

## *The House of Asterion* by Jorge Luis Borges

And the queen gave birth to a son named Asterion.

I know they accuse me of arrogance, perhaps also of misanthropy, perhaps madness too. Such accusations (which I shall castigate in due course) are laughable. It is true that I do not leave my house, but it is also true that its doors (which are infinite\* in number) are open day and night to man and animal alike. Anyone who wishes may enter. One will not find feminine extravagance here, nor gallant courtly ritual, just quiet and solitude. Here one will find a house like no other on the face of the Earth. (They who declare that in Egypt exists another similar are lying). Even my detractors admit that there is not *a single piece of furniture* in the house. Another ridiculous tale claims that I, Asterion, am a prisoner. Need I repeat that there are no closed doors? Should I add that there are no locks? Besides, I did one evening step out onto the street; if I returned home before nightfall, I did so because of the fear that the faces of the hoi polloi, faces discoloured and plain like an open hand, had induced in me. The sun had already set, but the helpless cry of a babe and the coarse supplications of the common herd signalled that I had been recognised. The people prayed, fled and fell prostrate; some climbed up to the stylobate of the temple of Axes, others gathered stones. Someone, I believe, hid himself under the sea. Not in vain was my mother a queen; I cannot mix with the common people, though my modesty does so desire it.

The fact is that I am unique. What a man can pass unto others does not interest me; like the philosopher, I think nothing is communicated by the art of writing. Annoying and trivial minutiae have no place in my spirit, a spirit which is receptive only to whatsoever is grand. Never have I retained the difference between one letter and another. A certain generous impatience has not consented that I should learn to read. Sometimes I deplore this, for the nights and days are long.

Naturally, I am not without amusement. Like a ram on the charge, I run through the galleries of stone until dizzily I tumble to the ground. I conceal myself in the shadows of a cistern or in the corner of a corridor and pretend that I am being searched for. There are rooftops from which I let myself fall until I bloody myself. At any time I can shut my eyes and pretend that I am asleep, breathing deeply. (Sometimes I really do sleep, sometimes the colour of the day has changed by the time I open my eyes). But of the games I play, the one I prefer is pretending there is another Asterion. I pretend that he has come to visit me and I show him around the house. With great reverence I tell him: *Now we return to the previous intersection, or Now we head towards another courtyard, or I knew you would like this drain, or Now you will see a cistern that has filled with sand, or Now you will see how the cellar forks*. Sometimes I err and we both laugh heartily.

Not only these games have I imagined; I have also meditated on the house. Each part of the house repeats many times, any particular place is another place. There is not one cistern, courtyard, drinking fountain, manger; there are fourteen (infinite) mangers, drinking fountains, courtyards, cisterns. The house is the size of the world; better said, it is the world. Nevertheless, by dint of exhausting all the dusty galleries of grey stone and the courtyards with their

cisterns, I have reached the street and I have seen the temple of Axes and the sea. This I did not understand until a night vision revealed to me that there are also fourteen (infinite) seas and temples. Everything exists many times over, fourteen times, but there are two things in the world that seem to exist only once; above, the intricate Sun; below, Asterion. Perhaps I have created the stars and the Sun and the enormous house, but I do not remember anymore.

Nine men enter the house every nine years so that I may deliver them from all evil. I hear their footsteps or their voices in the depths of the galleries of stone and I run with joy in search of them. The ceremony lasts a few minutes. One after another, they fall to the ground without my having to bloody my hands. Where they fall, they remain, and the cadavers help to distinguish one gallery from another. I know not who they are, but I do know that one of them prophesied, at the moment of his death, that someday my redeemer would come. Since then, the solitude does not pain me because I know that my redeemer lives, and in the end he will rise above the dust. If I could hear all the rumblings of the world, I would detect the sound of his footsteps. Let it be that he take me to a place with fewer galleries and fewer doors.

I wonder: what will my redeemer be like? Will he be a bull or a man? Will he be perhaps a bull with the face of a man? Or will he be like me?

The morning Sun was reflected in the sword of bronze. No trace of blood remained.

“Would you believe it, Ariadne?” said Theseus. “The minotaur hardly put up a fight.”

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\* The original says *fourteen*, but there is ample reason to infer that in Asterion's eyes, this adjectival numeral is no different to *infinite*.