

1992

# Proteus

Jorge Luis Borges

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## Six Poems · *Jorge Luis Borges*

### PROTEUS

Before the oarsmen of Odysseus  
Troubled the waters of the winedark sea,  
I can catch glimpses of the slippery  
Shapes of the god whose name was Proteus.  
Proteus, shepherd of the herds of ocean,  
Possessing as he did prophetic power,  
Preferred to hide his wisdom and his lore  
And weave together wayward divinations.  
Held fast by stubborn men, he slipped his matter  
And took a lion's shape, the shape of fire,  
A shadetree shimmering in summer air,  
Or water that cannot be found in water.  
You think the Egyptian Proteus uncanny,  
You, who are one and at the same time many?

*translated by Robert Mezey*

### ANOTHER VERSION OF PROTEUS

Inhabitant of suspicious-looking sand,  
Half deity, half animal of the deep,  
He lacked memory, which bends to keep  
Watch over yesterday and things that end.  
But he was tortured by another engine  
At least as cruel, and that was prophecy:  
To know the door that shuts eternally,  
The fate of the Achaean and the Trojan.  
Held captive, he took on unstable matter  
In shifting forms, a tempest or a bonfire,  
A golden tiger or a shadowy panther,