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The Most Foreign Country

Introduction by Cole Heinowitz

Alejandra
Pizarnik

Translated by Yvette Siegert

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THE MOST FOREIGN COUNTRY

ALEJANDRA PIZARNIK

Translated from the Spanish by

Yvette Siegert

Introduction by

Cole Heinowitz

A PASSIONATE ABSENCE: THE EARLY WORK OF
(FLORA) ALEJANDRA PIZARNIK

*If literature coincides with nothing for just an instant, it is
immediately everything, and this everything begins to exist.*

—Maurice Blanchot

On September 26, 1954, the eighteen year-old Alejandra Pizarnik recorded in her diary: “I must write or die. I must fill up notebooks or die.” Two days later she added, “I want to free myself. I want to live!” For readers familiar with Pizarnik’s later life and work—her fascination with silence, her attraction to the void, her splintering and decomposition of self, her eroticization of death and, ultimately, her suicide—these urgent avowals of the will to exist through writing may come as a surprise.

Pizarnik’s first book, *The Most Foreign Country* (1955), gives us a deeper look into the poet’s formative struggle to constitute a self in words. This struggle is marked, on the one hand, by a desperate impulse to “grab hold of *everything*” (“I Will Continue”), every seemingly inconsequential experience, every hidden thought, “whether good or bad or good,” and to take possession of it in language:

reading my own poems
printed sorrows the daily transcendences

proud smile forgiven misunderstanding
it's mine it's mine it's mine!! ("A Poem for My Paper")

On the other hand, something alien begins to surface in this affirmation of verbal power. On taking form in language, the poet's experience becomes estranged. The written word asserts itself as an "autonomous chalice;" in becoming "mine," experience becomes foreign. This fraught, mutually constitutive relationship between interiority and exteriority is the central problem Pizarnik confronts as a young writer—and one that will define the course of her mature work.

Returning to her diary entry for September 26, we find the exclamation "I want to live!" immediately followed by a set of instructions: "Alejandra: remember. Remember well everything you've heard. First of all, you should learn to distinguish dreams from insomnia. Remember, and don't think 'you're naked or wearing a glass suit.'" The command to remember (in Spanish, *recordar*) figures prominently in Pizarnik's diaries and provides a clue to the difficult intimacy she explores between interior and exterior. Derived from the Latin *recordari* [*re* (again) + *cordis* (heart)], *recordar* suggests an action more physical than simply committing a fact to memory, something closer perhaps to "revisiting the heart." In Argentina, *recordar* carries another sense as well, one that dates back at least to Jorge Manrique's fifteenth-century poem, *Coplas por la muerte de su padre*: "to wake up," "to stop dreaming," "to come back to oneself." For Pizarnik, then, remembering signals the assertive reawakening of impressions lying dormant in the heart. Yet what is inside, what must be re-called, is not an enclosed and self-sufficient I, but rather an I that is formed by internalizing—and internally reviving—the external world.

These observations reveal something of Pizarnik's influence by surrealism and the French tradition of *poètes maudits*. Alongside the epigraph from Rimbaud that opens *The Most Foreign Country* and the explicit allusion to his poem "Voyelles" in part two of "In the Swamp," Rimbaud's unforgettable dictum, "I is another," haunts Pizarnik's work. In a diary entry from 1963, she writes, "To say 'I' is to be evacuated, to make a pronoun out of something outside myself." Pizarnik's debt to André Breton is equally apparent, particularly in her use of radical juxtaposition and syntactic ambiguity to erode the boundary between the material and the immaterial. As her early reading notebooks show, Pizarnik was deeply informed by the surrealists' exploration of "the force the imaginary exerts over the real, the internal over the external." But like the expelled surrealist Antonin Artaud, Pizarnik's work exposes the darker sides of this relationship: both the imagination's abject yearning for contact with the real and the extreme danger that such contact entails. Her private thoughts and feelings long for concrete objects. And those objects come, but their touch wounds: "sharp flowers...burn [her] fingers" and "the yellow sun" penetrates her skin, "marking its darkened fingerprints" ("Nemo").

In many cases, though, the ostensibly external forces that burn and pierce the poet's imagination are rendered abstract or intangible, inverting the conventional relationship between inside and outside. In "Reminiscences," an abstraction—time—strangles the poet. Yet it is not the poet's immaterial interior being assailed, but rather its projection in corporeal form, the form of a star ("time strangulated my star"). Later in the poem, the oppressive force that "crushes" the poet's inner world is equally devoid of material substance, a mere

physical force. The affinity is unmistakable in Pizarnik's essay, "The Incarnate Word" (1965), republished as the prologue to her translation, *Texts of Antonin Artaud* (1972). The essay begins with a telling epigraph from Artaud's *Letters from Rodez*: "I do not accept the fact that the poet I am was committed to a madhouse because he wanted to realize his poetry in its natural state." Like Artaud, Pizarnik sought a language that would "annul...the distance society imposes between poetry and life."

There is a crucial difference between the two writers, though. Whereas Artaud ruthlessly combats the abyss of language "body to body," Pizarnik claims to "bear it with docility" (diary entry, 1959). This is one of her characteristically mordant understatements. Pizarnik's struggle to bridge the gap between words and things is absolutely equal in ferocity to Artaud's. Their methods, however, are diametrically opposed. Artaud strove to create a violent collision of interior and exterior—a "theater of cruelty." Pizarnik's search for correspondence, by contrast, is grounded in negation. Words are *too* solid, *too* loud, to register the overwhelming lack that defines experience. In her work, it is silence that unites an unknowable self and an equally inaccessible other in their common absence. "Now I know why I'm in love," Pizarnik confides in a diary entry from 1963. "Her silence is the presence of things instead of their imaginary representation."

This embrace of silence should not be confused with Rimbaud's early repudiation of poetry, much less the suicide of Nerval. For Pizarnik, absence is both the essential precondition of writing and the lost origin writing calls to. She *will* sing, but only to a world "that hides when someone calls /

upon it" ("Nemo"). "If you speak about what is," she comments in her diary, "it means that someone didn't come—not that they came" (1963). And if the poet's object of desire stubbornly insists on appearing in the world, her words will condemn it to a state of death-in-language. Even memories must be destroyed for the poem to come into being. Oppressed by the "phantasmagoric vision" of an unnamed lover, the poet writes "to destroy the tickling of your / eyelashes," "to reject the restlessness of / your lips" ("Distance"). In her mature work, such negations are inseparable from the act of writing. In an untitled poem of 1969: "With every word I write I remember the void that makes me write what I couldn't if I let you in." And later, more starkly: "My words demand silence and wasteland" ("Night, Poem," 1969).

In *The Most Foreign Country* we witness a poet driven by an insatiable thirst for communion, even if it can only be reached through estrangement and uncertainty. She is wandering through the gloom, endlessly walking, running "I don't know where" ("Night"), leaving in a "gigantic boat," "sink[ing] into...darkness" ("Port Ahead"). The distance draws her on like a lover: "distant distant // distance // yes love you are distant" ("Sky"). A "marvelous distance" floods "her euphoric / ears," calling her to "leave, and not return" ("Port Ahead"). Perhaps this unnamable destination, this point of no return, this euphoric distance, is the "Most Foreign Country" of the book's title. Perhaps that country is writing itself—both the point at which the poet disappears and the act by which her disappearance becomes visible. This unknown, uncharted presence-in-absence is part of what makes Pizarnik's early work so compelling. While she described her life as "a well-conceived void" and her face as

“a zero in disguise,” the eyes looking out from that nothingness are nonetheless “pieces of the infinite” (“I Am...”). As she wrote in a diary entry from August 1955, “The optimistic hope of finding a passable bridge between limits and the infinite still breathes in me.” In *The Most Foreign Country*, Pizarnik catches sight of that bridge. It lies “Beyond Oblivion,” where the poem converges with absence and shines as its own truth.

This negative point of convergence would take multiple forms over the course of Pizarnik’s career: “the drowned girl,” “the dead little girl,” “the lost girl,” “the forgotten one,” “little statue of terror,” “the sleepwalker,” “my little blue doll,” and her own adopted name, “Alejandra”—to name just a few. Four decades of scholarship have tended to reify these figures as autobiographical personae rather than respecting their autonomy as poetic tropes. But *The Most Foreign Country* resists this interpretive impulse. Here, subject and object have not yet reconciled into character. The writing has yet to become fully other. Pizarnik’s given name, Flora, has yet to be discarded. It appears next to her adopted name, for the first and only time, on the cover of the book: Flora Alejandra Pizarnik.

This is the other thing that makes Pizarnik’s first collection so compelling, and—though she would later disavow the book—so important to her writing as a whole. The little drowned girls and statues of terror, those facilitating inventions that populate her later work, have not yet come into being. The closest the young Pizarnik comes to creating a separate figure to stand for the poet’s own absence is “love.” It hovers “between the shadows the smoke and the dance /

between the shadows the blackness and I” (“Me Leaving in a Black Boat”). It approaches at the moment words abandon her, the moment of her disappearance: “At times like this,” she writes in “Only a Love,” “the inkwell takes flight and / makes its way to the inextinguishable / borders... / I won’t be back ... It is my love that is expanding.”

In the penultimate poem of the book, “Beyond Oblivion,” Pizarnik imagines love’s arrival. “At some point,” she writes, interior will become exterior, and “you’ll see falling from the side / of the moon the kisses that glimmer inside me.” Words will be reunited with the world; “the wilting fragrances will come that / once came down innate from winged song,” and the harmony of inside and outside will dance “from the pipe of / my own love.” But this “some point” never comes. More precisely, it *must not* come. Poetry must ceaselessly repel the communion it thirsts for. Its thirst serves an infinitely more vital demand: the need to continue writing.

COLE HEINOWITZ

THE MOST
FOREIGN COUNTRY

*—Ah! the infinite egotism of adolescence, the studious
optimism: how the world was full of flowers that summer!
Airs and forms dying . . .*

—Arthur Rimbaud

DAYS AGAINST ILLUSION

Not wanting targets that roll
around on tilting surfaces.

Not wanting voices that steal
the grainy arching airs.

Not wanting to live for a million breaths
the trivial crusades with the sky.

Not wanting to alter my lines
without waxing the current blade.

Not wanting to resist the magnet
in the end the espadrille unthreads.

Not wanting to touch abstractions
to reach my final chestnut hair.

Not wanting to conquer the loosened tails
the trees positioning their leaves.

Not wanting to attract without chaos
the movable words.

SMOKE

pinkish frames in silent bone
stirring a smoky cocktail
millions of calories vanish
faced with the ringing austerity
of smoke seen from the back
two hands of shredded clover
almost entangling the separated teeth
and punishing the dark gums
beneath noises received by the second
the hairs laugh as they move
the footprints of various Martians
cognac yellowing-bordeaux
scrubbing the bloodied toilets
three voices phoneming three kisses
for me for you for me
to capture the euphoric lark
in a tin can
an ascendant chore!

REMINISCENCES

And time strangulated my star
four numbers spin insidiously
blackening the jellies
and time strangulated my star
worn out I walked over the dark pit
the gleams weeping over my greenness
and I looked on and I looked on
and time strangulated my star
to remember three rumblings of
young mountains and dark radios
two yellow goblets
two scraped throats
two kisses speaking for the vision of
 one existence to another existence
two promises moaning their
 awful distant loquacities
two promises of not being of being of not being
two dreams playing the wheel of fate around
 a cosmos of pallid yellow champagne
two glances affirming the greediness
 of some small star
and time strangulated my star
four numbers laughing through surly somersaults
one is dying
one is being born
and time strangulated my star

sounds of burning water lilies
detach my future shadows
a disconcerting mist fills up
 my sunny corner
the shadow of the sun crushes
 the sphinx of my star
the promises congeal
in front of the sign of stragulated stars
and time strangulated my star
but its essence will go on existing
in my atemporal interior
shine, oh essence of my star!

LUMINOUS WATERS

 Yes. It is raining...
the sky moans its faded heaps
damp shadows gather up its pieces
terrible muddy hollows
selfish drops of sulphury water
yet I don't know how to gather masses
to see if the pallid flame will trouble me
terrible thickness of cats and dogs
the drops continue

COLORLESS BEING

To the little rabbit that bit its own fingernails

unnailed needlework in my daily chaos humor
endless ringing scratchy harp
weeping corpses salt lake

your obscurity will remove the streams of green soap
colorful streamers
in a right hand with nails gnawed down to the quick

NEMO

the day won't go far that lacks in greenness
when I'll sing to the hateful moon giving light to my thick head,
 which a blade cut down
which gives birth to the brutal winds
to the sharp flowers that burn in your fingers beneath their gentle
 bandages
to the star that hides when someone calls upon it
to the damp rain that shimmies in its repulsive nakedness
to the yellow sun that passes through skin, marking its darkened
 fingerprints
to the little clock sent from hell the breaker of beautiful dreams
to the cold seas dredging up garbage waves golden rings burning
 in my eyes

WANDERING THROUGH THE GLOOM

my pupils black their lack of ineluctable glimmers
my pupils big pollen full of bees
my pupils round broken disk
my pupils grave without an absolute swerve
my pupils straight without any innate gesture
my pupils full a fragrant well
my pupils tinted defined water
my pupils sensitive rigidity for the unknown
my pupils protruding a precise impasse
my pupils earthly imitations of sky
my pupils dark falling stones

ENGAGING WITH THE RED SHADOW

her solitude is mewing
zeros upon zeros
that flow with ingenuous values
a retina before the unknown
the sounding breezes
gather back to prick
her being with smiling
and open teeth
to laugh in the night full of sun
from vigorous participles

NIGHT

running I don't know where
here or there
singular naked bends in the road
and enough with all this running!
braids subjecting nightfall
to dandruff and eau de cologne
burning roses and waxy phosphorus
an honest creation of capillary furrows
the night unloads its burden
of black and white
to throw off, delay its transformation

MY FOREST

collecting desires on thankless surfaces
recounting what is yours
in solemn greenness
and after that ten horses will come
to throw their tails to the black wind
the leaves will rustle
their damp manes
and the regiment will come
rounding up the verses

A POEM FOR MY PAPER

reading my own poems
printed sorrows the daily transcendences
proud smile forgiven misunderstanding
it's mine it's mine it's mine!!
reading cursive writing
joyful interior heartbeat
to feel that happiness congeals
whether good or bad or good
strangeness of inherent feelings
harmonious, autonomous chalice
the limit of the big toe of a tired foot and
washed hair on a curly head
it doesn't matter:
it's mine it's mine it's mine!!

. . . FROM MY DIARY

She watched the cars being fixed
without their metallic vestments
their front parts resembling
brand-new skulls.
A yellow sun dropping indifferent
luminous shards of something painted
and the shadows lingering
in the fragments of star.
She felt tired before such hazes
that didn't move
a blue brooding boredom inside her
extravagant footsteps left marks on her fingers
mobility measured by carpet and ballet.

MEMORIES OF A PALM READER

two hands holding flowers resume the
clumsy sculpture of exotic forms that
gleam as they sell to the witches the
exalted sign of life for the price of death
reading in the lines the thousands of
times you triumph or moan or cry or laugh or
take to the road with a steady pace that
struggles in the night repelling the
despicable coffins brandished by disaster

DRAWING

The knee of the cove
Smells the lovely compositions
Salient frost wetting her
Arching body
A thousand clocks are buzzing
The hours of a thousand distances
And the vase is reborn
Beneath the shadow of the catacomb

CHESS

even so the enclitic doesn't destroy
the reverent pawns before him
a million mountains
exploding all exquisite
before the red sun
(not the yellow sun)
inherent thought behind cast-iron bars
a cake smoking from candles minus the blaze
wishing to be a linguistic mass
to cut off his beard
waves in gorgeous flames
to raise the free flag
the walnut kilometers
and blows in relevant tourniquet

COMMON MAN

always complaining in blue
depending on the route
black the straight line
black the good earth
strange tremor that leaves
chests, hairy or not, unstirred
hopes not extinguished mix up
him with her with everyone
behold! his flesh is transferring
reminiscences opaque livestock

I WILL CONTINUE

broken frame centers this *everything*
of gelded weeping tree
to measure lengthwise every step
if the moon stays unperturbed
the light rounds out the whitenesses
of grated turnips
to throw off every wrapping
if it doesn't distort the blackness
the music reddens the path
of each small dampness
turning turning turning
to notice next to the broken frame
the feel of heels and teeth
the wish to grab hold of *everything*

AN OBJECTIVE TICKET

1

amid the murmur of so many arteries
I huddle rummaging through the pockets of
my jacket
trying to find something that could help
my eviscerated
dawn to float

2

I see faces I look for faces I find faces
the image of their sameness cools the
aesthetic
from the tram window my
bench is the pinnacle
of the world

3

fingernails arms rings fish flying
blue red green sounds approaching
parade boiling with an awful
bubbling
but nothing can unsettle suggestively the
security from my
bench

I AM...

my wings?
two rotting petals

my reason?
shots of briny wine

my life?
a well-conceived void

my body?
a fissure in the chair

my moods?
a child's gong

my face?
a zero in disguise

my eyes?
oh, pieces of the infinite

DEDALUS JOYCE

Man doomed with night keys and a naked body alongside a river that is deep with glistening spit. Man whose eyes are anti-myopic explorers of the infinite. Man with his face in the shadows and his body an abstract genius. Man without fear of the quill in his hand or of the eyes in his being or of a supreme smile. Man-god you arrived with nothing but phantasmastonishing infinities, adorned with tears of an embarrassing superiority. Man destroyer of taboos and starry skies. Man of the fragile garments that fall and leave behind them naked brothers. Man with no food to give to those who seek it. Man of the high seas of ravaging furrows. Man-ship in white. Man wrenching your own vomit out to lay the myth to rest. Man of time and space with rational lunacies in tow. Man-superman, coldness and warmth in conjunction. Man.

PORT AHEAD

Warm night. Pleasant sensation. The abstract music of the roads would flood her euphoric ears. She would think about the port she saw so often . . . a port of impressionist colors and dirty men with their wet and glistening arms and hair grown out and damp. Men unmoved by the marvellous distance, by the sky between the boats, by the landscape as a whole, by the ground littered with objects from faraway places like pieces of world in the melancholy heart of a sea . . .

Yes. To sink for a night into the streets of the port. To walk, to walk . . .

Yes. Alone. Always alone. Slow, very slowly. And the air will be rarified, it will be a cosmopolitan air and the ground will be covered with papers from cigarettes that existed once, white and beautiful.

Yes. To continue walking. To sink, darkness, to walk . . .

Yes. And a star will give its color to the silver anchor that she carried in her chest. To put down anchor. Yes. Very close to that gigantic boat striped in red and white and green . . . to leave, and not return.

IN THE SWAMP

for Mr. Federico Valle

1

A thousand footsteps are patiently dragging the old soles along the various rocks.

Maybe a droplet will wail in longing for the ancient vegetation on afternoons more free than this (babbling with its impure colors, its inhibited sun, and coppery water, and colts with ethereal tails, and the cries of the impotent cacti . . .). The waterfall is reviving the silent grasses that nurture the black pelt of the earth, which is dressed in brilliance.

Persistent shadows, constant images that make my retinas carry them cheerfully in fragile bundles. Mountains teeming with solar proximity, with unprecedented rain, with invisible flowers that can grow beneath all this sky, all these chromatic luminosities, all this conjecturing of place.

2

My fingers are typing evenly (in case with their noise they should help to augment the depths of natural noises).

The voices rise, wanting to explain the aspirations of solitude inspired by these spaces. Lively canticles

of springtime fragrance descend through the fog, unexpectedly. Lips thicken the notes. Lips shut by skillfully acquired creases. Lips closing over happy teeth. Lips that laugh beneath the tense oppression of a cloak dipped in various shades (me red you blue him green her grey . . .). The chromatic battle ensues. Each color expects the largest space on the cloth. Of course none of them will yield. Of course none of them wants to dissolve anonymously. And so it goes, and so it continues, and so you see the vanishing of the little white-black leaves of this calendar, which exudes the sweat of intangible heat.

3

The mountains remain composed. Terrible doubt: to scratch yourself beneath the earthly cloak or to remove the vague stems that are trying to find, by the light of a ruined enchantment, the contours of a singular flower.

A SIGN UPON YOUR
SHADOW

SKY

looking at the sky

I tell myself it is a washed out blue (tempera
in pure blue after cold showers)

the clouds are moving

I think of your face and of you and of your hands and
of the scratch of your pen and of you
but your face doesn't appear in any of these clouds!
I was waiting to see it appended there like
a bandaged piece of cotton dipped in iodine
I keep walking

a mental cocktail has tiled my forehead
I don't know whether to think about the sky or you
and if I flipped a coin? (heads you tails sky)
no! your being does not take chances and I
desire you I de-si-are you!
sky a slice of the cosmos sky infinite bar
as immutable as the eyes of my love

let's think about both

both you + sky = my galloping feelings
biformeds bicolored bitremendous bidistant

distant distant

distance

yes love you are distant like the mosquito
yes! the one chasing the girl-mosquito next
to the dirty-yellow light that keeps watch beneath the
clean-black sky this anguished night
full of dualities

I AM FALLING

1

wine is like a desolate sob that
wets my youth before your kisses that
 another can drink
wine is the elixir that pulverizes the
 pestilent desires of
 my body which
flutters and groans before this effigy of
 you in drowsy shadow.

2

wine dilutes when mingled with
 my own mute tears
your floury gypsy face appears
 in every bubble
my throat is a wretched archipelago
my temples lead to a filthy well, oh
to long for you love and to face your heights
 with such cheap anguish.

ONLY A LOVE

My love is expanding.
It is a perfect parachute.
It is a click breathed out and
 its chest becomes enormous.
My love doesn't rumble
 doesn't cry out
 doesn't beg
 doesn't laugh.
Its body is an eye.
Its skin is an atlas.
My words perforate the
 final sign of his name.
My kisses are eels he's
 proud to let slip away.
My caresses are streams reminiscent
 of music above the fountains of Rome.
No one could flee its emotional territories.
There are no routes nor folds nor insects.
Everything so terse that my tears have revolted.
My creation is all sanctimonious next
 to its own blonde boat.
At times like this the inkwell takes flight and
 makes its way to the inextinguishable borders
 where mosquitoes are making love.
There goes the fateful sound. I won't be back.
It is my love that is expanding.

BEYOND OBLIVION

at some point you'll see falling from the side
of the moon the kisses that glimmer inside me
the shadows will smile all fiery
beaming with the secret panting wandering
the fearless leaves will come
that were once what my eyes
the wilting fragrances will come that
once came down innate from winged song
the red delights will come
bubbling intensely in the sun that
resolves the equidistant harmonies in
the smoke that dances out from the pipe of my own love.

DISTANCE

My being brimming with white boats.
My being bursting with sensations.
All of me beneath the memories of
your eyes.
I want to destroy the tickling of your
eyelashes.
I want to reject the restlessness of
your lips.
Why does your phantasmagoric vision drink
from the chalices
of these hours?

