

An Educator's Guide to Latin American Literature

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide accompanies a short story by a Latin American author. It was produced by Sheena Chakeres on behalf of the Latin American and Iberian Institute (LAI) at The University of New Mexico as part of a series of lessons for high school English students or advanced Spanish language students. The purpose of these lessons is to expose students to the voices of Latin American and how their stories relate to the political history of the region.

ABOUT THE LAI

The LAI is an interdisciplinary resource center at The University of New Mexico. As part of its mission to promote a better understanding of Latin America among diverse constituents, it develops curriculum materials and related resources for teaching about Latin America in the K-12 classroom. To learn more about other classroom resources produced by the LAI, visit the [LAI website](#).

WHY USE IT IN THE CLASSROOM

This emblematic text by Julio Cortázar is well suited to Spanish classrooms because of the depth and range of conversation it provides. Written in 1946, *House Taken Over/Casa tomada* is a short story about an aging brother and sister who find their house, a very large mansion, slowly taken over by a mysterious entity. A political allegory, the story is both a commentary on Peronism in Argentina, as well as a classic example of Magical Realism. Students easily jump into this genre that can often be a mystery for those unfamiliar with its nuances. Additionally, the sociopolitical layer about Peronist Argentina provides Spanish, English, or History teachers and students another lens through which to view Latin America. Indeed, there is much debate about the symbolism of the house, the characters, and the strange entity that takes over, so it leads to rich discussions and debates. Its short length makes *House Taken Over* a wonderful introduction to Latin American literature, whether it leads to dabbling in the region's history or deepening it with other lessons on related topics.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The text of the chapter in question, "The House Taken Over" and its Spanish translation, "Casa tomada," are included at the end of this document under educational, fair use guidelines.

Images included below are also included under educational, fair use guidelines. The painting by Frida Kahlo is reprinted from Scholastic, with a higher resolution copy available for download here: <https://art.scholastic.com/pages/topics/posters/self-portrait-thorn-necklace-kahlo.html>. The painting by Alexander Kanoldt is reprinted under public domain licensure from Wikipedia and can be seen here.



Title: “House Taken Over”/ “Casa tomada” published within *Bestiario* (1952).

By: Argentine author Julio Cortázar

Publisher's description: In these eight masterpieces there is no room for the smallest sign of stumbling or youthful undertones: they are perfect. These stories that speak about objects and daily happenings and pass over to another dimension, one of nightmare or revelation. In each text, surprise and uneasiness are ingredients added to the indescribable pleasure of its reading. These stories may upset readers due to a very rare characteristic in literature: They stare at us as if waiting for something in return. After reading these true classics, our opinion of the world cannot remain the same.

Translated by Paul Blackburn

SUMMARY:

The narrator and his sister, Irene, have inherited a large mansion, in which they live happily with generations of keepsakes. Irene has taken up knitting and the narrator loves literature. They stick to an easy routine, until one day an entity takes over a part of their house, until eventually they must abandon it.

LANGUAGE LEVEL:

Grades 11-12 / Spanish III, IV, AP

THEMES & LITERARY ELEMENTS:

Argentina, Magical Realism, Peronism, imagery, allegory,

OBJECTIVES

- 1) To expose students to Latin American literature
- 2) To expand students' vocabulary base
- 3) To develop students' literacy skills, in English and/or Spanish
- 4) To explore the genre of Magical Realism as political commentary

APPLICABLE STANDARDS

The English Language Arts Common Core Standards mirror the current Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (see [Skills Map](#)). Both encourage a long sequence of language study in grades K–12 to promote a high level of literacy and communication ability.

COMMON CORE STATE → READING LITERATURE → Grades 11-12

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](#)

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2](#)

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3](#)

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4](#)

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR THE 21st CENTURY → Advanced

CRITICAL THINKING & PROBLEM SOLVING

Students as inquirers frame, analyze, and synthesize information as well as negotiate meaning across language and culture in order to explore problems and issues from their own and different perspectives.

INFORMATION LITERACY

Students as informed global citizens access, manage, and effectively use culturally authentic sources in ethical and legal ways.

SOCIAL & CROSSCULTURAL SKILLS

Students as adept language learners understand diverse cultural perspectives and use appropriate socio-linguistic skills in order to function in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

LESSON PLAN FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS

DAY 1

Pre-reading

Cortázar wrote *House Taken Over* in 1946, the year that Juan Perón was first elected President of Argentina. This short story has been interpreted in many ways, so provide a strong historical and literary background to foment discussion. Introduce the literary genre known as [Magical Realism](#). It is important to differentiate between Magical Realism and fantasy, like *Harry Potter*, or science fiction, like *The Walking Dead*. It is also worthwhile to mention that not all Latin American literature fits into this genre, and that the generalization can lead to an oversimplified idea of what Magical Realism expresses. Ask them to write down ideas or a definition on their worksheet that will help them remember key points (example: unlike fantasy, Magical Realism threads less obvious elements of magic or myth into a realistic story). Then, ask students to discuss elements of Magical Realism in the two paintings on their worksheets.

Set the stage for reading through a discussion about both the global climate and in Argentina in 1939-1946. Ask them to think about what was happening (World War II, industrialization,) Introduce [Peronismo](#), the ideology of Argentina's new President. Ask them to write down key ideas on their worksheet.

Reading:

Read the first two paragraphs with your class and then discuss how Cortázar has set the stage. Who do Irene and her brother symbolize? Students will finish the story for homework. Additionally, ask them to find a definition for *allegory* and think about how it applies to the reading.

DAY 2

Post-reading:

Below you will find a reading check. This can motivate students to read or give you feedback on how much of the deeper meanings they understood. You will also find a discussion guide with key terms. After the reading check, ask students to look at the questions and choose one that sounds like a good starting point for a discussion. Once one student has spoken, ask them to refrain from speaking again until everyone in the class has had a turn to comment (you may use TALK/DON'T TALK cards¹ to facilitate this).

¹ On a flashcard, write TALK on one side and DON'T TALK on the other. Once a student has commented during a class discussion, he/she will flip over their card until everyone has also spoken.

Name: _____

“House Taken Over”

PRE-READING

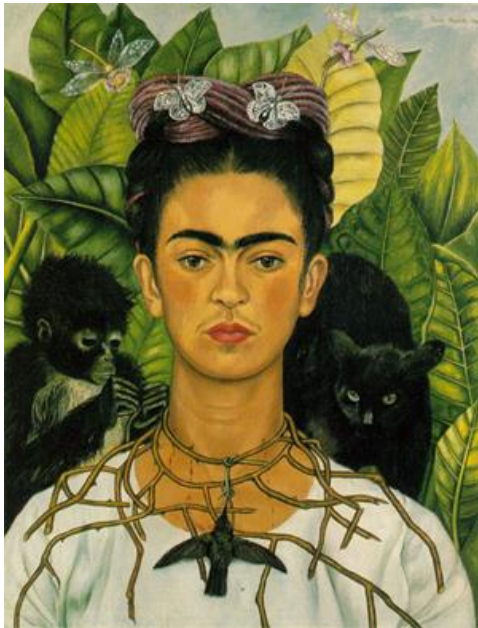
After discussing the following terms, write your own definition to refer back to.

Magical Realism _____

Peronismo _____

Allegory _____

Describe the elements of Magical Realism in these two paintings:



1. [Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird](#) (1940) by Frida Kahlo
2. [Still Life II](#) (1922) by Alexander Kanoldt

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Cortázar wrote this story in 1946. Thinking about the global and local political climates:

1. Who or what might Maria Esther represent? Why include her in the story?
2. What does the house symbolize?
3. And the unidentified entity that invades the house?
4. How does Cortázar's use of Magical Realism make the story more interesting? How would it be different if he had not used magical elements?
5. For what is *House Taken Over* an allegory?

READING CHECK

“House Taken Over”

Name: _____

1. What is Irene's hobby?

2. Where does the narrator go when he leaves the house?

3. What elements of Magical Realism exist in the story?

4. Describe how the narrator and Irene view each other's sleep patterns.

5. How does the story end?

LESSON PLAN FOR SPANISH TEACHERS

Pre-reading

Cortázar wrote *House Taken Over* in 1946, the year that Juan Perón was first elected President of Argentina. This short story has been interpreted in many ways, so provide a strong historical and literary background to foment discussion. Introduce the literary genre known as [Magical Realism](#). It is important to differentiate between Magical Realism and fantasy, like *Harry Potter*, or science fiction, like *The Walking Dead*. It is also worthwhile to mention that not all Latin American literature fits into this genre, and that the generalization can lead to an oversimplified idea of what Magical Realism expresses. Ask them to write down ideas or a definition on their worksheet that will help them remember key points (example: unlike fantasy, Magical Realism threads less obvious elements of magic or myth into a realistic story). Then, ask students to discuss elements of Magical Realism in the two paintings on their worksheets.

Set the stage for reading through a discussion about both the global climate and in Argentina in 1939-1946. Ask them to think about what was happening (World War II, industrialization, etc.) Introduce [Peronismo](#), the ideology of Argentina's new President. Ask them to summarize key ideas in their own words on their worksheet.

Reading:

Go over the vocabulary list with students. You may provide them with the list or have them write the words down in their notes. Then, read the first two paragraphs with your class. Discuss how Cortázar has set the stage. Who do Irene and her brother symbolize? Students will finish the story for homework.

DAY 2

Post-reading:

Below you will find a reading check. This can motivate students to read or give you feedback on how much of the deeper meanings they understood. You will also find a discussion guide with key terms. After the reading check, ask students to look at the questions and choose one that sounds like a good starting point for a discussion. Once one student has spoken, ask them to refrain from speaking again until everyone in the class has had a turn to comment (you may use HABLA/NO HABLES cards² to facilitate this).

² On a flashcard, write HABLA on one side and NO HABLES on the other. Once a student has commented during a class discussion, he/she will flip over their card until everyone has also spoken.

Nombre: _____

“Casa tomada”

PARA EMPEZAR

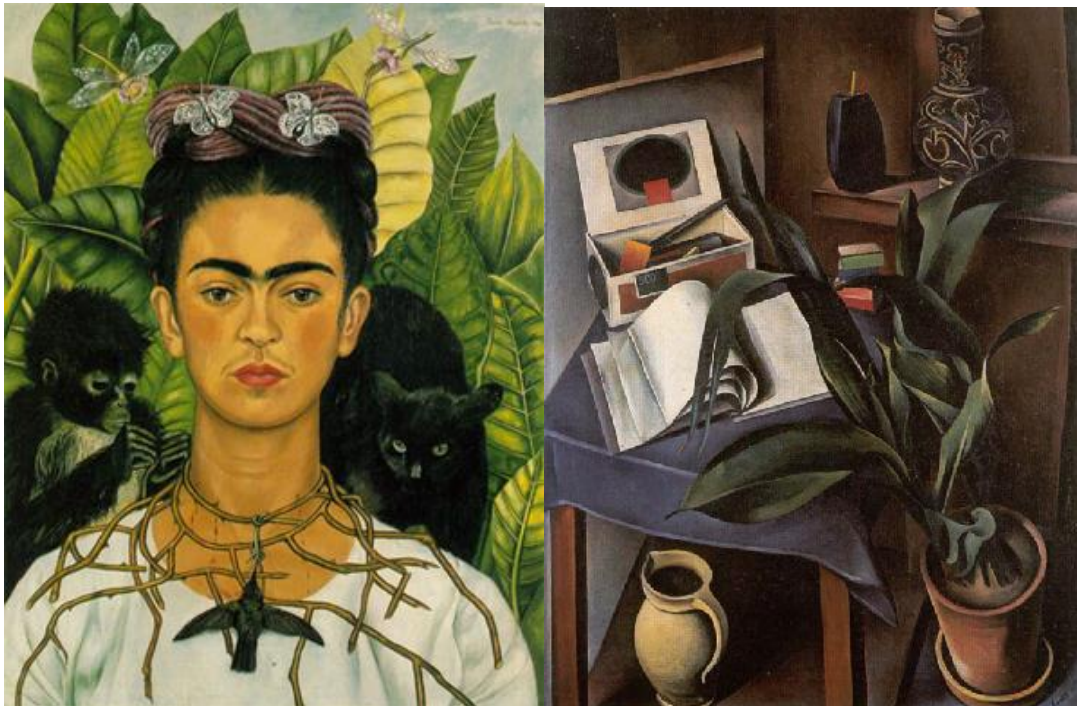
Después de hablar sobre estos términos, escribe una definición en tus propias palabras.

Peronismo _____

Realismo Mágico _____

Alegoría _____

Describe los elementos de Realismo Mágico presentes en estas pinturas:



1. [Autorretrato con Collar de Espinas y Colibrí](#) (1940) por Frida Kahlo
2. [Bodegón II](#) (1922) por Alexander Kanoldt

VOCABULARIO

estorbar(se) – *get in each other's way*

grato – *pleasant; agreeable*

bastar – *to be enough or sufficient*

esquivo – *aloof*

ladrillo – *brick*

alcanfor – *moth ball*

voltear – *to turn (something) over*

ráfage – *gust*

zaguán – *hallway*

roble – *oak*

Mientras lees, escribe las otras palabras que buscas aquí:

PREGUNTAS DE DISCUSIÓN

Cortázar escribió este cuento en 1946. Pensando en el clima político global y local...

1. ¿Quién puede simbolizar María Esther? ¿Por qué la menciona el narrador?
2. ¿Qué representa la casa en la que viven el narrador y su hermana?
3. Y, ¿la entidad desconocida que invade la casa?
4. Identifica los elementos de Realismo Mágico. ¿Cómo sería diferente el cuento sin estos elementos?
5. ¿Para qué funciona el cuento como una alegoría? Explica.

PRUEBITA DE LEER

“Casa tomada”

Nombre: _____

1. ¿Cuál es el pasatiempo de Irene?

2. ¿Adónde va el narrador cuando sale de la casa?

3. ¿Qué elementos de Realismo Mágico existen?

4. Describe cómo el narrador y su hermana duermen.

5. ¿Cómo termina el cuento?

HOUSE TAKEN OVER

.....

We liked the house because, apart from its being old and spacious (in a day when old houses go down for a profitable auction of their construction materials), it kept the memories of great-grandparents, our paternal grandfather, our parents and the whole of childhood.

Irene and I got used to staying in the house by ourselves, which was crazy, eight people could have lived in that place and not have gotten in each other's way. We rose at seven in the morning and got the cleaning done, and about eleven I left Irene to finish off whatever rooms and went to the kitchen. We lunched at noon precisely; then there was nothing left to do but a few dirty plates. It

House Taken Over

was pleasant to take lunch and commune with the great hollow, silent house, and it was enough for us just to keep it clean. We ended up thinking, at times, that that was what had kept us from marrying. Irene turned down two suitors for no particular reason, and María Esther went and died on me before we could manage to get engaged. We were easing into our forties with the unvoiced concept that the quiet, simple marriage of sister and brother was the indispensable end to a line established in this house by our grandparents. We would die here someday, obscure and distant cousins would inherit the place, have it torn down, sell the bricks and get rich on the building plot; or more justly and better yet, we would topple it ourselves before it was too late.

Irene never bothered anyone. Once the morning housework was finished, she spent the rest of the day on the sofa in her bedroom, knitting. I couldn't tell you why she knitted so much; I think women knit when they discover that it's a fat excuse to do nothing at all. But Irene was not like that, she always knitted necessities, sweaters for winter, socks for me, handy morning robes and bedjackets for herself. Sometimes she would do a jacket, then unravel it the next moment because there was something that didn't please her; it was pleasant to see a pile of tangled wool in her knitting basket fighting a losing battle for a few hours to retain its shape. Saturdays I went downtown to buy wool; Irene had faith in my good taste, was pleased with the colors and never a skein had to be returned. I took advantage of these trips to make the rounds of the bookstores, uselessly asking if they had anything new in French literature. Nothing worthwhile had arrived in Argentina since 1939.

But it's the house I want to talk about, the house and Irene, I'm not very important. I wonder what Irene would have done without her knitting. One can reread a book,

but once a pullover is finished you can't do it over again, it's some kind of disgrace. One day I found that the drawer at the bottom of the chiffonier, replete with moth-balls, was filled with shawls, white, green, lilac. Stacked amid a great smell of camphor—it was like a shop; I didn't have the nerve to ask her what she planned to do with them. We didn't have to earn our living, there was plenty coming in from the farms each month, even piling up. But Irene was only interested in the knitting and showed a wonderful dexterity, and for me the hours slipped away watching her, her hands like silver sea-urchins, needles flashing, and one or two knitting baskets on the floor, the balls of yarn jumping about. It was lovely.

How not to remember the layout of that house. The dining room, a living room with tapestries, the library and three large bedrooms in the section most recessed, the one that faced toward Rodríguez Peña. Only a corridor with its massive oak door separated that part from the front wing, where there was a bath, the kitchen, our bedrooms and the hall. One entered the house through a vestibule with enameled tiles, and a wrought-iron grated door opened onto the living room. You had to come in through the vestibule and open the gate to go into the living room; the doors to our bedrooms were on either side of this, and opposite it was the corridor leading to the back section; going down the passage, one swung open the oak door beyond which was the other part of the house; or just before the door, one could turn to the left and go down a narrower passageway which led to the kitchen and the bath. When the door was open, you became aware of the size of the house; when it was closed, you had the impression of an apartment, like the ones they build today, with barely enough room to move around in. Irene and I always lived

in this part of the house and hardly ever went beyond the oak door except to do the cleaning. Incredible how much dust collected on the furniture. It may be Buenos Aires is a clean city, but she owes it to her population and nothing else. There's too much dust in the air, the slightest breeze and it's back on the marble console tops and in the diamond patterns of the tooled-leather desk set. It's a lot of work to get it off with a feather duster; the motes rise and hang in the air, and settle again a minute later on the pianos and the furniture.

I'll always have a clear memory of it because it happened so simply and without fuss. Irene was knitting in her bedroom, it was eight at night, and I suddenly decided to put the water up for *mate*. I went down the corridor as far as the oak door, which was ajar, then turned into the hall toward the kitchen, when I heard something in the library or the dining room. The sound came through muted and indistinct, a chair being knocked over onto the carpet or the muffled buzzing of a conversation. At the same time or a second later, I heard it at the end of the passage which led from those two rooms toward the door. I hurled myself against the door before it was too late and shut it, leaned on it with the weight of my body; luckily, the key was on our side; moreover, I ran the great bolt into place, just to be safe.

I went down to the kitchen, heated the kettle, and when I got back with the tray of *mate*, I told Irene:

"I had to shut the door to the passage. They've taken over the back part."

She let her knitting fall and looked at me with her tired, serious eyes.

"You're sure?"

I nodded.

JULIO CORTÁZAR

"In that case," she said, picking up her needles again, "we'll have to live on this side."

I sipped at the *mate* very carefully, but she took her time starting her work again. I remember it was a grey vest she was knitting. I liked that vest.

The first few days were painful, since we'd both left so many things in the part that had been taken over. My collection of French literature, for example, was still in the library. Irene had left several folios of stationery and a pair of slippers that she used a lot in the winter. I missed my briar pipe, and Irene, I think, regretted the loss of an ancient bottle of Hesperidin. It happened repeatedly (but only in the first few days) that we would close some drawer or cabinet and look at one another sadly.

"It's not here."

One thing more among the many lost on the other side of the house.

But there were advantages, too. The cleaning was so much simplified that, even when we got up late, nine thirty for instance, by eleven we were sitting around with our arms folded. Irene got into the habit of coming to the kitchen with me to help get lunch. We thought about it and decided on this: while I prepared the lunch, Irene would cook up dishes that could be eaten cold in the evening. We were happy with the arrangement because it was always such a bother to have to leave our bedrooms in the evening and start to cook. Now we made do with the table in Irene's room and platters of cold supper.

Since it left her more time for knitting, Irene was content. I was a little lost without my books, but so as not to inflict myself on my sister, I set about reordering papa's stamp collection; that killed some time. We amused ourselves sufficiently, each with his own thing, almost always

House Taken Over

getting together in Irene's bedroom, which was the more comfortable. Every once in a while, Irene might say:

"Look at this pattern I just figured out, doesn't it look like clover?"

After a bit it was I, pushing a small square of paper in front of her so that she could see the excellence of some stamp or another from Eupen-et-Malmédy. We were fine, and little by little we stopped thinking. You can live without thinking.

(Whenever Irene talked in her sleep, I woke up immediately and stayed awake. I never could get used to this voice from a statue or a parrot, a voice that came out of the dreams, not from a throat. Irene said that in my sleep I flailed about enormously and shook the blankets off. We had the living room between us, but at night you could hear everything in the house. We heard each other breathing, coughing, could even feel each other reaching for the light switch when, as happened frequently, neither of us could fall asleep.)

Aside from our nocturnal rumblings, everything was quiet in the house. During the day there were the household sounds, the metallic click of knitting needles, the rustle of stamp-album pages turning. The oak door was massive, I think I said that. In the kitchen or the bath, which adjoined the part that was taken over, we managed to talk loudly, or Irene sang lullabies. In a kitchen there's always too much noise, the plates and glasses, for there to be interruptions from other sounds. We seldom allowed ourselves silence there, but when we went back to our rooms or to the living room, then the house grew quiet, half-lit, we ended by stepping around more slowly so as not to disturb one another. I think it was because of this that I woke up irremediably and at once when Irene began to talk in her sleep.)

JULIO CORTÁZAR

Except for the consequences, it's nearly a matter of repeating the same scene over again. I was thirsty that night, and before we went to sleep, I told Irene that I was going to the kitchen for a glass of water. From the door of the bedroom (she was knitting) I heard the noise in the kitchen; if not the kitchen, then the bath, the passage off at that angle dulled the sound. Irene noticed how brusquely I had paused, and came up beside me without a word. We stood listening to the noises, growing more and more sure that they were on our side of the oak door, if not the kitchen then the bath, or in the hall itself at the turn, almost next to us.

We didn't wait to look at one another. I took Irene's arm and forced her to run with me to the wrought-iron door, not waiting to look back. You could hear the noises, still muffled but louder, just behind us. I slammed the grating and we stopped in the vestibule. Now there was nothing to be heard.

"They've taken over our section," Irene said. The knitting had reeled off from her hands and the yarn ran back toward the door and disappeared under it. When she saw that the balls of yarn were on the other side, she dropped the knitting without looking at it.

"Did you have time to bring anything?" I asked hopelessly.

"No, nothing."

We had what we had on. I remembered fifteen thousand pesos in the wardrobe in my bedroom. Too late now.

I still had my wrist watch on and saw that it was 11 P.M. I took Irene around the waist (I think she was crying) and that was how we went into the street. Before we left, I felt terrible; I locked the front door up tight and tossed the key down the sewer. It wouldn't do to have some poor devil decide to go in and rob the house, at that hour and with the house taken over.

Casa tomada

Julio Cortázar

Nos gustaba la casa porque aparte de espaciosa y antigua (hoy que las casas antiguas sucumben a la más ventajosa liquidación de sus materiales) guardaba los recuerdos de nuestros bisabuelos, el abuelo paterno, nuestros padres y toda la infancia.

Nos habituamos Irene y yo a persistir solos en ella, lo que era una locura pues en esa casa podían vivir ocho personas sin estorbarse. Hacíamos la limpieza por la mañana, levantándonos a las siete, y a eso de las once yo le dejaba a Irene las últimas habitaciones por reparar y me iba a la cocina. Almorzábamos al mediodía, siempre puntuales; ya no quedaba nada por hacer fuera de unos platos sucios. Nos resultaba grato almorzar pensando en la casa profunda y silenciosa y cómo nos bastábamos para mantenerla limpia. A veces llegábamos a creer que era ella la que no nos dejó casarnos. Irene rechazó dos pretendientes sin mayor motivo, a mí se me murió María Esther antes que llegáramos a comprometernos. Entramos en los cuarenta años con la inexpresada idea de que el nuestro, simple y silencioso matrimonio de hermanos, era necesaria clausura de la genealogía asentada por nuestros bisabuelos en nuestra casa. Nos moriríamos allí algún día, vagos y esquivos primos se quedarían con la casa y la echarían al suelo para enriquecerse con el terreno y los ladrillos; o mejor, nosotros mismos la voltearíamos justicieramente antes de que fuese demasiado tarde.

Irene era una chica nacida para no molestar a nadie. Aparte de su actividad matinal se pasaba el resto del día tejiendo en el sofá de su dormitorio. No sé por qué tejía tanto, yo creo que las mujeres tejen cuando han encontrado en esa labor el gran pretexto para no hacer nada. Irene no era así, tejía cosas siempre necesarias, tricotas para el invierno, medias para mí, mañanitas y chalecos para ella. A veces tejía un chaleco y después lo destejía en un momento porque algo no le agradaba; era gracioso ver en la canastilla el montón de lana encrespada resistiéndose a perder su forma de algunas horas. Los sábados iba yo al centro a comprarle lana; Irene tenía fe en mi gusto, se complacía con los colores y nunca tuve que devolver madejas. Yo aprovechaba esas salidas para dar una vuelta por las librerías y preguntar vanamente si había novedades en literatura francesa. Desde 1939 no llegaba nada valioso a la Argentina.

Pero es de la casa que me interesa hablar, de la casa y de Irene, porque yo no tengo importancia. Me pregunto qué hubiera hecho Irene sin el tejido. Uno puede releer un libro, pero cuando un pullover está terminado no se puede repetirlo sin escándalo. Un día encontré el cajón de abajo de la cómoda de alcanfor lleno de pañoletas blancas, verdes, lila. Estaban con naftalina, apiladas como en una mercería; no tuve valor para preguntarle a Irene qué pensaba hacer con ellas. No necesitábamos ganarnos la vida, todos los meses llegaba plata de los campos y el dinero aumentaba. Pero a Irene solamente la entretenía el tejido, mostraba una

destreza maravillosa y a mí se me iban las horas viéndole las manos como erizos plateados, agujas yendo y viniendo y una o dos canastillas en el suelo donde se agitaban constantemente los ovillos. Era hermoso.

Cómo no acordarme de la distribución de la casa. El comedor, una sala con gobelinos, la biblioteca y tres dormitorios grandes quedaban en la parte más retirada, la que mira hacia Rodríguez Peña. Solamente un pasillo con su maciza puerta de roble aislaba esa parte del ala delantera donde había un baño, la cocina, nuestros dormitorios y el living central, al cual comunicaban los dormitorios y el pasillo. Se entraba a la casa por un zaguán con mayólica, y la puerta cancel daba al living. De manera que uno entraba por el zaguán, abría la cancel y pasaba al living; tenía a los lados las puertas de nuestros dormitorios, y al frente el pasillo que conducía a la parte más retirada; avanzando por el pasillo se franqueaba la puerta de roble y mas allá empezaba el otro lado de la casa, o bien se podía girar a la izquierda justamente antes de la puerta y seguir por un pasillo más estrecho que llevaba a la cocina y el baño. Cuando la puerta estaba abierta advertía uno que la casa era muy grande; si no, daba la impresión de un departamento de los que se edifican ahora, apenas para moverse; Irene y yo vivíamos siempre en esta parte de la casa, casi nunca íbamos más allá de la puerta de roble, salvo para hacer la limpieza, pues es increíble cómo se junta tierra en los muebles. Buenos Aires será una ciudad limpia, pero eso lo debe a sus habitantes y no a otra cosa. Hay demasiada tierra en el aire, apenas sopla una ráfaga se palpa el polvo en los mármoles de las consolas y entre los rombos de las carpetas de macramé; da trabajo sacarlo bien con plumero, vuela y se suspende en el aire, un momento después se deposita de nuevo en los muebles y los pianos.

Lo recordaré siempre con claridad porque fue simple y sin circunstancias inútiles. Irene estaba tejiendo en su dormitorio, eran las ocho de la noche y de repente se me ocurrió poner al fuego la pavita del mate. Fui por el pasillo hasta enfrentar la entornada puerta de roble, y daba la vuelta al codo que llevaba a la cocina cuando escuché algo en el comedor o en la biblioteca. El sonido venía impreciso y sordo, como un volcarse de silla sobre la alfombra o un ahogado susurro de conversación. También lo oí, al mismo tiempo o un segundo después, en el fondo del pasillo que traía desde aquellas piezas hasta la puerta. Me tiré contra la pared antes de que fuera demasiado tarde, la cerré de golpe apoyando el cuerpo; felizmente la llave estaba puesta de nuestro lado y además corrí el gran cerrojo para más seguridad.

Fui a la cocina, calenté la pavita, y cuando estuve de vuelta con la bandeja del mate le dije a Irene:

-Tuve que cerrar la puerta del pasillo. Han tomado parte del fondo.

Dejó caer el tejido y me miró con sus graves ojos cansados.

-¿Estás seguro?

Asentí.

-Entonces -dijo recogiendo las agujas- tendremos que vivir en este lado.

Yo cebaba el mate con mucho cuidado, pero ella tardó un rato en reanudar su labor. Me acuerdo que me tejía un chaleco gris; a mí me gustaba ese chaleco.

Los primeros días nos pareció penoso porque ambos habíamos dejado en la parte tomada muchas cosas que queríamos. Mis libros de literatura francesa, por ejemplo, estaban todos en la biblioteca. Irene pensó en una botella de Hesperidina de muchos años. Con frecuencia (pero esto solamente sucedió los primeros días) cerrábamos algún cajón de las cómodas y nos mirábamos con tristeza.

-No está aquí.

Y era una cosa más de todo lo que habíamos perdido al otro lado de la casa.

Pero también tuvimos ventajas. La limpieza se simplificó tanto que aun levantándose tardísimo, a las nueve y media por ejemplo, no daban las once y ya estábamos de brazos cruzados. Irene se acostumbró a ir conmigo a la cocina y ayudarme a preparar el almuerzo. Lo pensamos bien, y se decidió esto: mientras yo preparaba el almuerzo, Irene cocinaría platos para comer fríos de noche. Nos alegramos porque siempre resultaba molesto tener que abandonar los dormitorios al atardecer y ponerse a cocinar. Ahora nos bastaba con la mesa en el dormitorio de Irene y las fuentes de comida fiambre.

Irene estaba contenta porque le quedaba más tiempo para tejer. Yo andaba un poco perdido a causa de los libros, pero por no afligir a mi hermana me puse a revisar la colección de estampillas de papá, y eso me sirvió para matar el tiempo. Nos divertíamos mucho, cada uno en sus cosas, casi siempre reunidos en el dormitorio de Irene que era más cómodo. A veces Irene decía:

-Fíjate este punto que se me ha ocurrido. ¿No da un dibujo de trébol?

Un rato después era yo el que le ponía ante los ojos un cuadradito de papel para que viese el mérito de algún sello de Eupen y Malmédy. Estábamos bien, y poco a poco empezábamos a no pensar. Se puede vivir sin pensar.

(Cuando Irene soñaba en alta voz yo me desvelaba en seguida. Nunca pude habituarme a esa voz de estatua o papagayo, voz que viene de los sueños y no de la garganta. Irene decía que mis sueños consistían en grandes sacudones que a veces hacían caer el cobertor. Nuestros dormitorios tenían el living de por medio, pero de noche se escuchaba cualquier cosa en la casa. Nos oíamos respirar, toser, presentíamos el ademán que conduce a la llave del velador, los mutuos y frecuentes insomnios.

Aparte de eso todo estaba callado en la casa. De día eran los rumores domésticos, el roce metálico de las agujas de tejer, un crujido al pasar las hojas del álbum filatélico. La puerta de roble, creo haberlo dicho, era maciza. En la cocina y el baño, que quedaban tocando la parte tomada, nos poníamos a hablar en voz más alta o Irene cantaba canciones de cuna. En una cocina hay demasiados ruidos de loza y vidrios para que otros sonidos irruman en ella. Muy

pocas veces permitíamos allí el silencio, pero cuando tornábamos a los dormitorios y al living, entonces la casa se ponía callada y a media luz, hasta pisábamos despacio para no molestarnos. Yo creo que era por eso que de noche, cuando Irene empezaba a soñar en alta voz, me desvelaba en seguida.)

Es casi repetir lo mismo salvo las consecuencias. De noche siento sed, y antes de acostarnos le dije a Irene que iba hasta la cocina a servirme un vaso de agua. Desde la puerta del dormitorio (ella tejía) oí ruido en la cocina; tal vez en la cocina o tal vez en el baño porque el codo del pasillo apagaba el sonido. A Irene le llamó la atención mi brusca manera de detenerme, y vino a mi lado sin decir palabra. Nos quedamos escuchando los ruidos, notando claramente que eran de este lado de la puerta de roble, en la cocina y el baño, o en el pasillo mismo donde empezaba el codo casi al lado nuestro.

No nos miramos siquiera. Apreté el brazo de Irene y la hice correr conmigo hasta la puerta cancel, sin volvernos hacia atrás. Los ruidos se oían más fuerte pero siempre sordos, a espaldas nuestras. Cerré de un golpe la cancel y nos quedamos en el zaguán. Ahora no se oía nada.

-Han tomado esta parte -dijo Irene. El tejido le colgaba de las manos y las hebras iban hasta la cancel y se perdían debajo. Cuando vio que los ovillos habían quedado del otro lado, soltó el tejido sin mirarlo.

-¿Tuviste tiempo de traer alguna cosa? -le pregunté inútilmente.

-No, nada.

Estábamos con lo puesto. Me acordé de los quince mil pesos en el armario de mi dormitorio. Ya era tarde ahora.

Como me quedaba el reloj pulsera, vi que eran las once de la noche. Rodeé con mi brazo la cintura de Irene (yo creo que ella estaba llorando) y salimos así a la calle. Antes de alejarnos tuve lástima, cerré bien la puerta de entrada y tiré la llave a la alcantarilla. No fuese que a algún pobre diablo se le ocurriera robar y se metiera en la casa, a esa hora y con la casa tomada.

FIN