

Nadia Villafuerte

## Casas

*Translated from Spanish by Pennell Somsen*

Fantasy and representation. The first thought on seeing certain places sometimes comes from a previous image: stories read or seen in films can evoke a detached response. I have been a devoted reader of Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Richard Yates, and John Cheever, writers who have delved into specific American landscapes to give them their own character, miniatures in a parallel universe, that of fiction, where the tranquility and longed-for perfection of suburban life topples little by little when a keen look at the interior of the houses with porches and gardens captures small but decisive domestic ruptures (the cracked linoleum, the wallpaper, a light bulb in a bedroom, the noise of a sprinkler in the yard. It's possible to travel the world by examining its objects and their qualities, and discovering the intrinsic relationship between them and the attitudes and feelings of those who own them).

Because space is a physical projection of human intention, a house becomes a map of life. To what degree do we subdue nature to create a building? How does a house, a neighborhood, and then the sum of many neighborhoods that make a city, speak of where and how we live? There is an unbreakable connection between a physical space and the person who occupies it. It isn't necessary to be very perceptive to see that life plays out differently in a dark space where nylon curtains hung on rods separate makeshift rooms, than in moss-covered brownstones or in a garden apartment in an ordinary neighborhood—sometimes dismal, sometimes humid, sometimes burdened by the monotony of the running water infinitely multiplying its endless grayness. All buildings change their images according to who passes through them.

At the Brooklyn Museum an exhibit presents various types of nineteenth-century houses from different parts of the United States. "Since eternity was out of stock, ten thousand aging things have been amassed instead" (Wisława Szymborska).<sup>1</sup> The exhibit is called "Playing House" and although it's

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1 Szymborska, "Museum," in *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 11 (translator's note).

technically perfect, a sense of desertion exists in the living rooms, the bedrooms, the kitchens, the great rooms, which all seem to be frozen in a remote age and at the same time disappearing into a sort of temporal limbo, where no human touch can disturb them. Nothing moves, and beauty for the sake of beauty is a bit intimidating. "Playing House" is domestic life suspended in time, a time that doesn't know the disruption of a porcelain dish breaking, the dust in the rugs, the noise of a ceiling fan in the corridor.

The houses that caught my attention were those of the south (Georgia or Alabama), with their pottery vases, bookshelves of rustic wood, matted photos on the wall, rugs of bland colors, formal placement of furniture (the chair against the window, the polished parquet of the living room, and the different textures of fabrics for beds and curtains.) Before seeing the replicas in the museums, I had, in a way, known these houses through the stories of Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers and Tennessee Williams. (Have you ever lain under an opening in the roof from which it's possible to see the stars? Crickets and frogs singing and a great blackness surrounding you, and fireflies flickering far away over the cotton fields or in the cypresses?) Their words have painted a picture in my head of clouds of cigar smoke drifting to the ceiling, the sound of the midnight train, and the 100 degrees of summer heat burning in the distance as if it were a mirage. I recognize these things neither by the buildings, nor by the odor of wood and mothballs in the closets, but by the people who live there and give meaning to the objects. This type of house—screened windows, hallways painted cobalt blue or pistachio green, a handmade chair of canary yellow—makes me think of small towns: people hardened in the fields, apparently placid people whose apathetic interiors burst forth only to yield simple stories: here where merely the whistle of a teapot on the stove tells you that something trivial or disastrous is about to happen.

Every place is political: on every corner you can see the economic, social, and cultural differences of any community. A place that is irrefutable proof of the feats of what we call progress and civilization also reveals the inequalities that so-called progress brings with it, the enormous rupture that civilization creates. I know that what I say is obvious, but I suspect that the boundaries we establish between the hierarchies of places are such that often we are incapable of

seeing past the edges of our own corners. To counterbalance this separation that limits us we seek out multiple experiences, to break up our routine and transform it, to elicit the search for an internal truth or a display of symbols that we impose on the place where we sleep and eat every day. We crowd together over the earth planting our flags in our own territories with such determination that we believe that all the odysseys have already been completed, that there is nothing left to conquer.

We make it so that we don't see our surroundings as vibrant, not until the eyes of strangers help us peel away the layers and see more clearly. The lethargy that accompanies this static way of being trivializes our daily life, the magnitude of all that surrounds us, and suddenly we have lost the old practice of exchanging stories, of telling anecdotes, of being affected by the daily routines that reveal to us the oddness of that other who travels by our side.

(Here, I'm putting a parenthesis, as I interrupt my journey. I have left lower Manhattan and boarded the ferry. I should make clear that the visual perspective when you arrive in Manhattan is the opposite of what it is when you leave it. You feel raised up like a flag while you're on the sea, but the lightness is gone as soon as you set foot in Manhattan and are cast into the streets that take you to Wall Street with its fanatical scream of triumphant capitalism. Landing there I try to imagine the motivations of those who threw concrete and glass up into the sky: maybe they didn't do it because the buildings appeared magnificent, daring, triumphant, but because the act itself was something absolutely useless for everyone, including the thousands of people who built it. Once on land it's likely that excitement will burst inside us and dissipate as soon as we get lost in the gleaming streets. The shadow of the skyscrapers is so vain and humiliating that its message is clear: it is better not to have ambitions in a city that can never be yours. On the return trip, going from Manhattan to Staten Island, even your soul will take a seat to lose itself in the sensation of the water, sometimes green, other times grey or brown, always cold. In the boat, you're free from the urban shores. On one side is New Jersey, its buildings much less ostentatious and more industrial: on the other side is Brooklyn, its hodgepodge of old brick buildings staring at the port. And, in this parenthesis that is the ferry, without a floor to cling to, at least I can't think about anything. The craziness of people comes to a halt in this in-

between place and allows me to rest. The spray of salt water, the stumbling, the leaving and arriving from one piece of land to another create an illusion of a different type of understanding, one that is empty and silent, a silence that embodies my lungs, my liver. It is as if within me an impression in the form of an A opens until I can hear the faint creaking of the ferry landing, like the sound of a wooden crate breaking. Without walls other than the shell of the ferry I am left to focus on the faces of the other travelers or to get lost in thought, abandoning the serviceable seat to let loose a vague idea in my subconscious. The murmur of different languages, those wild languages in which even curse words sound beautiful, the stink of contaminated water that wafts through the open partitions, whatever people are doing, reading magazines and newspapers, listening to music, checking their cellphones or walking or talking in the hallways, is eclipsed by this mist that surrounds our faces, faces of brick, legs like the sidewalks of hot granite where you can throw yourself into the crowd if you have the courage to do so. All of us in the ferry share the feeling of the common danger of being in the elements, of losing our way. Past, present and future are mental states. There, in the ferry, even the things most real, most solid, the most loved and the most hated, aren't more than shadows on the surface of the water that opens and at the same time sustains us.)

Much has been said regarding the influence of our surroundings on how we feel, but little of how they influence our ethical codes, of whether the eyes should or shouldn't open and question what they see, because all that is outside, whether we like it or not, affects us. Once you gloss over what makes you uncomfortable your vision becomes limited and you find it necessary to judge although you are judging only by appearances.

After the ferry I need to take a bus. The types of people that get on and off vary depending on the neighborhoods. In St. George you see the multiracial bustle of the working class, most of them Black, Indian, or Latino, and standing apart from them the angry white laborers. Gallician construction workers, plumbers from Veracruz, cashiers from Madurai: citizens of colonized nations laboring in this thick substance we call destiny that doesn't depend on an individual's efforts, as we have claimed ad nauseam, but rather on other factors (mainly the ferocious economic system and good tips; at the end of the day this continues to be the richest country in the world.)

In the first stretch from St. George to Richmond Town Road the houses are modest, unpretentious brick buildings, unadorned by gardens. The businesses announce themselves on their awnings, a Hispanic restaurant, delis full of a mix of Africans and Dominicans, a laundry, a center for making and receiving phone calls and sending money to and from other countries. There are posters that not only decorate the walls but also defiantly claim the right to occupy public space. Some closed-off streets serve as playgrounds for the children who kick balls and play after school in the dangerous light where everything is seen and, later, in the twilight where almost everything is hidden. Then the sweaty children go to their warm houses with kitchens vibrant with disorder. I dare to guess that those who live in these houses express themselves in an uninhibited way, following their natural impulses. I also know that I have more prejudices than principles, and that the exercise of speculation is unreliable.

Halfway along the bus route going into Historic Richmond Town, the view changes. This district of Staten Island is mostly white and very conservative. Here, the upper middle class seem to have bestowed upon themselves the right to consider picturesque the surrounding neighborhoods inhabited by working people. Between their skirts, the old Victorians begin to display glimpses of their green gardens, with formal flower plots in colors both subtle and brilliant. In some gardens people have inscribed biblical quotations in stone; one psalm makes me wonder why on occasion people associate wealth with religion, and why these religious phrases engraved in the borders between one house and another inspire this thought: in the United States the most important religion is that of private property. As for the rest, the grand display of large porches, the facades of two stories with their airtight picture windows that provide protection from street noise,—they allow me to understand the unvarnished realism of American exteriors that Edward Hopper captured so well, as a means of looking at the emotional landscape, there where the cushioned sound of nothingness remains exposed thanks to the harshness of the light, the interiors and exteriors which in their abandonment or alienation appear sinister, disturbing.

I get off at Corbin Street and walk toward Elkhart. Because it isn't fully spring yet the trees are bare: showing their intricate branches, some are already beginning to bud. On walking

below the trees decorated by the whiteness of the sun, I think of the dry weeds on the high plateaus of Ciudad Juarez, where it is possible to find a spare part for a car next to the severed hand of a worker. The well-cut grass of the lawns in this middle-class neighborhood makes me think of the poorly paid undocumented workers who maintain them.

Then, those houses, the ones on Arthur Kill Avenue, bring to mind the stories of Yates and Cheever: stories of employees of Ford and Chrysler with dreams that gradually faded because of the hideous imbalance hidden behind the efficiency of electricity. Something in the way the houses are built makes me think of underground rumblings making them shudder from the weightiness of their importance. Their sameness invites disaster. Their order, their refinement, is also their mystery: there is in them a perception of peace that begs to be broken abruptly. It intrigues me to wander around the fronts of the houses, to feel the quiet that surrounds them, and to see what is revealed behind the curtains. They aren't like the buildings of multihued red brick in the urban center, where the ceiling of one home is the floor of another, where the bedrooms back up to the next-door neighbor like open eyelids breaking the feeling of privacy. No. The houses of the suburbs, made like illustrations of children's stories, have a glazed and hallucinatory quality because it's difficult to enter them except in the imagination. A house is the most private place that exists. There could be something rotting on the patio that threatens the peace (there is the ear covered with ants in the first scene of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*). Or it could be that the washing machine sounds in the calm afternoon, without whoever dries the clothes ever having an epiphany.

Cars and bicycles are in the garages. Here, very few people use public transportation and when they do they maintain control of it. There is something that seems bizarre about this way of living, with so much technology at our service. Here, they use their cell phones to find out when the bus will arrive at the next stop. We press a button and begin to rely on our electronic gadgets to think for us, to remember for us. They are both our servants and our masters as we are theirs. It's interesting to see the collective impatience at a bus stop. The GPS is now the oracle that denies drivers and walkers the possibility of going in the wrong direction, and taking a journey during which instead of losing your way you learn something you didn't know about

yourself, about others, or about what you carry with you. I'm not saying that I prefer a compass or an hourglass but I like the idea that taking the wrong road might lead me to tangled streets that cross and change in a barely noticeable way and surprise me with a shortcut, and I sometimes enjoy the adventure I'm led on when people give me wrong directions as a joke. The impossibility of controlling the clock so as not to be late seems like the best example that the physical world still has ways to impose its own rules on us. Wandering without purpose continues to be, at least for me, a way to learn. (I'm lying a little. Today I waited for a bus and was annoyed that I didn't have the app that tells the time of arrival at the closest station: the delay was thirty minutes.) But I understand the following: the efficiency that the transit service attempts in this country isn't for convenience but to avoid frustration at all costs.

Of course this perspective is one of a Latin American woman who is becoming accustomed to the habits of the first world and modern life that have coined with desperation the words efficiency and control. I have forgotten to say that in whatever part of the world I identify much more with record players than with Internet radio. My image of a country woman is full of pity and tenderness. I know, nevertheless, she has the quality of a person who is astonished by something she has never seen before, like someone who sees the ocean for the first time or who learns how to use an escalator at fifty years of age.

There is a lot that is senseless about how dwellings fill up with things. Things for everything, to put together and to take apart, objects to fill certainties and to alleviate fears that come more from beliefs than from emotions. Objects that end up drugging our minds. Little by little we lose our quiet inner life and agitate it so that it resembles the things that move outside of us. Then life becomes less dangerous and more predictable, but that feeling of safety will never last too long. Soon the sound of glass breaking behind the room you live in will disrupt everything. Nobody guarantees us that behind these houses identical in form, different only for the type of flowers in the garden, so fragile that they can be uprooted by a hurricane, these unlikely houses of cards that appear to be Superglued to the surface of a model—no one guarantees us that inside these houses there is no neurotic icepick, no depressed stove, no demented washing machine: up close no house is normal. And even more serious: if, as they say, things say more about us

than a confession, we have to take into account that our privacy is not safe, that our objects betray us in that place we call home; they are more than our effort to decorate the house to our liking. Sliding back the bolt of a door, you can explore a sordid situation, a racist speculation, the insane discussion of why we hurt each others' feelings, the lullaby of a licensed revolver, or a strange murmur longing to escape confinement, all demanding their quota of exposure to the elements.

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The Mexican author Nadia Villafuerte (b. 1978) has published two collections of short stories, *Barcos en Houston* (2005) and *¿Te gusta el látex, cielo?* (2008), and one novel *Por el lado salvaje* (2011). Her work has been included in the anthologies *México 20, New Voices, Old Traditions* (Pushkin Press, 2015) and *Palabras mayores, nueva narrativa mexicana* (Malpaso Ediciones, 2015), among others. Her essay "Casas" was originally published in the *Revista de la Universidad de México* 119 (January 2014), available online at <http://www.revistadelauniversidad.unam.mx/articulo.php?publicacion=86&art=2486>.

Nadia Villafuerte will receive her Masters in Creative Writing in Spanish at New York University in May, 2017.

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