

# *El libro de arena*

## Jorge Luis Borges

...thy rope of sands...

—George Herbert (1593–1623)

A line consists of an infinite number of points; a plane, an infinite number of lines; a space, an infinite number of planes; a hyperspace, an infinite number of spaces—no, the laws of geometry surely are not the best way to begin my tale. To insist that one's fanciful tale is truthful in its retelling is now a staple of all such tales; nevertheless, mine *is* the truth.

I live alone, on the fourth floor of Belgrano St. It had been a few months ago, sometime in the evening, when I heard a knock on my door. I opened it, and a stranger walked in. He was a tall man, with indistinct features—at least as far as my myopia could make out. He seemed poor, but respectably so. He dressed in gray and had a gray satchel in his hand. Immediately, I marked him for a foreigner. On first sight I thought him old; later, I realized that I had been tricked by his sparse blonde hair, so pale it was almost white, as though he were Scandinavian. During the course of our conversation, which lasted no longer than an hour, I learned that he came from the Orkney Islands.

I motioned him to a chair. The man paused, then began to speak. He sighed in a melancholy fashion, as I do now.

“I sell bibles,” he told me.

Not without some pedantry, I replied, “In this house I have quite a few English bibles, even the first of its kind, that by John Wycliffe. I also have a copy by Cipriano de Valera, one by Luther, the worst of them in a literary sense, and even the Vulgate in the original Latin. As you can see, I don't lack bibles.”

After a pregnant pause, he responded, “I don't only sell bibles. I can show you a sacred text that may interest you. I obtained it by Bikaner.”

He opened his satchel and left it on the table. It was an octavo, wrapped in fabric. It had clearly belonged to many before him. I examined it, and its unusual weight surprised me. On its spine was written “Holy Writ”, then, below it, “Bombay.”

“It must be from the nineteenth century,” I noted.

“I don’t know. I never did know,” was his response.

I opened it to a random page. The script was strange to me. The pages, which were rather worn and typeset poorly, were printed in the standard two-column style of a bible. The words were cramped and written in verse. By the top corner of the pages were Arabic numerals. The even-numbered page was numbered something like 40,514; the odd-numbered page, which followed it, was 999. I turned it, and on the back page was an eight-digit number. There was also a small illustration, like those that could be found in dictionaries: a small anchor drawn in ink, as though by a child’s clumsy hand.

It was then that the stranger told me, “Take a careful look at the page. You’ll never see it again.”

His words felt like a threat, but not his tone.

I sat unmoving, closed the tome, and immediately reopened it. I searched for the little anchor in vain, page after page. To hide how unsettled I was, I asked, “This is a copy of the Scripture in some Hindustani script, isn’t it?”

“No,” he replied.

Then, he lowered his voice, as though he were telling me a secret. “I acquired this tome in a small town by the grasslands, in exchange for some rupees and a Bible. Its previous owner did not know how to read. I suspect that he treated this tome of tomes as an amulet. He was of the lowest caste, whom nobody could approach without fear of contamination. He told me that the tome was called the Book of Sand, because neither it nor sand had beginning or end.”

He asked me to search for the first page.

I placed my left hand on the cover and opened it, my thumb and forefinger almost touching. Nothing I tried worked: there were always a few pages between the cover and my fingers. It was almost as if the pages sprouted from the tome itself.

“Now search for the last page.”

Again I failed; I began to stammer in a voice not quite my own, “This cannot be.”

His voice still hushed, the bible-seller told me, “It cannot be, and yet it is. There are an infinite number of pages in this tome. None is the first; none the last. I

don't know why the pages are numbered in such an arbitrary fashion. Perhaps it's to demonstrate that any number might be found within the terms of an infinite series."

Then, almost as an afterthought, "If space were infinite, we could be anywhere in space. If time were infinite, we could be anywhere in time."

His murmurs bothered me. I asked him, "You must be religious, surely?"

"Yes, I'm a Presbyterian. My consicnece is clear. I'm certain that I hadn't tricked that man when I gave him the words of God in exchange for this diabolical tome."

I assured him that he had no reason to reproach himself, and asked if he would be staying in the vicinity. He told me that he had planned on returning to his homeland within a few days. It was then that I learned that he was Scottish, that he came from the Orkney Islands. I told him that I was particularly fond of Scotland out of my love of Stevenson and Hume.

"And of Robbie Burns," he added.

While we talked, I continued inspecting the infinite tome. With false indifference I asked him, "Do you intend on selling this curious specimen to the British Mu-seum?"

"No. I'm offering it to you," he said, quoting a rather high price.

I told him that, in all honesty, it was far too much for me. I continued to think, and had concocted a plan within just a few minutes.

"I propose an exchange," I said. "You obtained this tome for a few rupees and a copy of the Holy Scripture. I offer you my entire retirement pension, which I've just collected, as well as a gothic Wycliffe bible. I inherited it from my parents."

"A black-lettered Wycliffe," he murmured.

I went to my bedroom and handed him the money and bible. He turned its pages and studied its cover with the fervor of a bibliophile.

"Deal," he said.

I was surprised that he didn't negotiate. It was only later that I realized that he had come to my house planning to sell me the tome. He kept the money without counting it.

We spoke of India, of the Orkney Islands, and of the Norwegian jarls that governed them. It was night when the man left. I never saw him again, and neither did I know his name.

I thought to keep the Book of Sand in the space that my Wycliffe had occupied, but in the end, I decided to hide it beneath several incomplete volumes of the Thousand and One Nights.

I lay in bed and did not sleep. At 3:15 AM I turned on my nightlight. I again flipped through the pages of the impossible tome. On one page, I found an engraving of a mask. By the top corner of the page was a number, one that I no longer remember, raised to the ninth power.

I showed no one my treasure despite my joy at possessing it, fearful that it would be stolen. Then I suspected that it couldn't truly be infinite. These thoughts aggravated my deep-rooted misanthropy. I had but a few friends left; I stopped seeing them. Imprisoned by the Book, I almost never left my house. I examined its worn spine and cover with a magnifying glass, rejecting the idea that it was nothing but a trick. I confirmed that the small illustrations were two thousand pages apart. I copied them down in a composition notebook, one which didn't take much time to fill. The illustrations never repeated. At night, during those rare intervals in which insomnia left me, I dreamt of the Book.

As summer ended, I came to the realization that the book was a monstrosity. I was no less monstrous, having seen it with my eyes and having touched it with my fingers. It was a nightmare, an obscene thing that corrupted and rejected reality.

I thought to burn it, but I was worried that burning an infinite book would take an infinite amount of time, that the planet would be smothered by smoke.

I remembered having read that the best place to hide a leaf was in a forest. Before my retirement, I had worked in the National Library, which boasted a collection of 900,000 books; I knew that, to the right of the lobby, a set of stairs sank down to the basement, where newspapers and maps were kept. While the librarians were distracted, I lost the Book of Sand in one of its many damp shelves. I tried not to think about where it was on the shelf, nor how far I had been from the door.

I feel some measure of relief now, but I avoid passing by the street to the library all the same.