

Amparo Dávila and the Horror of Domesticity

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“Ah, one learns when one has to; one learns when one needs a way out; one learns at all costs.”

— Franz Kafka, “A Report to An Academy”

It’s no coincidence that Amparo Dávila’s first collection of short stories to appear in English, *The Houseguest*, was published in the month of October, when we commemorate the dead. It’s a set of scary stories, and a scary set of stories. It introduces English speakers to an author long-acclaimed in Mexico for what one of her translators, Matthew Gleeson, describes as uncanny and fantastic works that “revolve around characters gripped by extreme states of mind, psyches stoked with an uncertain mix of imagination and fact” (“The Crying Cat”). The publisher’s synopsis compares Dávila’s work to that of Franz Kafka, Edgar Allen Poe, and Shirley Jackson: “terrifying, mesmerizing, and expertly crafted.” There’s also a blurb by Carmen Maria Machado: “Amparo Dávila is Franz Kafka by way of [Yoko] Ogawa, [César] Aira by way of [Leonora] Carrington, [Julio] Cortázar by way of [Armonía] Somers ...” Maria Machado gives a head-spinning, kaleidoscopic lineage—one that, like any, invites elaboration and contestation. What happens to Aira when filtered through Carrington? Does Kafka by way of Ogawa look like either Kafka or Ogawa? Or do they become one of those digital face-swaps, where both people look like neither?

I’m particularly interested in Maria Machado’s reading, from which I glean two ideas. One, that Dávila

belongs in the same camp as these other writers; two, that Dávila is part of a feminine revision of that camp. The authors she mentions orbit what Maggie Nelson calls the “art of cruelty”; that is, they affect “precision, transgression, purgation, productive unease, abjectness, radical exposure, uncanniness, unnerving frankness...” (Nelson 6). Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” is one example discussed by Nelson. In it, an officer shows off an exquisite torture device, lamenting its decline in popularity. To turn to Jackson, we might consider “The Lottery,” in which a small town annually stones to death a randomly selected resident. And there’s Carrington’s “The Debutante,” in which a girl’s hyena-friend attends a ball in her place—and tears off the housemaid’s face to wear it as a disguise. Even Aira, the least cruel of the bunch, dabbles in this aesthetic: consider his novella “How I Became a Nun,” in which a six-year-old child named César Aira eats cyanide-tainted strawberry ice cream, only to witness her/his—the narrator alternates pronouns—dad kill the ice cream vendor. Each of these stories hinges on an absurd act of deliberate harm. I won’t say that this group of writers is defined by the art of cruelty, or that they belong solely to it. Rather, some of their works rub elbows in terrain where cruelty pervades. And Dávila fits right in. Her landscapes are singularly uncanny, both surreal and hyperreal—her prose terse and gleaming with ambiguity.

A friend brought it to my attention that in each pairing, a male author is accessed by way of a woman author. If Maria Machado is suggesting a gendered revision of a horror/surrealist aesthetic, then I begin to wonder: what, if anything, might be feminine about the latter authors’ works? I can’t find any singular formal or aesthetic difference that divides the works neatly along the gender of their authors, nor would I expect to. I could define the masculine and the feminine as Pam Houston does in her essay on Alice Munro’s “Menasetung,” in which case we’d say that the masculine is direct and destination-oriented, and the feminine circular and journey-oriented (81). Our authors land on both sides of the divide, and not in accordance with their gender. Central to Aira’s oeuvre is what he calls the “flight forward,” his commitment to improvisation, a kind of artmaking hardly concerned with destination. Dávila’s stories, meanwhile, trod steadily toward a decisive final twist.

Perhaps this theory of feminine revision is discernible in the thematics of the works. Dávila, for instance, is very much a writer of the quotidian, the domestic, the private—all of which are often defined as subjects of the so-called feminine domain. But even then, what

is Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," a story in which a family reconsiders its relationship to a member who has suddenly transformed into a giant bug, if not a domestic tale? This is all to say that, while I think there's value in Maria Machado's nod toward a feminine revision of the canon at hand, I find the gesture more compelling when considered through Houston's framework of masculine/feminine rather than men/women. I also keep in mind that, as her translator Matthew Gleeson points out, "Dávila's work, which she resolutely labels 'universal,' [is not] intended to have a feminist or gender-specific slant" ("The Crying Cat"). That said, considering Dávila's position as a small-town woman who made it big in Mexico City's male-dominated literary scene of the 50s, which Gleeson also notes, I won't be reading Dávila solely as "universal."

In *The Houseguest*, families and individuals crumble under immense pressure from a dark force inside the household. The protagonists, often women, are tethered to the home, where they must face inhuman creatures on the inside—or on the outside, breaking in. In "Oscar," published originally in 1977 as part of the collection *Árboles Petrificados [Petriified Trees]*, the story's namesake character wreaks havoc on his family from the cellar, where they keep him locked away. He must be fed according to a strict schedule, lest he burst into a fit of rage. He'll break dishes, smash furniture to bits, crush flowerpots, bang on the door, scream. Sometimes his father, at great risk to himself, will attempt to restrain and tranquilize him. At night, he lurks in the house and watches his family members sleep. They do so lightly, in fear that he might go Tell-Tale-Heart on them at any moment. And yet, "no one ever complained: resigned to what they could not change, they accepted their cruel destiny and suffered in silence" (65).

Monica Ramón, our protagonist, a stylish young woman on a visit home from the capital, must have at one point resisted this fate — after all, she left. At the point that we enter the story, however, she has returned, and is now confined to the house by a sense of guilt for having abandoned her younger sister. When she enters her old room, which she shared with her younger sister Cristina during childhood, she feels a "pang of remorse for not having brought her sister along when she left for the capital, and instead leaving her behind to languish, to waste away in this confinement" (61). And waste away Cristina does. At a meal, Monica takes note of her family's rapid deterioration under Oscar's tyranny: "Emaciated in the extreme, with her sharp, ashen face and her dull,

sunken eyes, [Monica's mother] seemed more like a sorrowful shadow than a human being. Cristina, weighed down by silence, solitude, and despair, was an aged youth, a wilted flower" (62). The stress of caring for a thoroughly destructive creature proves to be too much for Monica's parents, who die of heart attack and unspecified illness. She and her siblings barely escape death when, in the story's final twist, the cackling Oscar sets the house on fire in the middle of the night.

Monica comes home and stays home; leaving no longer seems possible. I'd be remiss to suggest that she is bound just by her guilt for having left in the first place — her confinement is also literal. As the narrator puts it, "The women only went out when absolutely necessary: for groceries or shopping, Sunday mass and sometimes to recite the rosary during the week, some condolence or funeral, some truly special event, because these things excited him inordinately; he didn't accept anything that would break the rhythm of his life or alter his routine" (65). For the Ramón family, the domestic sphere is a prison. They prepare Oscar's meals, clean his messes, and most of all ensure he doesn't escape. Oscar is fly and flytrap, prisoner and warden. He characterizes the rhetoric that confines women to the home, and reveals such talk for what it really is: a mechanism of control.

For Dávila, the biggest danger of domestic confinement is isolation. When her characters are isolated, they are most deadly—to themselves and others. They curl into themselves and fall prey to their own demons. After the parents in "Oscar" die, for instance, the narrator says, "the three siblings closed themselves off, didn't dare to talk or communicate, became hollow and self-absorbed, as if their thoughts and words had been misplaced, or carried away by those who had gone" (69). Together, they may have had a chance of figuring out a solution to the Oscar problem; separately, no such possibility exists. In "Moses and Gaspar," a man who kills himself leaves his beloved brother an inheritance of two creatures—pets, Matthew Gleeson speculates in "The Crying Cat," though, thanks to Dávila's masterful ambiguity, I initially thought they were people. Moses and Gaspar are so demanding and chaotic that they force our protagonist to cut ties with his partner and friends, forfeit his bedroom, quit his job, and move into a desolate rural home, where he may well meet his brother's fate. In "The Cell," Señora Camino grows concerned about her teenage daughter's deteriorating health. Little does she know that the young Maria Camino suffers alone each night in her bedroom as she faces an undescribed

monster that not even marriage can protect her from. Like all good horror, these stories are scary within and beyond themselves. They are scary not just because they feature grotesque creatures and suspenseful plots, but also because one gets a sense of what these things might represent. “Moses and Gaspar,” to me, is an allegory about grief, dysfunction, and the trauma we inherit from our families; I am reminded of Ari Aster’s terrifying film *Hereditary* (2018). “The Cell” evokes the isolation experienced by victims of domestic violence in a deeply unsettling way.

“The Last Summer” may be the most horrific example of the perils of isolation in *The Houseguest*. A lonely and depressed mother of six unexpectedly gets pregnant during a midlife crisis. One sleepless night, she grabs a breath of fresh air by the stairs that descend from her bedroom to the garden. As she leans on the railing, she suddenly miscarries. She cries out for her husband Pepe, who calls for the doctor. The doctor sees her and tells her to rest. Upon her request, Pepe wraps the coagula in newspaper and buries it in a corner of the garden, out of the children’s sight. In a few days, just as she is beginning to feel better, her son refuses to cut her some tomatoes from the garden: “No, Mami, the worms are there too.” She quickly becomes paranoid, thinking to herself, “Surely Pepe, clumsy as ever, hadn’t dug deep enough and then ... but how horrifying, the maggots crawling out, crawling out ...”¹ (106). A deep anxiety seeps into all of her daily tasks, which she carries out more and more absent-mindedly as she retreats further into her own psyche. She hardly speaks to her family, and soon becomes irritated by all that they say and do: “she wanted to be alone, to think, to observe ... she didn’t want to be distracted, she needed to be alert, listening, watching, listening, watching ...” (106). When they leave her alone in the house one evening, she hears a “light rasping sound, something dragging itself across the floor” (106), and glimpses a faint shadow beneath the door. She runs to the oil lamp across the room, douses herself in its contents, and lights a match. The narrator concludes, “Nothing would be left for them to avenge themselves upon but a pile of smoldering ashes” (107).

Not all of Dávila’s characters meet such grim fates. The title story may provide a glimpse into Dávila’s vision of some kind of way out. In “The Houseguest,” a repressive husband brings home a dangerous creature that harrasses his wife, the maid Guadalupe,

1 All ellipses in the passages quoted from *The Houseguest* are Dávila’s.

and their children. The story opens in an ambiguous register: “I’ll never forget the day he came to live with us. My husband brought him home from a trip.” Judging from this paragraph alone, the story could be about anything. For all we know, the husband could’ve brought home a cute dog that would become his wife’s lifelong companion. In the next paragraph, however, the unease settles in:

At the time we’d been married for almost three years, we had two children, and I wasn’t happy. My husband thought of me as something like a piece of furniture, one that you’re used to seeing in a particular spot but that doesn’t make the slightest impression. We lived in a small, isolated town, far from the city. A town that was almost dead, or about to disappear. (14)

Who is the real monster in this story? The husband or the houseguest? Even before we get to know the terrible creature that is the houseguest, we are situated in the horror of a marriage gone awry, the psychological violence² of a negligent partner. What is initially a banal comparison to a piece of furniture morphs into a commentary on what lurks behind the things that look harmless on the surface, the things we relegate to the unused corners of our houses (or gardens), where the houseguest types reside. I get all the more concerned when I consider that the narrator herself lives in a small rural town, another one of those neglected spaces that is “almost dead” — a corner of its own.

The houseguest turns out to be a kind of Oscar, albeit quieter; he’s “grim, sinister, with large yellowish eyes, unblinking and almost circular, that seemed to pierce through things and people” (14). Like Oscar, the houseguest is human-ish. (When I showed my dad the story, he thought the houseguest was an animal.) He sleeps all day, roams the house at night, stalks the narrator and her children, and eats only two meals a day, comprised of solely meat. Gleeson’s analysis of the beings in “Moses and Gaspar” applies here: the houseguest exists on an “ambiguous, uneasy continuum between the animal and the human (or the animal and the human and something else), an instability of borders that lies at the heart of Dávila’s story and

2 For more on psychological violence in Dávila, see the essay by Torres and Ramírez, “Lo fantástico, lo monstruoso y la violencia psicológica en ‘El huésped’ de Amparo Dávila” [“The Fantastic, the Monstrous, and Psychological Violence in ‘The Houseguest’ by Amparo Dávila.”]

makes it linger, disquietingly, in the reader's mind" ("The Crying Cat"). The narrator begs in vain for her disinterested husband to get rid of him. She almost meets a fate similar to our protagonist in "The Last Summer." One night, she notices him standing by her bed, staring at her. She leaps out of bed and throws an oil lamp at him, which he dodges. It shatters, and has just burst into flames when Guadalupe comes to her rescue. Later, after the houseguest attacks Guadalupe's child and the narrator, the two women decide to take matters into their own hands. When the husband goes on a three week business trip, they act:

Guadalupe sawed several large, sturdy planks while I looked for a hammer and nails. When everything was ready, we silently crept toward the corner room. The double door was ajar. Holding our breath, we closed the door, dropped the bolt, then locked it and began to nail the planks across it until we had completely sealed it shut. Thick drops of sweat ran down our foreheads as we worked. He didn't make any noise; he was seemingly fast asleep. When it was all finished, Guadalupe and I hugged each other, crying. (19)

The houseguest survives nearly two weeks, and raises hell as only Oscar could until his death. "When my husband returned," the narrator concludes, "we greeted him with the news of his guest's sudden and disconcerting death" (19).

"The Houseguest" stands out among the collection as the only story with a happy ending—if that's what this could be called. At the very least, the monster is slain, and everyone we're rooting for survives. It is also the only story where the protagonist isn't entirely isolated; her relationship with Guadalupe accounts for her survival of that initial midnight encounter with the houseguest and her success in carrying out his murder. After the deed is done, she hugs Guadalupe and cries. In this regard, it seems that Dávila is pointing to solidarity as a way out of the houseguest's grip. And yet, I'm not quite satisfied. I get the sense that the real horror in this ending is the temptation to celebrate. At the end of one nightmare lies the next. Kill one houseguest, and the next one comes home from a business trip. Who knows what it'll cost to get rid of him this time.

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