

## (Un) Chosen Spaces

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On a hot summer in a Costa Rican Pacific beach, as I lay down on a foam mattress, I could feel the sweat in my back, the thick material sucking it in. I had been lying there for a while looking at the ocean in front and thinking about this vastness that seems to have no end. It brought to mind those first explorers of the ocean, afraid to jump into the void full of evil creatures; their end. Their braveness has always surprised me. I feel better with my feet on the ground. The heat was too much so I stood up. There, on the mattress, I noticed my shape, a fossil of my body slowly rising to the surface. I stared at this space I had occupied and marveled at the smallness of me compared to the endless water just a few meters away. That was my shape, unique and ephemeral.

A sound brought my attention to the house next door; a wood hut where a woman was sweeping the floor while whistling a tune of a popular romantic song. She was of an indefinite age, maybe younger than me, but her body had the marks of childbirth and a life of hardships. Her house looked so clean I could see her reflection on the red concrete floor. It looked like she was having a dance with her other self.

She occasionally stopped sweeping to take a peek at the floor. I could see pride in her face. She inhabited that space with ease, with the familiarity of years of going over the same tasks: the unavoidable everyday life that shapes who we are.

She could sense my stare because she looked back at me and smiled, some teeth missing from her mouth. That place had also shaped who she was. Her skin, overexposed to the bright sun of those lands, looked corrugated, like the rusty tin that made her ceiling. I wondered what would have become of her if she would have been born in a bigger city. But there is no way to know that. Her movements had the cadence of the waves; her dress spoke of a life lived by the ocean: short, bright-colored, with flower patterns.

If he were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard would say that it shelters daydreaming, it protects the dreamer, and it allows one to dream in peace. His was a kind of philosophy of architecture that aimed to transcend the mere practical and functional use of our spaces. We are first and foremost corporeal beings who always inhabit some sort of physical space, our first

being a woman's womb. But since we are also thinking beings, our corporeality goes beyond flesh to encompass a more mysterious and incorporeal space, that of our minds, or I should rather say imagination. It is impossible for me to know what that woman at the beach hut was dreaming of, but most certainly her dreams were shaped by the spaces she inhabited. I can only guess from the way she moved, looked around and swept that she might have dreams of kids or husband coming home safe. But she might also be, like a character in a story by Kate Chopin, unnoticeable unsatisfied.

We are somehow like *matryoshka* dolls sheltered by many houses: the planet, the space we call home, and our bodies. As any relationship, ours with the spaces we inhabit might be a complex one. We are here, but where are we really? Do we want to be here? Are our spaces chosen or forced upon us?

Some time around the year 1112 in a town in Germany, a fourteen year old girl named Hildegard was offered to the church as a tithe by her parents. Little did they know by then that the girl will grow to become one of the greatest women in medieval history. Guided by Jutta, an anchoress, Hildegard was secluded in a small room adjacent to the church. Later, she founded and became abbess of a convent in the town of Bingen. This cloistered life ended up giving Hildegard a glimpse not only of the world of ideas but of the divine. In the safety of a convent, she could dream in peace. And big she dreamt. She became well-known in her time and was often the source of advice for religious and political leaders.

Writer, herbalist, composer, painter, mystic: all that she was. Bachelard

also ascertained that an inhabited space transcends geometrical space. In one of Hildegard's paintings, we see her surrounded by the cloistered space of a confessional booth while Volmar, her loyal secretary, takes notes of her visions. The space seems too rigid, even claustrophobic in its limitation, but there is the flame of God upon her head, connecting her mind with the space of the sacred, of the ultimate debatable space of all.

The red flame of the divine falls through her head; she becomes the vehicle for this mystic experience. Her face is attentive yet relaxed; she sits comfortably, like one who joyfully inhabits a chosen space. Yet, Hildegard's place in the world was not at first a conscious decision, her parents decided for her. But this eventually led to a fulfilled and productive life. The cloistered space did not imprison her mind; it flew free and wondered. Like the woman at the beach, I can picture Hildegard walking at ease in her convent, her body fully comfortable and used to what for lay people might seem like the restrictions of a life too deprived of worldly pleasures.

Many centuries later, a young, curious girl would walk around the gardens of her Catholic school trying to get a glimpse of the nuns' house. From the outside, it looked like a modern convent, closed, cold and unreachable. Its mysteriousness made my imagination flow in all directions. I was used to reading about Hildegard or Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, two of my heroines. Being surrounded by nuns made me want to experience some of the connection I secretly thought all nuns would have with God. Then the lucky day came. I was allowed to go their

house to help bring some boxes to the school. I felt like if I was about to travel back in time and enter a sacred space of wisdom and sanctity. I was rather disappointed to first encounter a line of white, big, humble underwear let in the sun to dry. The walls were white and the place had the air of a hospital, never fully inhabited. It did not smell of incense or God, but rather of medicine and detergent. So I chose other spaces to call my own.

Some decades before, in 1925, a young Mexican woman suffered an accident that changed her life forever. Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón did not choose to have a near fatal accident that made her bed one of the spaces she had to inhabit more frequently. Yet, immobility and pain made her take up painting. Whereas for Hildegard the cloistered space took her out of herself towards the divine, Frida's confinement resulted in an art that is openly and painfully self-reflective. We cannot escape living in the body we are given; a body that is more fragile than some of us care to remember. When faced with constant pain, one inevitable turns to self-reflection, and probably self-loathing. There is usually no escaping from so much pain despite all medications and treatments. In Frida's case, her body became a constant remainder of her immortality. At a time of great political struggles in Mexico and elsewhere in the world, Frida departed from the so-called more political art of her contemporaries. Hers is a confessional poetical and feminine art. The intense black eyes that stare directly at us from most of her self-portraits do not want to hide secrets. There is usually blood in her art, openly reminding the viewer of the fragility of the flesh.

There is no room for hope in *The Broken Column*. The land is arid and infertile, just as Frida's body is. Though tears come down her face, her gaze is still strong, almost defiant. A Greek broken goddess. And she is alone, like sufferers are. We carry our pain like houses. It is a space we are forced to inhabit. There is no way out from pain in this painting.

They say blue is the color of sadness, of melancholy. That was what I felt when I first visited *La casa azul*, Frida's former house turned museum. During one of her bed-bound moments, she wrote in her journal: "Why do I need feet, if I have wings to fly?" Looking at the bed where she actually slept, I could imagine her, flying away from pain guided by colors and a mirror. Her painted caskets are another remainder of her confinement to bed and to that room. There is Frida everywhere in this house; she still fully inhabits it in the feminine details of her many embroidered Juchiteca dresses, her elaborate jewelry and the beautiful kitchen utensils she treasured so much.

This house also speaks of the *mexicanidad* that is Frida, a proud daughter of an indigenous and diverse land. When I think about Frida, the colors that come to mind are passionate reds, playful oranges and bright greens. Yet, in her house, the calming blue seems to come more from her soul than from the cheerful and sometimes sarcastic façade she is believed to have put out to the world. One walks around her house as in a labyrinth of memories Frida fans like to believe we are entitled to. We feel we have a connection to this woman who opened the doors of her life for us to marvel. Hers is naked confession. Frida appeals to many people because she rarely reached to anyone outside herself to really see her

own frailty; she stands, brave, amidst the turbulence of her own self, an independence many are strive to achieve. And, despite all that, Frida still loved life profoundly.

This independence, though, is found by some only in suicide, in the annihilation of body-houses that can become too painful to live in. Somewhere in Massachusetts on the fall of 1974 a 46 beautiful blue-eyed woman entered her house, went to her garage and sat inside her car. She poisoned herself with carbon monoxide. Like Khalo some decades earlier, Anne Sexton started her art from pain, hers mostly psychological. Sexton's open self-exposure in her poetry repels some and attracts many. Not everyone wants to read poems called "Menstruation at Forty" or "In Celebration of my Uterus."

The mind is a tricky place to choose to lock oneself in, like people with some sort of mental disorder often do. Sexton inhabited a few other spaces throughout her life. She lived mostly in Massachusetts; she was institutionalized several times and she had a long history of psychiatric counseling. She was also tied to place, not purposefully like Hildegard, or aware like Frida, but hers also seems to be a confinement of sorts.

Here,  
in the room of my life  
the objects keep changing.  
Ashtrays to cry into,  
the suffering brother of the wood  
walls,  
the forty-eight keys of the typewriter  
each an eyeball that is never shut,  
the books, each a contestant in a  
beauty contest,  
the black chair, a dog coffin made of  
Naugahyde,

the sockets on the wall  
waiting like a cave of bees...

There is no joyful relationship to place. Objects seem strange, potentially dangerous and deadly. There is no way the dreamer in this house can aspire to beauty or peace. The speaker feels constantly observed by her typewriter and by sockets on the wall. She feels a captive in her own life. Feelings of inadequacy are not uncommon in women after ages of patriarchy, which biographers have mentioned was Sexton's main problem. A free spirit in middle class, white, suburban United States in the '50s and '60s, Sexton turned to open confession to find some release from constrictions and expectations placed on her by her circumstances.

Those of us who have experienced the dark night of the soul know of the frailty of the mind. We don't want to live confined there forever. There is too much going on, usually pain and confusion. Most minds don't make for livable homes. That's why many love Anne Sexton. She went to the obscure passages of her mind and came back to write about suffering, bleeding, death. Eventually she chose death over fighting. Some of us take comfort in her despair.

Frida's ashes inhabit a dark urn placed on a small table like any other object in her museum. She would have liked that, being surrounded by all her possessions and by hundreds of people, never again alone. The urn might feel like a womb, small, protective. There is no going out this time. The shape of my body on the foam mattress that day is long gone. There's no visible trait of it. I've come to inhabit other places,

my favorite now the page. I would like to think that the woman at the beach is still sweeping the floor of her wooden hut. There is comfort in knowing that some things never change.

Some say they write to exorcise their own internal demons. Sometimes the best we can hope for is that they move to the room next door.

### **Bibliography**

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