrales, atlas, copas, clavos,  
nos sirven como táticos esclavos,  
ciegas y extrañamente sigilosas!  
Durarán más allá de nuestro olvido;  
no sabrán nunca que nos hemos ido.

#### **Things**

(rhymed only)

Cane, small change, key-ring,  
the obedient lock, the overdue  
notes that the few  
days left me will not read, the table and playing-  
cards, a book, and between its pages, dry,  
a violet, monument to some night  
(no doubt unforgettable) that has now slipped my  
mind, the red mirror on the west wall, with its bright  
illusory sunrise. So many things!  
Nail-file, doorsill, atlas, wine-glass, key,  
like slaves they serve us, strangely  
secretive, blind and unspeaking.  
Long after we are forgotten, they will carry on,  
and never even know that we are gone.

#### **Things**

(rhymed and syllabic)





My old cane, my pocket change, and my key-ring,  
the obedient door-lock, the overdue  
notes that will not be read again in the few  
days still left me, the table and the playing-  
cards, a book, and between its pages, dry and faded,  
the little violet, memorial to some night,  
no doubt unforgettable once, that now has evaded  
memory, the red mirror on the west wall where the bright  
illusion of a sunrise glows. So many things that serve!  
Nail-files, atlases, glasses, sills, architraves,—  
they stand there like unspeaking household slaves,  
blind to everything, and yet strangely secretive.  
They will continue long after our oblivion;  
and will never even know that we are gone.

**Things**  
(literal)

Cane, small change, key-ring,  
the obedient lock, the late  
notes that the few days that are left to me  
will not read, playing cards and table,  
A book and in its pages the faded  
violet, monument to a night  
no doubt unforgettable and now forgotten  
the red western mirror in which glows  
an illusory sunrise. How many things,  
files, doorsills, atlases, wine-glasses, keys,  
they serve us like unspeaking slaves,  
blind and strangely secretive!  
They will endure beyond our oblivion;  
they will never know that we have gone.