

## Algebra and Fire

*A mind all logic is like a  
knife all blade. It makes the  
hand bleed that uses it.—  
Rabindranath Tagore*

‘A mixture of algebra and fire’  
is how Borges described poetry, I’m told.  
I have to wonder what he meant.

Now fire as metaphor isn’t so rare—  
in fact, it’s almost trite. But ‘trite’  
doesn’t spring to mind  
as adjective for Jorge Luis.  
So ‘algebra’ must be  
the spice in that combine.

He didn’t say ‘mathematics and fire’  
or ‘geometry and fire’  
as he might have done.  
‘Mathematics’, perhaps, is too generic  
and ‘geometry’, what?  
too visual—too real—  
for the magical, fantastic  
fabrics that he wove?  
But algebra for him, I suppose,  
was clean, precise, abstract  
unpredictable yet inevitable—  
square root of minus 1?!  
Imagine that! Fantastic!

For Borges, though, algebra alone  
wasn’t poetry.  
Perhaps he felt, like Tagore  
that it needed some handle—  
something to buffer  
its keen, cutting edge.

Which to me, an algebraist  
seems strange.  
Algebra permits—requires—  
devil-may-care flights of fancy.  
The interplay of structures—  
some ‘seen’, most only imagined—  
has its own inner rhythm and form.  
To work with another, to offer an idea  
mold it together, can be a dance of joy—  
to joy—a ballet.  
No other fire need be in play.