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Questions of Home

IT WAS ON AN MP3 player while walking on a treadmill in a cavernous gym in New Jersey that I first heard "The Folks Who Live on the Hill." Those were the years we lived in Princeton part-time because I was teaching at Columbia University. It was Arthur Prysock's rendering, recorded in 1967. This somewhat obscure song, from a time and place foreign to me, has become one of the *canciones de mi vida,* the "songs of my life," by which I don't mean the *chachachás* and *boleros* on the radio when I was growing up in Cuba, but the "this is your life" songs, those that tell your story in someone else's words. Not like this late-in-life reckoning, which retells it in mine.

In the lyric, written by Oscar Hammerstein II, a young couple—the folks who live on the hill—look forward to building a house on a spot of land, raising their children, having them leave the nest, and living out the rest of their span in the same. By the time I heard it, the song was seventy years old. It debuted in the 1937 musical, *High, Wide and Handsome,* a Western about farmers who find oil on their property. Backed by a spare, up-tempo arrangement, Irene Dunne sings it to an adoring Randolph Scott on the Hollywood-studio "hill" where the newlyweds plan to build their house. That same year Bing Crosby and Guy Lombardo recorded the song, but neither version made much of an impression.

It was not until two decades later, when Peggy Lee covered it as the last cut on *The Man I Love*, that the song's reach and appeal became evident. Arranged by Nelson Riddle, who slowed the tempo and added violins, it was reborn as a lush, languid ballad perfect for Lee's small but affecting voice. Influenced by this recording, in the 1960s other artists covered the song, among them Prysock.

I listen to "The Folks Who Live on the Hill" and I hear the story of the last decades of my life: thirty-two years in thirty-two bars. With the difference that what the song narrates prospectively, I construe retrospectively, as if the lyric flashed back rather than forward. This is why Prysock's version remains my favorite. His deep, occasionally raspy baritone gives voice to the experiences of someone who's been up and down and around and over that hill. The intro, a subdued sax line, sets

the reflective mood. When he enters with the word, *Someday*, I can't help thinking back to the day, long ago, when Mary Anne and I found our house on a hill.

The road into the neighborhood rises to an eminence before falling away. Our house sits on the crest of the eminence. (In truth, it's a house on a hill within a hill: Chapel Hill, North Carolina.) Like the couple in the song, we moved in when the house was "shiny and new," a month after getting married in front of the Chapel Hill Police Station (the only justice of the peace available that Saturday morning was a detective). Our first night in the house was inauspicious. We got into a loud argument (loud on my part), I forget about what, and our brand-new across-the-street neighbors called the cops. While I cowered in the bedroom, Mary Anne answered the door, explained away the argument, and I was spared another visit to the police station.

My American life, with its storms and its bounties, did not begin on the morning in October 1960 when my parents and their four children disembarked from the City of Havana ferry in Key West. It began thirty years later, on that "someday" that saw us take ownership of the house on the hill.

Roamer or squatter: when you encounter exile, those are your options. I have friends who, like me, left Cuba as children, but unlike me, thrive on travel. They answered forced displacement with elective displacement. All their roads lead to roam. Home is where they hang their backpacks. I responded to exile in the opposite way: by turning sedentary almost to the point of stillness. Absent from my homeland, I squat on my home's land. When I have to travel, I worry that the house won't be there when I come back. I tell myself that my anxiety is a form of motion sickness induced by exile.

In *The Long, Long Trailer*, a 1954 movie starring Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, the Desi character drives back on a windy, rainy night to the park where he had stationed the trailer. It's not there. He says: "It's a fine thin' when you come home to your home and your home is gone." The line is supposed to be funny but I've never heard it that way because I'm afraid that the same thing could happen to me. During the time we spent in Princeton, every time we drove back to Chapel Hill, which we did several times every semester, it was a relief when I saw that our house was still right there, on top of the hill, where we had left it. And not only a relief, a surprise. Knowing better, I expected the worst, as I tend to do.

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Elizabeth Bishop, another squatter in search of home, gave her books titles that connoted itinerancy: *North & South, Questions of Travel, Geography III.* But the great subject of her poetry was a wished-for but never achieved homing. Early and late, images of transient domesticity recur. In a famous poem, "Over Two Thousand Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," the speaker, after giving an account of her travels, describes an illustration in her childhood Bible. The familiar Nativity scene, with the Holy Family in the stable, is the outstanding example in our culture of transient domesticity. Another poem from *A Cold Spring,* "The Prodigal," consists of two sonnets based on the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the last line of the first sonnet, the key word is "exile." In the last line of the second sonnet, the last word is "home."

Home and exile, the two poles of Bishop's imagination, are also the two poles of mine. As in her poems, my emotional life has transpired between North and South, except that for me "home" was South and "exile" was North, "el norte," as Cubans of my generation called the United States.

Even if I'm only coming back from a short jaunt to the supermarket or the gym, as I drive up our street no sight is more welcome than the gabled roof of our house above the line of trees, then the second story, and finally the pale-yellow house entire, standing on red brick pillars of different heights, next to a gravel driveway.

The builder intended to cover the gaps between pillars with lattice, but I liked the up-in-the-air illusion, as if our house were not a nest but an aviary. It reminded me of beach houses on stilts. We also nixed the plan to build a staircase leading up to the front door because I thought that it would destroy the suspension-effect. So the only way into our house is through a side door. If houses with a centered door flanked by windows emulate the features of a face (hence the term *facade*), ours resembles a cubist portrait by Picasso. The mouth appears next to an ear. The wraparound porch could be a set of teeth.

Like the other Romance languages, Spanish does not have a word for home: *casa* is what we usually say. Because in Spanish a man's home is his *casa,* I'm struck by the distinction in English between house and home. The difference seems to be that a house is only a dwelling, while a home requires warm family ties among its residents. Hence: "A house is not a home."

I discriminate between *casa* and *home* in a different way. When I pronounce "home," my lips close to that most homely of consonants, the "m." I say *casa,* and my

mouth gapes to generate the two vowels. The sound of "home" suggests seclusion; that of *casa,* openness. In Spanish you welcome a friend to your house with the greeting, "Estás en tu casa." In English you say, "Make yourself at home." The former says: "This is your house." The latter conveys to your guest: "Pretend that you're in your home, though you and I know that you aren't." You can't say "my home is your home" because your home is yours alone.

My *casa*-inflected view of home supposes, if not a multifamily household, a constellation of familial homes. Not irrelevantly, "house" is also the term applied to a historical family, as in "The Fall of the House of Usher," which names both the family and the dwelling. In the Havana house where I was raised, I lived with my parents and siblings, but my paternal grandparents, my aunt and uncle, and four of my cousins lived literally next door. Two homes that made one *casa*. On my mother's side, several generations of her family shared a large Beaux arts–style house that dated back to the beginning of the twentieth century. My cousin's bedroom had been her aunt's before her.

Your home can sit in the middle of nowhere, a little house on the prairie, and it's still home. To the extended family, molecular rather than nuclear, corresponds the expanded home, the *casa*.

I'm not sure what passers-by can infer about us from our house. Certainly that we like trees and don't mind overgrown bushes. If a front door marks the threshold between public and private, the lack of one may suggest we're introverts, which is true enough. On the other hand, currently Mary Anne and I are the only people on Tallyho Trail (the neighborhood is called Fox Meadow) with a name on the mailbox. For years after we moved in, other mailboxes bore the names of the residents, but at some point the custom fell out of fashion, perhaps a sign of our increasingly monadic lives. The anonymity of my neighbors seems to me at least as unneighborly as the absence of a front door.

When we moved in, I baptized the house, with mock pomposity, "Mar-A-Villa." *Mar* is ocean and *Villa* is country house. Add the "a" and together they spell *Maravilla*, Marvel. Looking back, what seemed a marvel was less the house, a 2200 sq. ft. two-story farmhouse, than the change of life it represented.

Lacking a word for "home," Spanish cannot properly translate that unique affliction called "homesickness." The bilingual dictionary will offer nostalgia and melancholy, but I can be nostalgic or melancholy about many things. If you're

homesick, you're prey to a specific variety of nostalgia or melancholy, what the French call *mal de pays,* the malaise that arises from being away from your country or your region. Many times I've said to myself: "Extraño mi casa." *I miss my house.* But it's never occurred to me to say, "I'm homesick."

The use of "home" expands in circles, like a pebble dropped into a pond: homebody, homeplace, homestead, hometown, homeland. Other iterations further bring home, as one says, the pervasiveness of the notion: homespun, homebound, homemade, homework, home team, home stretch, home run (in Spanish: *jonrón*). Even the digital age has not strayed far from home: home page.

In Spanish you'd never call your country "my home sweet home," as Irving Berlin does in "God Bless America," not only because there is no adequate equivalent for the concept, but because we don't think of a country as a residence. Cuba is not *mi casa* but *mi patria,* my fatherland. If it had a distinct regional identity, the part of Cuba from which I hail wouldn't be my home state but *mi patria chica,* my small fatherland.

But if it's home cooking you're after, you may find it in one of several Miami restaurants with *casa* in their names: Casa Juan, Casa Juancho, Casa Paco, Casa Larios, and La casita, which serve Cuban and Spanish dishes. If your tastes run to pasta and tiramisu instead, you can try Casa Tua ("Your House" in Italian, another of the home-forsaken languages).

When we bought the house, only the frame had been erected. The first time we walked in it, we could see through it! A structure of wooden beams and planks, a piece of floor here and there, a skeletal stairway to take us upstairs. If you were to x-ray the house, that's what you would see, bones without flesh on them. We proceeded to flesh out the skeleton in our image. No moldings, no mantelpiece over the fireplace, no partitions separating kitchen, living room, and dining room, no blinds or curtains on the windows (the elevation made them unnecessary). We asked for white paint on all the walls and recessed lighting everywhere but the bedrooms. Mary Anne and I were starting from scratch, and we wanted the spareness of the house to reflect that. Our marriage resembled one of those early maps with blank spots; we'd fill in the blanks in the course of our life together. In addition to books and records, I took from my former house my reading chair and what used to be called an entertainment center. Mary Anne brought books, some silverware and her childhood bed, which her daughter had slept on and where my daughter would sleep three nights out of every week.

Here we helped raise the two children from my first marriage, who were in grade school at the time of the divorce, and provided a rest stop for Mary Anne's two, who were already in college. Week after week I would pick David and Miriam up at school on Wednesday afternoon and drop them off at their mother's punctually at 5:00 PM on Saturday. On my "off" days I'd take them to school in the mornings to see them, however briefly, and if they had a volleyball or baseball game, we would attend those. Otherwise, Mary Anne and I were on our own, a division of parental labor I enjoyed, but I'm not sure how David and Miriam felt about it. Early on Miriam would sometimes wake up at night crying, not knowing whose house she was in. Years later, when I took the job at Columbia and planned to spend part of the week by myself in New York City, she said: "Now you will have joint custody of yourself."

When David and Miriam got old enough to drive themselves to places, the routine of dividing the week between houses began to fall apart. By the time they graduated from high school, they were mostly living with their mother, who did not remarry. Since then, twenty years ago, they haven't spent a single night in the house on the hill. I'm afraid to ask why. This is what English calls a "home truth."

Each of the three choruses of "The Folks Who Live on the Hill" addresses a different stage in the curriculum vitae of the folks. In the first, they're newlyweds and the house is shiny and new; in the second, they've added "a wing or two" because children have come along; in the last, they've become empty nesters. This chorus begins: "And when the kids grow up and leave us / We'll sit and look at the same old view, just we two." Two words stick out to me: "leave us." The plain meaning is that the children grow up and move away, but when the object of leaving is specified, the verb suggests a deeper rupture, as when we say that a man left his country or his wife.

Vacated, the wing or two that the folks added when kids were born, turns into a reminder of how much things have changed, and not for the better. To cheat memory, you might put the rooms to other uses, as we have. A different couple would sell the house and downsize to a condo or townhome. But not the folks. And not us. That's where they began their life together and that's where they intend to remain. According to Eliot in "East Coker," "Home is where you start from." Hammerstein does not agree: Home is where you end up. The next line in the lyric completes the picture: "We'll sit and look at the same old view, just we two."

I retired from teaching two years ago. Unlike some of our friends, who regard

retirement as an opportunity to explore, to expand their horizons, we look upon it as a time to circle the Volkswagens, batten down imaginary shutters, and close in upon ourselves. As we age, the world becomes strange, like a science fiction story with characters named Harg and Rirga who consume arnel cakes. At least that's how it seems to us. The sensation of strangeness puts a premium, if not on family, on familiarity, the highest degree of which is intimacy. Retired, we enjoy a closeness, a "coupleness" that we had not achieved while we were both working. Were I writing in Spanish, the noun I would use is *compenetración*. The dictionary translates it as "rapport," but the word is more physical, more carnal. It denotes a reciprocal, sustained merging of body and spirit.

After David and Miriam stopped living here, their bedrooms evolved. His has been taken over by books, CDs, and vinyl albums. During the pandemic his closet became a reserve pantry, which it remains to this day. Miriam's room is now a guest room and her closet, more ample than David's, holds a filing cabinet and folders with fifty years' worth of my class and research notes. The only clues to the past are the snow globes I used to bring back from my trips for Miriam and the Gloria Estefan poster that David put up. (Even so, anytime I refer to these rooms, it's still "David's room," "Miriam's room.") The other half of the second floor, what I believe is called a "bonus room," contains Mary Anne's workstation (she pays the bills) and her sewing machine and paraphernalia. An upright piano that we bought when Miriam began taking lessons at her mother's house has never been played.

I rarely go upstairs these days because I'm not comfortable there. It's Mary Anne's domain. That's where she displays photos of her parents, her children and grandchildren, and my children. Downstairs, where I live, there are no family photos.

In a little-known book (*Mélancholia*, 1928), the French writer and polemicist Léon Daudet (son of the better known Alphonse) argues that one fundamental cause of melancholy is what he calls "the loss of *ambiance*," by which he means the lack of consonance ("communication," he also says) between ourselves and our surroundings, the sum total of impressions, conscious and not, that our environment makes upon us. When the consonance or communication between outside and inside breaks down, melancholy results. Not surprisingly, Daudet wrote this book in exile.

I'm a squatter not because I'm not legally entitled to our property—it's bought and paid for, as Americans redundantly say—but because my communication with the world around me—what I see, hear, touch, smell, *sense*—is intermittent, like a bad radio transmission. No matter how long I live in Chapel Hill, I'll never be properly tuned in. Too much interference from divergent histories. Were I to be asked, as Southerners sometimes do, "Who are your people?" I wouldn't know where to begin.

Before the pandemic, I had my hair cut by a youngish blond woman with a melodious Southern drawl that I liked. She was born in Chapel Hill and has lived here all her life, as have her parents. Her eighty-five-year-old mother, a former member of the town council, has a street named after her. In their lifetime Chapel Hill has evolved from a cozy college town, "The Southern Part of Heaven," into an overbuilt, congested sanctuary for Northerners fleeing metropolitan woes. Jo, my hairdresser, despises the transformation of what she calls the "village," but she retains the sense of ownership, the consonance of person and place. Under the new parking structures and seven-story apartment buildings, she sees the old town. I've lived here almost as long as she has, but her kind of vision is developed during our formative years, when the experience of place leaves a deeper, durable impression, like a footprint in wet cement. Hearing her talk about local landmarks, extant or extinct, I came to understand what it means to have a hometown.

Several years ago we ran into each other at the car wash. She said to me: "This place has been here a long time. I remember coming here as a little girl." I'd bet that Jo has never experienced "loss of *ambiance*."

My study, just beyond the kitchen on the first floor, was intended as the screened back porch. On the two sides that face the backyard we asked the builder to put rows of windows and on the widest of the other walls, a floor to ceiling bookcase that holds all of my Spanish-language books, even though I read less in Spanish than I used to. Still, they act as a bulwark against foreignness. I go in, close the door, and I'm in a custom-made (dare I say, homemade?) island: my own private Cuba. It smells of paper and cigar smoke: the scent of home.

Very few people have ever come into my study. Unbeknown to me, my teenage son used to sneak out of the house late at night through one of the windows. The reading chair by the window that David used is the one I took from my former home. I bought it the year he was born. It's aged better than I have. And it's one

of those objects whose natural name is in Spanish: *butacón.* Reading chair is to *butacón* as Gus is to Gustavo.

Beyond the windows, shrubbery and trees. Some years ago, when I was on sabbatical, I got interested in birds. We threaded a metal pole with arms for the feeders into the red clay soil (not easy). I bought a book entitled *Birds of the Carolinas* to learn the names. Bird-watching from my *butacón* day after day, I was fascinated by the differences in temperament. The robins were pushy; the cardinals, regally indifferent; the titmice, timid; the wrens, restless. The grackles, bullies all. And my favorites, the goldfinches, the jittery belles of the backyard. Every day I fed my birds a balanced diet of seeds and suet. But after a couple of years I lost interest. The black metal pole survives, a bare reminder of the ephemeralness of my enthusiasms. Call me flighty.

Other than the house on the hill, my Cuban *casa* is the only new house I've lived in. Since I was almost twelve when we left Cuba, I have firm and fond memories of that house, which was built to coincide with my birth. I remember the tropical deco design, the granite floors (so cool in the summer), the central hallway, the rooms on either side of it, the furniture, the bathrooms, and my favorite nooks and hiding places, foremost among them the grotto my mother erected in the tiled patio to thank the Virgin Mary for her only daughter. What I don't remember is abandoning it, those last few days before we left, two weeks after the family business had been confiscated. They must have been conspicuously hectic, however. My mother packed twenty suitcases with everything she thought she would need, including tinfoil and bedsheets. The visits by alarmed relatives and friends must have been constant. Yet the first thing I remember about that time is standing on the deck of the ferry while the suitcases were being inspected.

For years, living in Miami, I expected to return to that house. I've never stopped regarding it as *mi casa.*

The English language privileges motion. If I can afford a bigger house, I'm moving up. If I'm stuck in my job, I haven't moved, I'm going nowhere. But to jump at a chance for better, I make my move. Home is what does not move, yet in America people live in mobile homes. Even traditional homes are sometimes lifted from lot to lot. Static, from *stasis,* is not a good thing, whether its source is your phone or your boss. In professional golf, the Saturday round is called "moving day," a day of hope and promise because that's when you move up the leaderboard. Wherefore this idolatry of motion?

My other language has a different take on movement. To designate a change of residence or removal from one region to another the verb is not the cognate, *mover,* but *mudarse*, literally to mutate. The same verb applies to molting, shedding a skin or leaving a cocoon. In Spanish even the expression for a change of clothes, *una muda de ropa,* implies mutation, as if the clothes really made the man. When we move, we mutate, we become other people. Immigration and exile bring about the most jarring type of *mudada.*

Our house's hub, the continent to which my island is adjacent, is the living room. On the walls we have several pieces by Cuban artists, as well three collages by Mary Anne. One of them, *Between the Lines,* was her first gift to me in the early weeks of my glorious, short-lived career as chair of the Romance Studies department at Duke University. Glorious because that's when Mary Anne and I fell in love, short-lived because toward the end of the second semester my colleagues complained about my relationship with Mary Anne, who was the department's admin, and I quit the next day. I don't know whether love conquers all, but the perks of the job were no match for ours.

The collage consists of multicolored squares and rectangles set at different angles against a pastel-dusted white background, with words (*cryptic, compel, conjunction, parallel*) penciled in between the figures. It hung in the chair's office for as long as I occupied it.

When Mary Anne surprised me with it, we were living that exhilarating, exhausting, springlike season of romance (even though it was fall). Our feelings were budding, though we had not yet spoken them. Telling me something without saying it, Mary Anne created *Between the Lines.* I was so besotted that I kept her phone messages about departmental business on my answering machine at home just to hear her voice. It did not take long for the buds to flower. By January we had left our spouses: my Cuban wife and her American husband. Two messy, emotionally fraught years followed before we finally got married.

At the edge of our property, about seventy yards from my study, stands a pin oak whose trunk measures fourteen feet around. The branches spread beyond what used to be the lawn, which we gave up on years ago because of the lack of sunlight, and now looks like a patchwork quilt of dead leaves. I like to sit at my desk, as I'm doing now, and contemplate the oak's solidity, its sheer "there-ness." It teaches me to last. According to a tree age calculator I found on the web, it's about 150

years old. I don't expect, nor would I wish, to reach that Biblical age, but like the oak, I intend to remain what I am for as long as I can. Not who I am, that I've always known, but what I am, the man I became over the last thirty years. Leaves will drop; a bough or two may break off; but the sunlit trunk with the dark roots stands firm.

Doing a little exploring, we once came across, in a corner of the lot near the oak, a trash heap of rusted pails and utensils. Not far, on the other side of the boundary line, people still live in an old log cabin. This area, developed in the 1980s and early 1990s, used to be farmland. When we first moved in, Mary Anne noticed furrows in the soil where she was putting in her garden. We speculate that they were made by ploughs. At the entrance to the neighborhood there is a historically Black community. It may be that the ancestors of the current residents worked this land.

The foliage in our two acres used to be less dense than it is. Some of the branches of the sweetgum a few feet from the front porch overhang the roof. The holly bushes by the study partially obstruct my view. For eight or nine months out of the year, the house is all but invisible from the street. Once an aviary, it has become a nest. Instead of looking out, we look in and, in my case, back. During the pandemic, I actually welcomed the confinement. No longer was I embarrassed by my stillness. (Mary Anne, less given to immobility, did not find it so pleasant.) A good day is when I wake up and there's nothing ahead, no visits that will take me out of the house or leaky faucet that will bring a handyman in. It's just we two, as in the song.

I didn't think much about old age until it had snuck up on me. Had I thought about it, this is not how I would have envisioned it. My parents grew old surrounded by family, as did my aunts and uncles. Hardly a day went by that they did not see or talk to someone they had known all their lives. But that was another time, another place. When the water holes are few and far between, you learn to like your thirst.

It's been said that an exile is someone for whom all homes are provisional. (The Cuban patriot and poet José Martí, who lived in New York City for more than ten years, expressed the idea in a metaphor: a house in a foreign country feels like a ship.) This isn't always true of long-term or chronic exiles, people who have spent many years away from their homeland and, unlike Martí, do not plan to return, but for whom the estrangement of the exile persists. Such people, and I count

myself among them, have a more complicated idea of home. Our homes may be provisional, which makes them less homelike, but they aren't temporary, which makes them more like home. We're squatters who dream of settling.

When I referred to science fiction earlier I was thinking of a novella by Lloyd Biggles Jr., "Orphan of the Void." One of the characters writes a tune he calls "Homing Song." It becomes a galactic hit and inspires the orphan of the title to go back to Earth in search of his origins. The sad beauty of the song, he says, entwined itself into his consciousness. That's what "The Folks Who Live on the Hill" has done to me. It's my homing, or perhaps re-homing song. Orphaned by Cuba, I adopted Chapel Hill. The house on the hill is not *mi casa*, but here, at last, I feel at home.