

# **ALEJANDRA PIZARNIK**

**FROM THE BLOODY COUNTESS  
NOTES FOR A COLUMN  
SOME KEYS TO ALEJANDRA PIZARNIK**

**TRANSLATED BY COLE HEINOWITZ**

## THE BLOODY COUNTESS

“The criminal does not make beauty;  
he is himself the authentic beauty.”

—J.P. Sartre

Valentine Penrose has collected documents and accounts relating to a real and unusual figure: Countess Báthory, the murderer of 650 girls.<sup>1</sup>

An excellent poet (her first book opens with a fervent preface by Paul Éluard), Penrose unites her poetic talent with meticulous scholarship. Without altering the real, hard-won facts, she recasts them as a sort of vast, lovely prose poem.

Countess Báthory’s sexual perversion and madness are so obvious that Penrose ignores them in order to focus solely on the figure’s convulsive beauty.

It isn’t easy to reveal this kind of beauty. Valentine Penrose has achieved it, however, through her dexterous engagement with the aesthetic values of this dark history. The *underground reign* of Erzébet Báthory is inscribed in the torture chamber of her medieval castle: there, the sinister beauty of nocturnal creatures is embodied in a silent woman of legendary pallor, with lunatic eyes and sumptuous, raven-colored hair.

A well-known philosopher includes screams in the category of silence: Screams, gasps, curses form a “silent substance.” The substance of this underground is evil. Seated on her throne, the Countess watches the torture and listens to the screams. Her hideous old servant women are silent figures bringing fire, knives, needles, pokers; they torture the girls, then bury them. Like the poker or the knife, these old women are instruments of a possession. This dark ceremony has only one silent spectator.

## THE IRON MAIDEN

“..among the red laughter of glistening lips  
and the monstrous movements of mechanical women.”

—R. Daumal

In Nuremberg, there was a famous automaton known as “the Iron Maiden.” Countess

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<sup>1</sup> Valentine Penrose, “Erzébet Báthory, la comtesse sanglante.” *Mercure de France*. Paris, 1963.

Báthory purchased a replica for her torture chamber in Csejthe Castle. This metallic lady had the color and proportions of a human creature. Naked, painted, and bejeweled, with long blonde hair that reached the floor, it had a mechanism that allowed the lips to open in a smile and the eyes to move.

The Countess, sitting on her throne, observes.

To make the “Maiden” spring into action, one must touch several of the precious stones in its necklace. It responds instantly with horrible grinding sounds and very slowly lifts its white arms so they close in a perfect embrace over whatever is nearby—in this case, a girl. Once the automaton embraces her, no one can separate the living from the iron body, both equal in beauty. Suddenly, the iron lady’s painted breasts open up to reveal five daggers that pierce its living companion, her loose hair as long as its own.

Once the sacrifice is accomplished, another stone in the necklace is touched: the arms fall, the lips and eyes shut, and the assassin becomes again the “Maiden,” motionless in its casket.

#### THE POWER OF A NAME

“And madness and cold  
roved aimlessly through the house.”  
—Milosz

The name of Báthory—in whose power Erzébet believed as in a magic charm—was an illustrious name dating back to the beginnings of the Hungarian Empire. It is no coincidence that the family crest flaunted the teeth of a wolf, as the Báthorys were cruel, fearless, and lustful. The many marriages between close relations contributed, perhaps, to the appearance of hereditary illnesses and inclinations: epilepsy, gout, lechery. It is likely that Erzébet was epileptic given that she was stricken by episodes of possession as unforeseen as her terrible eye pains and migraines (which she exorcised by placing a wounded, barely living dove on her forehead).

The Countess’ relatives were no discredit to the ancestral fame. Her uncle Istvan, for example, was so mad that he couldn’t tell summer from winter and would have himself drawn on a sleigh over burning sands that were, for him, snowy roads; or her cousin Gábor, whose incestuous passion was shared by his sister. But the most delightful was her celebrated aunt Klara. She had four husbands (she murdered the first two) and died her own melodramatic death: a pasha caught her with her current lover and the unfortunate man was roasted on a spit. As for aunt Klara, she was raped—if this term can be used with

regard to her—by the entire Turkish garrison. She didn't die from this, however; rather, her captors—perhaps tired of raping her—finally stabbed her to death. She used to pick her lovers up in the streets of Hungary and didn't mind sprawling out with them on some bed in which she had (truth be told) just killed one of her chambermaids.

By the time the Countess reached her fortieth year, the Báthorys had been dwindling and wasting away, thanks either to madness or their many consecutive deaths. Those who remained had become almost sensible, thereby forfeiting any interest they had inspired in Erzébet. It should be noted that, when fortune turned against her, the Báthorys, if they did not help her, at least reproached her with nothing.

### THE MIRROR OF MELANCHOLY

“Everything is a mirror!”

—Octavio Paz

*...she lived before her large dark looking glass, the famous looking glass whose pattern she designed herself...* It was so comfortable it even had supports to rest her arms on so she could remain in front of it for hours without getting tired. We may imagine that if she could venture to design a mirror, Erzébet also drew up the plans for her dwelling. And we can understand why only the ravishingly sad music of her gypsy orchestra or the dangerous games of chase or the violent perfume of the magical herbs in the sorceress' cottage or—above all—the basement swimming in human blood, could ignite in the eyes of her perfect face some semblance of a living human gaze. Because no one has as deep a thirst for earth, blood, and brute sexuality as those creatures that inhabit cold mirrors. And apropos of mirrors: they were never able to clear up the rumors around the Countess' homosexuality, whether it was a matter of unconscious inclination or if, rather, she naturally accepted it as simply one more of her prerogatives. For the most part, she lived in an entirely female environment. Only women were ever present at her nights of crime. Then there are certain more obviously revealing details. For example, in the torture chamber, in her moments of maximum tension, the Countess herself would insert a burning candle into the sex of her victim. There are also testimonies that speak of less solitary forms of lechery. At some point, one maidservant affirmed that a mysterious aristocratic lady dressed as a boy had been visiting the Countess. On one occasion she discovered them together, torturing a girl, but she could not say if they shared more than the sadistic pleasures.

To continue with the subject of the mirror: Even if one doesn't attempt to explain this sinister figure, it is essential to dwell on the fact that she was entirely free from the

sixteenth century's *mal du siècle*, melancholy.

An unvarying tone presides over the melancholic. Their interior is a space the color of mourning; nothing happens there and no one enters. It is a bare stage on which the inert self is attended by the self who grieves for that inertia. The latter wants to liberate the prisoner, but any attempts fail like Theseus would have failed if, in addition to being himself he was also the Minotaur; to kill it, in other words, would have required he kill himself. But there are temporary fixes: sexual pleasure, for example, can for a brief time efface the silent gallery of mirrors and echoes that forms the melancholy soul. And what is more, it can illuminate that house of mourning and transform it into a kind of music box with bright and happy colors that sing and dance deliciously. Then, when the cord runs out, everything returns to immobility and silence. The music box is not a gratuitous comparison. I believe that melancholy, in sum, is a musical problem: a dissonance, an irregular rhythm. While *on the outside* everything unfolds at the dizzying pace of a waterfall, *on the inside* there is only the exhausted slowness of a drop of water falling now and again, with the result that the *outside*, when seen from the melancholic *inside*, seems absurd and unreal, and constitutes “the farce we all must act.” But for an instant—whether due to the sound of savage music or a drug or the sex act at its maximum violence—the melancholic’s torpid rhythm not only comes into alignment with the outside world, it overtakes it by an indescribably delicious excess, and the self vibrates with intoxicated force.

To the melancholic, time appears as a suspension of events—in actuality, things are occurring, but their slowness suggests the growth of a cadaver’s fingernails—that precedes and follows moments of fatally ephemeral violence. Between two silences or two deaths, the prodigious and fleeting speed, dressed in a variety of forms that range from innocent drunkenness to sexual perversions, and even to murder. And I think of the nights of Erzébet Báthory, keeping time with the screams of adolescent girls. The book these notes refer to contains a portrait of the Countess: the somber, beautiful lady looks like the allegory of melancholy as portrayed in old engravings. I would also like to point out that in her era, melancholics were believed to be possessed by this devil.

## DRASTIC MEASURES

“...the law, cold and impersonal, is a stranger to the passions  
that could justify the cruel act of murder.”

—Sade

For six years, the Countess murdered with impunity. Over the course of those years, the

most dismal rumors never ceased to circulate about her. But the name of Báthory, not merely illustrious but also assiduously protected by the Hapsburgs, terrified any potential accusers.

By 1610, the King had received the most sinister reports—accompanied by evidence—concerning the Countess. After much hesitation, he decided to take serious measures. He charged the powerful Count Palatine Thurzó to investigate the tragic events at Csejthe and to punish the guilty.

Accompanied by a band of armed men, Thurzó arrived unannounced at the castle. In the basement, still in disarray from the bloody ceremony of the previous night, he found a beautiful, mutilated corpse and two girls in their death throes. But that wasn't all. He breathed the stench of death; he saw the blood-splattered walls; he saw the "Iron Maiden," the cage, the instruments of torture, the basins of dried blood, the cells, and in one of them he discovered a group of girls waiting their turn to die who told him that after many days without food they had been served a plate of grilled meat cut from the lovely bodies of their dead companions.

The Countess, without denying Thurzó's accusations, declared *that this was all her right as a high-ranking noblewoman*. To which the Count Palatine answered: *...I condemn you to imprisonment for life in your castle*.

In his heart, Thurzó knew he should behead the Countess, yet such an exemplary form of punishment might have elicited reproach, not only from the Báthorys but from the entire nobility. Meanwhile, in the Countess's apartments they found a journal in her handwriting, filled with the names and distinguishing marks of her victims, which now amounted to 610... As for Erzébet's lackeys, when brought before the court, they confessed to unimaginable deeds and died at the stake.

*The prison rose up around her*. They bricked up the doors and windows of her apartments. A tiny opening was left in the wall through which to pass her food. *And when everything was done they erected four gallows, one at each corner of the castle, to signal that it housed a prisoner condemned to death*.

Thus she lived for over three years, almost dying from cold and hunger. She never showed remorse. She never understood why they had punished her. On August 21, 1614, a chronicler of the day wrote: *She died at nightfall, abandoned by everyone*.

She was never afraid; she never trembled. She deserves neither compassion nor respect—only a certain astonishment at the enormity of the horror, a certain fascination for a white dress turning red, for the idea of absolute rupture, for the evocation of a silence in which every scream is the image of intolerable beauty.

Like Sade in his writings and Gilles de Rais in his crimes, the Countess Báthory reached the unfathomable depths of debauchery. She is one more proof that absolute human freedom is horrifying.

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## NOTES FOR A COLUMN

c) What is the importance of poetry in the world today?

No. 1

We need a place where the impossible becomes possible. It is in the poem, particularly, where the limit of the possible contravenes law and order and risks itself.

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No. 2

The poet brings news from the other side. He is the envoy or repository of the forbidden because he incites certain confrontations with the wonders of the world, but also with madness and death.

Outside the miniscule secret society of poetry lovers, everyone is afraid to recognize that an encounter with the poem could have freed them. Freed them from what? But this too everyone knows.

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December 12

A writing that is dense and filled with danger due to its excessive transparency; utterly concrete; disproportionately material in the extent to which it reveals images originating in the most distant, unknown, and unexpected internal shadows.

A writing that is intolerably dense, to the point of suffocation, but made of nothing more than the “subtle links” that could allow for an innocent coexistence, on the same plane, of the subject and the object, as well as erasing the usual borders separating I, you, he, we, us, them. Alliances, metamorphosis.

My torment is transferring the images made on the other side by “the voice’s daughter” into lightning presences. A transfer I want to make with a tense precision that would allow me to master chance and would compensate me for my absolute submission to “the voice’s daughter.”

An intense need for poetic truth. She demands that visionary force be simultaneously liberated and maintained, an extraordinary poise in directing this force [and in structuring

these images].

I don't notice whether I'm talking about poetic perfection, freedom, or about love and death.

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Thursday, December 14, 1964

No. 3

A writing that is dense and filled with danger due to its excessive transparency. Utterly concrete, as well as material in the extent to which it reveals images originating in distant, unknown, and unexpected internal shadows.

A writing that is intolerably dense, to the point of suffocation, but made of nothing more than subtle links that allow for an innocent coexistence, on the same plane, of the subject and the object, as well as erasing the usual borders separating I, you, he, we, us, them.

My torment results from the outpouring of images "the voice's daughter" makes on the other side. Add to this an intense need for poetic truth. A simultaneous double movement: liberating the visionary force and maintaining an extraordinary poise in directing it. I want to effect this transfer into lightning presence by a tense precision that allows me to master chance and compensates me for my absolute submission to "*my voice's daughter*," either inspiration or unconscious.

[1964.]

## SOME KEYS TO ALEJANDRA PIZARNIK: AN INTERVIEW

**MARTHA ISABEL MOIA:** In your poems, there are terms I consider *emblematic* and that contribute to the formation of your poems as solitary, illicit domains like the passions of childhood, like the poem, like love, like death. Would you agree with me that terms like *garden, forest, word, silence, wandering, wind, heartbreak, and night* are at once signs and emblems?

**AP:** I think that in my poems there are words I repeat incessantly, relentlessly, and mercilessly: the words of childhood, of fears, of death, of the night of bodies. Or, more precisely, the terms you indicate in your question would be signs and emblems.

**MIM:** Let's start, then, by entering the most pleasant spaces: the garden and the forest.

**AP:** One of the sentences I'm most haunted by is spoken by the little girl Alice in *Wonderland*: "*I only came to see the garden.*" For Alice and for myself, the garden is the space of encounter or, as Mircea Eliade put it, *the center of the world*. Which suggests this sentence to me: The garden is green in the brain. A sentence of my own that brings me to another one by Gaston Bachelard, which I hope I remember correctly: *The garden of dream-memory, lost in an afterlife of the true past.*

**MIM:** In terms of your forest, it appears as a synonym for silence. But I sense other meanings. For example, your forest could be an allusion to the forbidden, to the occult.

**AP:** Why not? But it could also suggest childhood, the body, night.

**MIM:** Did you ever enter the garden?

**AP:** Proust, analyzing desire, says that desire doesn't want to be analyzed but satisfied. In other words, I don't want to talk about the garden, I want to see it. Of course what I'm saying is still puerile, but in this life we never do what we want to. Which is another reason to want to see the garden, even if it's impossible, especially if it's impossible.

**MIM:** While you were answering my question, your voice in my memory told me this from one of your poems: *My business is to invoke and exorcize*.<sup>1</sup>

**AP:** Among other things, I write so that what I'm afraid of doesn't happen; so that what wounds me doesn't exist; to ward off Evil (*cf.* Kafka). It has been said that the poet is the great therapist. In this sense, the poetic task entails exorcism, invocation, and, beyond that, *healing*. To write a poem is to heal the fundamental wound, the rupture. Because all of us are wounded.

**MIM:** Among the various metaphors by which you construct this fundamental wound, I remember, because of how deeply it struck me, the one that in an early poem makes you ask about *the stunned beast dragging itself through my blood* (\*). And I'm almost certain that the wind is one of the principle authors of the wound, since at times it appears in your writings as *the great tormentor*.

**AP:** I love the wind even if, exactly, my imagination tends to give it ferocious shapes and colors. Battered by the wind, I go through the forest, I wander in search of the garden.

**MIM:** In the night?

**AP:** I know little about the night but I unite myself it. I said it in a poem: *All night I make the night. All night I write. Word by word I write the night* (\*).

**MIM:** In an early poem, you also unite yourself with silence.

**AP:** Silence: the only temptation and the greatest promise. But I feel that the "inexhaustible whisper" is always welling up (*How well I know where flows the fountain of wandering language*). Which is why I would dare to say I don't know if silence exists.

**MIM:** In a sort of counterpoint with your "I" that joins itself to the night, I see "the stranger;" "the silent one in the desert;" "the little traveler;" "my emigrant from herself;" the one who "wanted to enter the keyboard to get inside the music in order to have a homeland." These,

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<sup>1</sup> All further references to poems by AP are marked (\*).

your other voices, the ones that speak of your vocation of wandering, which for me is your true vocation, as you would say.

**AP:** I think of a line by Trakl: *Man is a stranger on earth*. I believe that, of everyone, the poet is the most foreign. I believe that the only possible refuge for the poet is the word.

**MIM:** There is a fear of yours that puts this refuge in danger: *not knowing how to name what doesn't exist* (\*). That's when you hide from language.

**AP:** With an ambiguity I'd like to clarify: I hide *from* language *inside* language. When something—including nothingness—has a name, it seems less hostile. *Nevertheless, I suspect that the essential is unspeakable.*

**MIM:** Is that why you look for *figures that appear alive by means of an active language that alludes to them* (\*)?

**AP:** I feel that signs, words, insinuate, allude. This complicated way of feeling language leads me to believe that language cannot express reality, that we can only speak of the obvious. This is the root of my desire to make poems that are terribly exact in spite of my innate surrealism and the fact that I work with the elements of internal shadows. It is this that has characterized my poems.

**MIM:** Nevertheless, you don't look for that exactitude anymore.

**AP:** True; I look for the poem to write itself however it wants to. But I prefer not to speak of now because it's scarcely been written.

**MIM:** In spite of how much you write!

**AP:** ...

**MIM:** *Not knowing how to name* (\*) is related to the concern with finding *some phrase that is entirely yours* (\*). Your book *Works and Nights* is a telling response, since there *your* voices are the ones that speak.

**AP:** I worked hard on those poems and I should say that in configuring them I configured myself, and I changed. Inside me I had an ideal image of the poem and I managed to achieve it. I know I'm not like anybody (this is a misfortune). That book gave me the happiness of finding freedom in writing. I was free, I had the power to make myself a form as I wished to.

**MIM:** These fears coexist with the fear of *words that return* (\*). Which ones are those?

**AP:** It's memory. What happens is I watch the procession of rushing words, and I feel like a passive and defenseless spectator.

**MIM:** I find that the mirror, the other side, the forbidden zone and its oblivion, enable the fear of *being two* (\*) in your work, which escapes the limits of the *doppelgänger* in order to include everyone you were.

**AP:** You're right, it's the fear of all of those that are contending in me. There is a poem by Michaux that says: *I am; I speak of who-I-was and who-I-was speaks to me. (...)* *One isn't alone in one's skin.*

**MIM:** Does this happen at any particular moment?

**AP:** When "the daughter of my voice" betrays me.

**MIM:** According to one of your poems, your most beautiful love was the love of mirrors. Who do you see in them?

**AP:** I see the other I am. (In truth, I have a certain fear of mirrors.) In some instances we come together. This almost always happens when I'm writing.

**MIM:** One night at the circus you recovered *a lost language at the moment when riders carrying torches galloped in a ferocious ring on black stallions* (\*). What is that *something similar for my heart to the hot sounds of hooves against stand* (\*)?

**AP:** It is the unfound language that I'm trying to find.

**MIM:** Perhaps you've found it in painting?

**AP:** I like to paint because in painting I find the opportunity to silently allude to the images of my interior shadows. In addition, I'm attracted by the lack of mythomania in the language of painting. Working with words or, more specifically, looking for *my* words, involves a tension that doesn't exist in painting.

**MIM:** What is it that so attracts you to Rousseau's "The Sleeping Gypsy"?

**AP:** It's the equivalent of the language of circus horses. I'd like to be able to write something similar to the Customs Agent's<sup>2</sup> "Gypsy" because there is silence and, at the same time, allusion to grave and luminous things. I'm also exceptionally moved by the work of Bosch, Klee, and Ernst.

**MIM:** Lastly, I'm curious whether you ever asked yourself the question Octavio Paz poses in the prologue to *The Bow and the Lyre*: *Wouldn't it be better to turn life into poetry than to make poetry out of life?*

**AP:** I'll respond with one of my most recent poems: *I wish I could live solely in ecstasy, making the body of the poem with my own body, rescuing every sentence with my days and weeks, infusing the poem with my breath insofar as every letter of every word has been sacrificed in ceremonies of living* (\*).

[Published in *El deseo de la palabra*, Ocnos, Barcelona, 1972.]

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2 The "customs agent" refers to the French painter Henri Julien Félix Rousseau (1844-1910), so-called for his work at the Paris customs office.