

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

SINCE THE PUBLICATION of her debut poetry collection, *La tierra más ajena* [*The Most Foreign Country*] (1955), Alejandra Pizarnik has captivated the imaginations of many of the century's most celebrated Latin American writers, from Roberto Bolaño to Octavio Paz—the latter of whom described her work as exuding “a luminous heat that could burn, smelt, or even vaporize its skeptics.” Julio Cortázar characterized “each of Pizarnik's poems [as] the cube of an enormous wheel,” and the poet Raúl Zurita praised the piercing clarity with which her poetry “illuminates the abysses of emotional sensitivity, desire, and absence . . . presses against our lives and touches the most exposed, fragile, and numb parts of humanity.” When César Aira's biography of Pizarnik appeared in 1998, it was no exaggeration for him to state: “There is an aura of almost legendary prestige that surrounds the life and work of Alejandra Pizarnik.”

Pizarnik's reputation outside of Latin America has grown dramatically over the last several years, particularly in the English-speaking world. Since 2013, a new collection of her work has appeared almost every year: *A Musical Hell* (New Directions, 2013); *Diana's Tree* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2014); *Extracting the Stone of Madness: Poems 1962-1972*

(New Directions, 2016); *The Most Foreign Country* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2017); and *The Galloping Hour: French Poems* (New Directions, 2018). There has been a similar increase in the number of studies and critical appreciations of Pizarnik published in English each year. I have noticed, however, that these essays, articles, and reviews often present a very partial view of Pizarnik and her work, one in which her treatment of sexuality, alterity, childhood, violence, and trauma is framed by her personal struggle with mental illness and her eventual suicide. My hope is that the collection of writings presented here will help to expand this view.

These texts show us the poet at work in the world. We see the breadth of Pizarnik's reading—from Saint John of the Cross to Fernando Pessoa, from Cervantes to Artaud—as well as the depth of her immersion in the avant-garde traditions of Latin America and France. We hear the mordant wit she brought to bear on contemporary social issues (when an interviewer asked if she supported sex education, Pizarnik answered, “Of course—sex is difficult”). But most importantly, perhaps, these writings give us direct access to Pizarnik's reflections on writing. In reading and writing about other authors' work, she examines her own methods and articulates her own principles. In her rare condemnations of others, we learn the strictures she imposed on herself. Conversely, Pizarnik's praise of other writers and the passages she cites by way of evidence often crystallize the essence of her own stance toward writing. This quote from Octavio Paz's *Cuadrivio* in “A Tradition of Rupture” might well have been written to describe this book: “I set out, once again, to interrogate these poems—as one interrogates oneself.”

—*Cole Heinowitz*

ATTEMPT AT A PROLOGUE IN THEIR STYLE, NOT MINE

They are everyone and I am me.

—G.

NOTHING IN SUM. Absolutely nothing. Nothing that doesn't diverge from the everyday track. Life doesn't flow endlessly or uniformly: I don't sleep, I don't work, I don't go for walks, I don't leaf through some new book at random, I write badly or well—badly, I'm sure—driven and faltering. From time to time I lie down on a sofa so I don't look at the sky: indigo or ashen. And why shouldn't the unthinkable—I mean the poem—suddenly emerge? I work night after night. What falls outside my work are golden dispensations, the only ones of any worth. Pen in hand, pen on paper, I write so I don't commit suicide. And our dream of the absolute? Diluted in the daily toil. Or perhaps, through the work, we make that dissolution more refined.

Time passes on. Or, more accurately, we pass on. In the distance, closer every moment, the idea of a sinister task I have to complete: editing my old poems. Focusing my attention on them is the equivalent of returning to a wrong turn when I'm already walking in another direction, no better but certainly different. I try to concentrate on a shapeless

book. I don't know if this book of mine actually belongs to me. Forced to read its pages, it seems I'm reading something I wrote without realizing I was another. Could I write the same way now? I'm disappointed, always, when I read one of my old pages. The feeling I experience can't be precisely defined. Fifteen years writing! A pen in my hand since I was fifteen years old. Devotion, passion, fidelity, dedication, certainty that this is the path to salvation (from what?). The years weigh on my shoulders. I couldn't write that way now. Did that poetry contain today's silent, awestruck desperation? It hardly matters. All I want is to be reunited with the ones I was before; the rest I leave to chance.

So many images of death and birth have disappeared. These writings have a curious fate: born from disgrace, they serve, now, as a way to entertain (or not) and to move (or not) other people. Perhaps, after reading them, someone I know will love me a little more. And that would be enough, which is to say a lot.

HUMOR AND POETRY IN JULIO CORTÁZAR'S *CRONOPIOS AND FAMAS*

"HE HAD GIVEN names to each of his two slippers." Of Lichtenberg, the author of this sentence, Goethe said: "If he tells a joke it's because there's a hidden problem." A phrase which Freud, in his turn, elaborated in his famous essay on the joke—a magnificent essay that does absolutely nothing to help familiarize us (if humor or poetry can in fact be learned) with the kind of humor employed by contemporary writers, a humor that is metaphysical and almost always indistinguishable from poetry. (The most important theatrical works that fall under the heading of *the avant-garde* bear this out.) When Alfred Jarry states: "Then I will kill everyone in the world and be off," we learn, not that there is something hidden in Jarry, but rather something rotten—Hamletically speaking—everywhere.

At present, literary humor proceeds from an overwhelming "realism." Having recognized the absurdity of the world, it will speak the world's own language: that of the absurd. In other words, it makes an incision in so-called *reality* and gilds the mirror. The spectators laugh at the way Ionesco's creatures tell their stories, but when the show is over they discuss it in exactly the same way (a language made of spent word-coins).

THIS WONDERFUL NEW book by Julio Cortázar aligns humor perfectly with poetry. Who are the *famas*? They are Caution; Restraint; Common Sense; the Directress of a Benevolent Society (*for missing mountaineers*); a fat man in a hat; a traveling salesman; a mother-in-law; an uncle; a woman screaming in fear because they gave her a balloon; a hose manufacturer; someone looking at his watch saying: time is money... *And hopes? They're a bunch of suckers* but the *famas** are scared of them. As for the honorable *cronopios*, they are the bearers of a certain organ—almost obsolete in modern man—the organ responsible for seeing and perceiving beauty. As *cronopio* is a more handsome and less equivocal noun than *classic*, thanks to Cortázar we can apply it to the *cronopios avant la lettre*, as much from the past as from the present. Don Quijote and Charlie Parker, Rimbaud and the Archpriest of Hita... and, of course, Cortázar himself would be *cronopios*.

That being said, it just so happens that *a fama had a grandfather clock and every week he wound it VERY CAREFULLY. A cronopio was passing by and, on seeing this, began to laugh...* We understand the *cronopio's* zen little snicker: what's this about wanting to count time, to cut time up, to sort it into hours, and from hours to make schedules? The chuckler goes home and, playing around, invents another clock: the *artichoke-clock*. Its operation is simple: *whenever he wants to know the time, he tears off a leaf*. But this is merely the first stage of a magnificent initiation: to reach the heart of the artichoke-clock in which *time can no longer be measured, and in the infinite rose-violet of its center the cronopio finds great satisfaction, so he eats it with oil, vinegar, and salt...* It is often said that time devours us, but here a fragile *cronopio* changes the terms. In the first part of the

* Italics indicate quotes from Cortázar's *Cronopios and Famas*.

book, entitled “Instruction Manual,” we read: *They aren't giving you a watch. You are the gift; they are giving you yourself for the watch's birthday.* In the second part, “Unusual Occupations,” one of the tasks of the large, *unusual* family consists in posing a tiger as if it were a model or a bouquet of live-forevers. Minutely described (so minutely it induces vertigo), we ultimately read in the operations of this strange posing something that illuminates the sense and direction of these apparently absurd acts:

Posing the tiger contains something of the total encounter, of alignment before an absolute; the balance depends on so little and we pay so high a price for it that the brief instants which follow the posing and which determine its perfection wrench us as if from our own selves, obliterate tigerishness and humanness alike with a single, motionless gesture that is vertigo, pause, and arrival. There is no tiger, no family, no posing. It is impossible to know what there is: a tremor not of this flesh, a central time, a pillar of contact.

BUT SINCE NO ONE would believe that the members of this enchanting family spend their entire lives trying to pose a tiger, they also attempt to refine the spoken word:

... it suffices to cite the case of my second aunt. Visibly endowed with a derrière of imposing dimensions, we would never have let ourselves succumb to the facile temptation of conventional nicknames; thus, instead of giving her the brutal moniker of Etruscan Amphora, we agreed on the more decent and familiar appellation, Booty. In all cases, we proceed with the same tact...

One day, thanks to a distant relative who had risen to the rank of minister, everyone—large and small—is employed in a post office whose doleful and discouraging atmosphere they attempt to revitalize. To that end, along with the

stamps, they give each customer a balloon, a glass of grappa, and some beef empanadas; they adorn the parcels with plumes so *the name of the recipient (...) appears to have gotten stuck under a swan's wing...*

THE UNLIKELY ACTS of this family have an irresistible humor. At the same time, in my view, the family represents something profoundly tragic: the eruption of the poetic and the marvelous in what we are given to believe is reality. This family, with its obstinate naiveté, decides to concretize poetry's impossible enterprise: to incarnate, transform into action, that which by who knows what error only lives in the pages of books, in songs, in dreams, and in the remotest longings. (The perfection with which Cortázar shapes his tales is marvelous: even the most fantastical presents an architecture as complete and finished as that of a flower or a stone. One might say that Cortázar never leaves randomness to chance.) Let's consider another *occupation: in order to fight against pragmatism and the horrible tendency toward achieving useful ends, one should tear a good chunk of hair out of one's head, tie a knot in the middle, and softly let it fall down the drain of the sink.*

The hair's possible or impossible recovery must be the cherished goal of the bereft. To this end, he must doubtlessly devote several years, destroy the plumbing, purchase the apartments on the lower floors in order to pursue his investigations, bribe members of the underworld and explore the sewers of the city with their help, etc., etc. But it is also possible that it might be found *just a few inches from the mouth of the sink...* and that would produce a happiness so great as to oblige him *to practically demand that every conscious schoolmaster encourage his students, from their tenderest infancy, to perform a similar exercise instead of withering their souls with the double rule of three or the sorrows of Cancha Rayada.*

Cortázar's humor unfolds across the entire color spectrum. It is always metaphysical humor, but at times it is black, at others pink, blue, yellow... It is frequently savage, but its tenderness is inexhaustible, often projecting itself far enough to reach fantastic animals (*Guk, the camel non-grata; the bear that walks around in the pipes of the house*), real animals (turtles), and "mechanical animals" (bicycles). He not infrequently combines humor with the fantastic. This is evident, for example, in the case of the *eminent sage*, author of a Roman history in twenty-three volumes, *a shoo-in* for the Nobel Prize to the joy and satisfaction of his country. But then: *sudden dismay*. A *professional bookworm* condemns the omission, in the twenty-three volumes, of a name: *Caracalla*. The sage sequesters himself in his house; he disconnects the phone; he will not answer the call from King Gustavus of Sweden..., but in truth it is someone else who is calling him, someone *who vainly dials the number again and again, cursing in a dead language*.

I spoke of Cortázar's passionate thoroughness and his mastery of the concept of chance. This is due to the fact that few writers know, as he does, how to "see the infinite in a grain of sand." This attitude—and aptitude—all his own reveals itself in every one of his books, and Cortázar himself admirably defines it in the "Instructions for Killing Ants in Rome:" ... *to patiently learn the cipher of every fountain, to hold enamored vigil on moonlit nights...* In this way, he can speak in *full possession of the facts* and move us deeply by describing the vicissitudes of a raindrop clinging to a windowpane. In this way, he can describe, with the same mind-boggling precision, a neighborhood wake in Buenos Aires, a fantastic animal, a painting by Titian, a staircase... This attitude of incorruptibly *enamored vigil* is complemented by his ceaseless rejection of life defined as habit and order: *Refusing that the delicate act of turning a doorknob, that act by*

which everything could be transformed, be carried out with the cold efficiency of an everyday reflex. Nothing and no one can shut his eyes. Things are not merely things; dreams are not things; love is not a thing. *To squeeze a teaspoon between one's fingers and feel its metal heartbeat, its suspicious warning.* Because it hurts so much to deny a teaspoon, deny a door, deny everything that habit licks to a satisfying smoothness. Whence his constant references to—or his prophecy of—the objects' rebellion; bicycles, for example: How many more years will they tolerate the arbitrary placards of *this world's banks and places of business: VIETATO INTRODURRE BICICLETTE?* So watch out, managers! *Roses are also innocent and sweet, but perhaps you know that in a war of two roses, princes died who were like black bolts of lightning...* The persecuted crickets will also rebel, and sing *with such terrible vengeance that their pendulum clocks will hang themselves in their standing coffins...* The title of one of these stories is another corroboration of what we're saying: "A LITTLE STORY DESIGNED TO ILLUSTRATE THE PRECARIOUS STABILITY IN WHICH WE THINK WE EXIST, OR RATHER, THAT LAWS COULD CEDE GROUND TO EXCEPTIONS, RANDOM EVENTS, OR IMPROBABILITIES, AND I WANT TO SEE YOU THERE." *Historias de cronopios y de famas* exemplarily attests to the subversive nature of humor and poetry, and to how and how much, before the confused web presented as the real world, both of them—poetry and humor—proceed to expose the other side of the story.