

HOUSE STYLE



Bonnie Costello

VONA GROARKE, *Other People's Houses*. Gallery Press, £6.95

“Homely as a house (or, safe as houses)”, wrote Elizabeth Bishop, describing a towering moose encountered in the middle of a dark road. And her readers know just how little security that simile provides, for her houses are so often uncanny, *unheimlich*, “inscrutable”, her forms profoundly shaky. Vona Groarke has learned a great deal from Bishop, not least how houses speak of their inhabitants, bearing witness to the drama of everyday life. Both poets adopt that seventeenth-century Dutch penchant for looking at the overlooked:

Wedding gifts from the 30's,
Souvenirs from children's trips,
a gilt-framed oil, an inlaid chair,
cut glass and china (chipped).

While these “random artefacts” mean nothing to the auctioneer in “House Contents”, the poet still finds in still life the traces of a “plot”.

But Groarke's houses are safer than Bishop's. For all the “darkness strewn around”, chaos remains an affect, not a real infringement. And the trope of houses itself feels a bit thread-bare. This may be due in part to Bishop's widespread influence on contemporary poetry. But she is not the only ghost here. One recognizes the late settings and synecdoches of many a formalist—Yeats, Frost, Auden, Larkin, Merrill, Heaney—in these well-laid-out poems. Not that domesticity will ever go out of fashion. But after a volume of variations on the theme one wants a little fresh air: “Open House”, “The Lighthouse”, “The Slaughterhouse”, “The Glasshouse”, “House Guest”, “House Wine”, “House Fire”, “House Style”. I found myself wanting to sabotage the list: the doghouse, the outhouse, houseflies, house husbands, and on to the appliances. Too much of a good thing can only “raze” our expectations.

Groarke's wit, though heavily invested in puns, commands our admi-

ration, as in “The Courthouse”, where “men of letters” are “sprawled on granite walls”, where “silence is upheld” and “windows, in their cases, rattle on.” We are charmed by the partner who passes the glass “gingerly beneath [his] snout”, at the beginning of a sonnet, and toasts at the end: “There’s poetry, but here’s wine.” But there’s a little too much potpourri even in such understated humour. Beneath it, a significant talent is clamouring to get out, a madwoman in the attic one wants to hear more often. She can mutter curses in verses and rhyme “flesh” with “trash”, pair “cock” with “pens”, as in the biting sonnet “Folderol” (first published in *Metre*):

I have been walking by the harbour
where I see it’s recently sprayed
that Fred loves Freda, and Freda cops Fred.
Which reminds me of you, and the twenty-four

words for “nonsense” I wrote on your thighs and back
(the night you came home from her house with some cock-
and-bull story of missed connections and loose ends)
with passion-fruit lipstick and mascara pens.

Including, for the record: blather, drivel, trash,
prattle, palaver, waffle, balderdash, gibberish, shit.
Thinking I had made a point of sorts, but not
so sure when I woke up to find my own flesh

covered with your smudged disgrace
while you, of course, had vanished without a trace.

Here is a poet who knows where all the ladders start, who loves the slippery slide of strategic slant rhymes, the bending of syntax against line to break the diction open.

Indeed, it is in the rhyme-and-metre-making argument that Groarke’s poetic strength is most in evidence. “Open House”, for instance, wonderfully alludes, through its heroic couplets, to the great country house poems of the seventeenth century. The development at “Sycamore Court” (“seventy-six ideal homes / laid out with the stature of so many tombs”) is a far cry from the pastoral ideal of Appleton House. It promises a retreat from the invasive “neighbourly interface” of common humanity, but the façade is thin. “It’s only breeze blocks, plaster, paint, insulation / that maintains this illusion of neat isolation.” The off-rhyme neatly picks up the pun on insulation, exposing an attitude within these pristine walls. Similarly, the difference between ideal and real collapses in strategic

rhyme: “but how can we really be quite so distinct / when the smell of my own bin advances the stink.” Later on the baser side of “common ground” is hinted in the rhyme with “pounds”. High diction, associated with aspiration to “the Court”, finds delightful incongruity in the poet’s origins. “With all the aplomb of the propertied lass; / I saw myself sacrosanct, safe and secure.” But she brings her low diction, her “Wheelie bin”, “booze” and nickname “pup”, with her in the fantasy. Anyway, the “debris” at the edges of this development “doesn’t bode well” for the prospective privacy of the abode. A side of Robert Frost lurks in this poem, the side that “doesn’t love a wall”, that would like to see it, in Groarke’s words, “crumble and fall, / or else be rolled back by the great hand of fate / as happened to Lazarus, or the guests on Blind Date.”

The house is a natural and traditional metaphor for the formalist. “The house was quiet and the world was calm”, wrote Wallace Stevens, in the most formally controlled of his poems. Groarke’s “House Rules” provides a kind of blueprint, an *ars poetica* along the lines of Archibald MacLeish, only using triplets instead of couplets:

The foundation is the opening gambit;
What’s added are storeys or rooms. But
its premise is the open ground, unbuilt.

The pun on storeys and rooms (stanzas) establishes the trope. Where Heaney opened ground on the analogy with agriculture, this poet breaks ground with architecture. The poem explores structure in mind and experience, the interplay of outside and inside, open and closed, light and dark. “House Rules” starts with a foundation and ends with a roof, reflecting poetry’s expansive power which “for all its confinement and poise, / it is, in turn, preoccupied with skies.”

If the trope of the house is prefabricated, the forms of these poems are never mere façades. The structural variety and integrity in these poems is impressive; from double sonnet (“House Viewing”, buyer’s, then seller’s) to prose poem (“House Fire”) the designs are customized to their subjects. The volume as a whole is also thoughtfully ordered, from the first poem, “Indoors”, an abstract, metaphoric coming to consciousness, to “House Rules”, a poem of construction, and on to realist poems about how we live in what has been constructed, homes and institutions: “Domestic Arrangements”, “Workhouses”. From there we move to the body and death (“Slaughterhouse”) and then on to the imaginary: “The Play House”, “The Glasshouse”, “The Image of a House”. The walls erected at the beginning of the book gradually dissolve until we are “Outdoors”,

after which the poet turns to the reader (or herself as other), her work complete.

One feels, in certain poems, that Groarke has lingered a little too long. She need not be quite so emphatic. In a poem titled "The Glasshouse", about the growth of a relationship, measured literally in "stones" they have collected, we do not need to be told that "the hilt of one could hurt us / or pierce the walls of a delicate house / that, in the end, may be as breakable as glass." "The Dream House" (which owes something to Bishop's proto-crypto dream house, and her "Sonnet") does not need to include "a mirror / in which I am caught" or if it does, we do not need to be told that "I look strange" or later "I begin to see myself." Groarke is fond of tropes of accretion, amplification, elimination ("It is not, or—, or—, or—; it is...") and they are often quite effective. One wishes she would let parataxis and metonymy do their work, or that more mystery would arise in the summary statements. In the final poem "The Haunted House", the poet is relinquishing her poetry, a familiar genre ("go, little book"). A series of imperatives to "you" to "think of home" (another Bishopism) gives way to a detached "I" that steps out of the house, leaving it to others who will find her trace. The penultimate image carries the idea: "There's a thin voice singing 'I dreamt I dwelt' / and a stream in a ditch where the house dips in / that has my face in it." Do we need, except to round off the sonnet, these unmemorable lines as the last in the volume: "the time is now, / and I never will step into this house again"? I think back to other departure poems, to Stevens, who "left what still is / The look of things", who "left behind / A spirit storming in blank walls", who "open[ed] the door of his house on flames." I think of Whitman: "If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles... I stop somewhere waiting for you." Perhaps it isn't fair to compare a young contemporary to these celebrated poets. Yet Groarke repeatedly invites comparison. We can't help but think of Auden's series of poems a house in Vienna ("The Birth of Architecture", "Thanksgiving for a Habitat" etc.) when reading "Domestic Arrangements", though there are more skeletons in the closets of this hall to attic tour. Even William Carlos Williams, the "happy genius of [his] household" makes an appearance in a piece of shale "glazed with rain." A poet strong enough to imagine independently "my shadow steaming off in all this sun" doesn't need such props from "other people's houses."