

THE UNKNOWN COUNTRY

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THE UNKNOWN COUNTRY

SOFIA SAMATAR

Every artist, wrote Marcel Proust, is a native of an unknown country, which he himself has forgotten.

*lamps Mozart Malibran fireworks rainbows sundials
tightropes Persian sunbursts*

We don't remember it. We are searching for where we are from. For a long time I have been thinking about identity. I have been thinking about what people are made of. I want my brother to take a DNA test, so that we can, as one website puts it, "discover our story." We will "unlock the hidden past." We will "get peace of mind." Proust was born in 1871; I was born in 1971. Today, it's not only artists who don't know their origins. Today, because we are able to know, we've all forgotten where we are from.

*chimney sweeps skylights Baedeker parachutes emeralds
pageants camouflage colonnade Italian villas Hans Christian
Andersen violet-colored Switzerland*

We don't remember the lost homeland, writes Proust, but we remain all our lives unconsciously attuned to it. As artists, we become delirious with joy when we sing in harmony with the native land. (I once read that painting made August Strindberg "indescribably happy—as if he'd just taken hashish.") At times, in our search for fame, we turn our backs on this country. Only by scorning fame can we return. Then, Proust assures us, we will again discover that distinctive strain: the song of the elements that compose our soul.

*barometers owls siphons Queen Mab magic lanterns
twilight bees*

To test your DNA, you need a cheek swab. A world blooms from your spittle. Your results take the form of percentages and a

map. Now you can read your story which is the story of your genes which is the story of the places you are from. And how do you test the elements Proust describes? For this, you need a different instrument. You will have to feel your way. You will have to become the sole geographer of the unknown country, stubborn, stooped, delirious with joy. Alejandra Pizarnik, for example, holed herself up in Paris, reading and writing poetry. She wrote: "I want to be locked up in a room, whatever country I'm in." At such times, when she could forgive herself for not going outside, she became "like a delightful little animal." She had her expeditions. She made her maps. Enrique Vila-Matas wrote of her: "Alejandra Pizarnik liked illusory or artful nights, bloody countesses, the negative side of things, the castle of astonishing purity of her verses, combinatorial art, surrealism, the abrupt neglect her minimalist poems fell into, poems she believed the reader should complete, Arthur Rimbaud, the idea of killing the sun to reinstate the reign of black night, amphetamines and antidepressants, Lewis Carroll through the looking glass, young girls who open and shut themselves in a very pure, animal rhythm, Immaturity as a dark power, the poem-aphorisms of Antonio Porchia, the extractions of a stone called madness, and the art of Janis Joplin."

botanical gardens searchlights Ingres Sunday afternoons

Undoubtedly, there is a relationship between these elements and your DNA. There will be things that have seized you because they have fallen into your path, because they exist in the neighborhood where your genes permitted or compelled you to live. There may be a foreign language overheard in childhood, or some inherited object, torn out of context, hanging on the wall. Artists' biographies and autobiographical statements attempt to connect these dots, to show how the unknown country derives from the known. And yet these maps, when layered one on the other, do not line up precisely. There

is in the elements something wild. Recognizing this, some artists try to establish a difference, even an opposition, between the two ways of explaining who they are. Joseph Cornell, the poet of objects, wandered the secondhand shops of Manhattan in search of materials for his assemblages. He collected old prints, marbles, dolls, crockery, soap-bubble sets. In an interview, he described his “personal but not autobiographical use of nostalgic images.” This distinction—*personal but not autobiographical*—finds an echo in Roland Barthes’s desire, in his last lectures, to “offer the *intimate*, not the *private*.” The personal and the intimate describe feeling, impulse, passion; the autobiographical and the private indicate origins and events. I am interested in the will to privilege feelings over origins, to mark where passion transforms things and makes them *intimate*. Asked to name his favorite abstract artist of his time, Cornell replied, “What do you mean, ‘my time’?”

camera obscura Leonardo da Vinci Chinese gardens flights Seurat planetariums steel engravings zoetropes castles dramas of light

Roland Barthes was hostile toward journalists’ interest in his private life. He described interviews as “coerced exhibitionism.” A journalist, he said, is like a cop—“a kind of cop who likes you, who wants the best for you, since he gives you the floor and opens up celebrity for you.” Barthes’s mistrust of celebrity recalls Proust’s “search for fame,” the arid quest that leads away from the artist’s country. If drawing neat lines between biography and art is conducive to fame, if it results in a tidy and marketable package, a legible genetic code, then, these writers suggest, there’s something false and deadly about it, something threatening to the making of art itself.

aviaries illumination mountains of the Moon

How can you have an anti-autobiographical nostalgia? How can you miss a place you’ve never been? Of Cornell, John Bernard Mayers wrote: “He looked through windows ... searching for *le pays bleu*.”

distant music mermaid cats

Bessie Head loved winter mornings, rain, wildflowers, animals’ eyes, stars like polished blue jewels in the sky, three-legged iron cooking pots, sunrises, sunsets, Miriam Makeba, goats, and Albert Camus. Once, at a multi-racial party in Apartheid South Africa, she mentioned that she

had a crush on Camus and thought he had the death wish. Immediately, a white woman beside her turned and, twittering loudly, repeated the remark to the whole company. Head was humiliated. The woman’s laughter marked a boundary Head had crossed, as a Coloured woman, by falling in love with Albert Camus, by daring to analyze him, to absorb him. It was a checkpoint designed to police the borders of the unknown country. According to the laughing woman, Head was *persona non grata* here, a stateless person of the imagination, just as she was a second-class citizen in South Africa and would soon become a refugee in Botswana. This is the tyranny of biography. Against it we raise the intangible flag of *le pays bleu*. I think of W. E. B. Du Bois, his defiance, his ringing pentameter: “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not.”

animals ephemera

Standing in the kitchen teaching my father about iambic pentameter. It was the old kitchen with the pale green linoleum floor and the wallpaper of enormous jungle plants. My father had asked me to do this because, unlike him, I was a native of the English language. I thumped his chest with my palms. *Da-dum. Da-dum. Repeat five times.* Biography is not the enemy. The enemy is reduction to biography, imprisonment in the genes. The enemy is reduction. My father had difficulties capturing iambic pentameter but he could recite whole pages of Mark Twain from memory. Mark Twain was his second favorite writer; his favorite was Joseph Conrad. Years after the kitchen lesson in iambic pentameter, when I was trying to become a writer, I found myself in Istanbul, weeping over *Lord Jim*. It was October, cold, the room in the pension heated by a terrifying machine with naked, red-hot coils. Someone was attacked on the street below our window. I cried because I loved Conrad but Conrad would not have loved my father or me because he was a racist. I felt shut out of the unknown country, turned back at the border. Although this happened twenty years ago, I was already attuned to the cultural production of the twenty-first century, which Brian Kuan Wood has called “the monster of history.” According to Kuan Wood, we are now inside a planetary internet which, having reached its geographic limit, has taken hold in time: “in time as a means of accumulating historical identity.” We are enclosed in a feedback loop of what we cannot change, an identity neither chosen nor bought but historically received, your search history and your birth history and your family history amplified and

streamed back to you ever faster, bigger, simpler, more entrenched. Kuan Wood writes: “The monster feeds on biography.” He cautions us to ask who subsidizes us to talk about our identity, and why they need us to be only what we can only ever be. Da-dum. Da-dum. Listen, I said. It sounds like your heart.

hail eclipses transparencies Blue Grotto of Capri

In this condition, what a thrill to read, in Bhanu Kapil’s *Ban en Banlieue*, of how Petra Kuppers said to her, “I am not interested in disclosure. I am interested in discharge.” To read, “I’m not interested in where you are from.” I felt lit up to the roots of my hair. I want a map that is a discharge. Not disclosure, not the private, not sheer autobiography, but Proust’s soul-elements as a kind of spit. I think of how Sei Shonagon recorded, in her *Pillow Book*, a personal list of “things that quicken the heart.” Sparrows feeding their young. To pass a place where babies are playing. To sleep in a room where some fine incense has been burnt. Can we see this as a genetic signature? To notice that one’s elegant Chinese mirror has become a little cloudy. It is night and one is expecting a visitor. Suddenly one is startled by the sound of raindrops, which the wind blows against the shutters.

snow Paganini look-outs windows

Joseph Cornell’s collage story *The Crystal Cage* (*Portrait of Berenice*) tells of a child-artist who sequesters herself inside an antique pagoda. Here she contemplates the stars, the future, and the past, and conducts mysterious poetic experiments. *The Crystal Cage* includes a calligram in the shape of Berenice’s tower, made up of words with significance for Cornell, a list of his personal but not autobiographical nostalgic images: *lamps Mozart Malibran fireworks*. At the bottom of the calligram, a picture of a child. *The Crystal Cage* is a vision of art as solitary play. It’s comforting, delicious: The Garden of Eden as toy-box. Who has not dreamt of such uninterrupted hours? Yet, at the same time, the child is locked up in this cabinet of curiosities. We might see *The Crystal Cage* as an echo chamber, a prison of affections every bit as poreless and severe as the feedback loop of family history. We might—but unlike one’s DNA, the treasure chest can change. Items can be appended or subtracted over time. Eventually, Cornell put the pages of *The Crystal Cage* in a suitcase, to which he continued adding material for twenty years.

dioramas butterflies mines ropes

Berenice travels. The walls of her fairy palace are of glass. At last she takes up residence in a suitcase, a symbol of wandering. Cornell adds letters, diary pages describing her journeys, real ticket stubs. We are not confined by our blue countries. We spread out, we interpenetrate. Salvador Dalí, upon viewing Cornell’s film, *Rose Hobart*, famously overturned the projector, furious because, he declared, Cornell had plagiarized his dreams. In today’s parlance—and taking seriously the notion of the artist’s unknown country—he might have accused Cornell of cultural appropriation. I say this neither to mock the pain of seeing one’s dreams realized by another, nor to excuse the predatory practice in which the expressions of those without defenses are siphoned into entertainment factories, but to point out that, as our technologies of genetic analysis grow ever more sophisticated, our explorations of heredity deeper, and the resulting information more complex, our language for talking about encounters, hauntings, and other relationships in the realm of images remains impoverished. Alejandra Pizarnik loved Rimbaud, who wrote: “I loved absurd paintings, pictures over doorways, stage sets, carnival backdrops, billboards, bright-colored popular prints, old-fashioned literature, church Latin, erotic books full of misspellings, the kind of novels our grandmothers read, fairy tales, little children’s books, old operas, silly refrains, naïve rhythms.” To say that Pizarnik loved Rimbaud, that he was a square of her native ground, is to say that, in some way, all of these things were part of her. All of these things and more: a sensibility, a world. If words are things, then writers are collections. It’s possible to say this much, but to talk about how such collections work, how one recognizes another in the blue regions, and how the chromosomes of what Proust calls *soul* meet and mutate, I’m stuck with paltry ideas like “influence” and “intertextuality.” A chain of nucleotides is its own answer; it promises peace of mind. Pizarnik’s love for Rimbaud is a storm; it leaves me drenched. How to understand this intimacy, which must have been in place from the start, whole, like a process of cell division waiting to be unleashed, how to understand her love for Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont, it’s like trying to understand the origin of life itself, it’s enough to make you overturn the projector. Her last words, left behind on a chalkboard:

oh life
oh language
oh Isidore

*green daguerreotypes balloon Edgar Allan Poe
marvels shooting stars a winding staircase*

Advice from Kafka: “Two tasks at the beginning of your life—to narrow your orbit more and more, and ever and ever again to check whether you are not in hiding somewhere outside your orbit.” So you continue to return, to arrange the beloved objects, and you continue to wander in the junkshops, hoping to stumble on a piece of your forgotten country, perhaps a *balloon* or *Edgar Allan Poe*. Most of all, you look to artists, to see if they’re holding a shred of your lost map, or even a lump of coral or a patch of moss, an element that hits you with a shock of the most intense recognition although you’ve never seen it in your life. If we had a pair of wings, says Proust, if we had a different respiratory system, which enabled us to travel through outer space, it wouldn’t do us any good, because we’d look at Mars or Venus without really seeing them, having only the eyes of Earth. “The only true voyage, the only bath in the Fountain of Youth, would be not to visit strange lands, but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is.” With artists, he says, we can do this: “we do really fly from star to star.” Joseph Cornell often called his assemblages “explorations.” So you go out and return. You gather samples and you compare. This is a DNA test that lasts your whole life long.

*lightning soap bubbles solariums flower-
covered valleys*

“And it seemed to me that I must leave you,” wrote Marguerite Duras, “in order to go on writing about Siam and other things that none of you have ever experienced; that I must come back first and foremost, ever and again, to Siam, the sky over the mountains, and other things I used to think about when I should have let them alone, and that now I believed I should have stuck to all my life.”

silk cord Milky Way

It seems to me that I must leave you. It seems that I must pack my things and go. I dreamt that we met again outside the pension in Istanbul, on that same desolate street where we were so cold. I gave you a tiny paper doll. You gave me a blue pearl. We conversed for a time like the sages of Lagado, who, as Jonathan Swift records, express

themselves through objects, in what is surely a vision of the perfect language. “I have often beheld two of those Sages almost sinking under the Weight of their Packs,” writes Swift, “like Pedlars among us; who, when they meet in the Streets, would lay down their Loads, open their Sacks, and hold Conversation for an Hour together.” You gave me a thimble and I gave it back, but I kept the pearl. You retrieved my orange, which had rolled into the street. All around us, people were unpacking crates and baskets, blocking traffic as far as the eye could see. The truth is, I am deeply interested in where you are from. I hope to meet like this again, to lay down our Loads, to open our Sacks, to spend an Hour in intimate Conversation, and when we have done, to put up our Implements, help each other to resume our Burthens, and take our Leave. ●

**You look to
artists, to see
if they’re
holding a
shred of your
lost map ...**
