





« TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY ROBIN MYERS »

# THE VISIT

MARIANA GRACIANO

Foreword by  
ANTONIO MUÑOZ MOLINA

  
*Alliteration*

THE VISIT | MARIANA GRACIANO  
Translated from the Spanish by Robin Myers  
First edition in English in November 2023

© Mariana Graciano  
© Foreword by Antonio Muñoz Molina  
© Alliteration Publishing, 2023

[www.thealliteration.us](http://www.thealliteration.us)

Design by Elena Roosen  
Cover by Andrea Martínez  
Proofreading by Tess Rankin & Félix García  
Editorial Coordination by Amayra Velón

This work has been published within the framework of the Sur Translation Support Programme of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship of the Argentine Republic (Obra editada en el marco del Programa Sur de Apoyo a las Traducciones del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto de la República Argentina).  
web site: <http://programa-sur.cancilleria.gob.ar/>

ISBN: 979-8-9876541-8-7

## AN INVITATION TO THE STORIES OF MARIANA GRACIANO

With striking serenity and ease, Mariana Graciano's imagination seems to alight on the strange or fantastical side of everyday life, a side especially perceptible to children. There are children in her stories, young boys and girls, silent and observant guests in the adult world. And there are also adults—fathers, mothers, grandparents, aunts and uncles—in a state of perpetual confusion, or so they appear. In part because they are seen through children's eyes; in part because, no matter their age, they haven't lost the sense of being, in fact, lost. Or banished—a feeling often experienced at the end of childhood and soon forgotten, though its consequences endure. A child observes intensely but lacks contextual information, which means that whatever they observe almost always has the air of an isolated snapshot, a Polaroid. Neither the past nor the present has become important yet, so the present looms colossal. This is why childhood houses are so enormous in our memory, and periods of time so protracted, so static.

Almost all writers consider the spaces and temporalities of childhood from the remote perspective of their adult consciousness. Graciano invokes them in the present, which intensifies the effects of wonder and strangeness. Children and grown-ups inhabit simultaneous but parallel worlds, near strangers to each other. The only irrefutable bonds are those of tenderness. In

these stories, whose style is so austere, so tight, with a diction more poetic than narrative per se, the colloquial inflections of speech are significant as means of containing and expressing affection. Kids play their games or tell their stories; adults go about their business in the peripheral area they occupy. On torrid summer afternoons, they take interminable naps, inexplicable to an impatient child. They drink, get excited over incomprehensible things, live out inner dramas that the kids uncomprehendingly observe, registering only a sense of alarm. After all, children always fear that the world is about to fall apart—but they are also almost telepathically sensitive to the fragility of grown-ups and want to protect them.

In this borderland between child and adult life that Graciano holds so dear, fantastical elements often emerge. Not the stupefying magic of magical realism, but something far more furtive, closer to suspicion than certainty, less fear than unease. Aren't adults in themselves—so outlandishly large, so unfathomable—always a source of astonishment? And from the level of children's movement and vision, reality reveals cracks, shadows, and patches of mystery that grown-ups can't see. A light shines inexplicably in the depths of a summer night, flaring in that space of darkness and menace beyond a well-lit house. Something or someone makes noises in a courtyard as if digging underground. A rat hides in a cranny behind the couch.

But grown-ups aren't spared the throb of the threatening or the unexpected. Mariana Graciano's adults are generally as bewildered as children in the brittle normalcy of the world. A kind neighbor from a faraway country may conceal an atrocious identity, like a character in a horror film slowly peeling off a rubber mask. Love leaves someone suddenly deflated, adrift. Illness erodes memory and an elderly person becomes a frightened, disoriented child trying to decipher an unfamiliar street. Poetry stirs in the shadows of the unexplained.

Antonio Muñoz Molina

# **THE VISIT**

**MARIANA GRACIANO**





## THE VISIT

Sometimes I think I can still hear the chickens clucking outside. The sound wakes me. It takes me a few seconds to recognize the bed, the room, the city. I wonder what's become of that place, if someone's living there, if it still exists, or if it's been torn down, reduced to dirt and forgotten scrub, or if there are animals grazing, licking each other clean, obliviously chewing some cud of the past.

I focus on an edge of my nightstand and stop blinking until it vanishes, until I can see only smudges, then start to reconstruct the route as meticulously as I can: first you drive out of town, abandon the pavement, confront the dirt road ahead. Then a cloud of dust rises up behind the car and you let it swallow everything, people, houses, pharmacies, stores, the world, goodbye.

Two kilometers in a straight line, then a right turn at the store, then another kilometer, then a left turn. After a few minutes, the two pine trees at the entrance came into view. On arrival, the chaos of dogs, chickens pecking and shitting everywhere, sunlight ravaging the earth. I was always ready to jump out as soon as my dad stopped the car. I'd fling open the door, my legs asleep after the long trip. Hey, you've gotten so big, kisses on the cheek, uncle, hugs, cousins, aunt, hi, old dog, new dogs, and beyond, beyond our voices, the deep silence of the fields.

We'd unload our luggage, pile our things in one of the bedrooms, and our mom would send us straight to change, put on our bathing suits even though there was nowhere to swim. Too hot for clothes, let alone shoes. You had to follow the shade all day long, splash yourself with pails of cold water from the well.

My cousin Luciana was always close behind me. We'd glance at each other, smile without saying much, recognizing each other again after a year, noting what had changed, what hadn't. Within half an hour, we were off, exploring everything, talking, playing, making plans for tomorrow as more aunts and uncles arrived, more cousins, more cars, more bags.

Anyone who hadn't turned up by midday on December 31 wasn't coming. Whoever was there, that's who was staying. We usually arrived on the thirtieth and stayed till the second or third of January.

Afternoons were for siestas. My mom would go into the house, lie down in the bedroom that used to be hers, with the windows open and the fan cranked up all the way, trained straight at her. My dad preferred to stretch out shirtless under the ombú tree. Me too. Although I never slept, I just stayed there looking out at the road, the horizon, distant, radiant and parched.

When the sun eased a little, the cousins would dress up in the old clothes we found in one of the bedrooms, run around, bathe the dogs, get our feet and shins splattered in mud, set up an obstacle course for bike races, pet the baby chicks, startle the pigs, and decorate the henhouse with flowers, making it so pretty that Luci wanted to move in. She'd latch the door with its little wire hook and sit down inside, and we'd have to leave her there because there was no talking her out of it, no matter how hard we tried to explain that she couldn't live there, it belonged to the chickens. I remember her stubbornness, arms crossed, refusing to come out of her palace, the hens' haughty queen.

And I remember that last trip. We packed the night before so we could hit the road early. We ate dinner. All the others had

gone. It was just us. So hot that no one dared go to bed. The sheets would stick to your body and it was impossible to sleep.

My dad sat outside for a while, trying to cool off. I gathered my courage to pass the troop of toads that had congregated by the door and went to see what he was up to. He was rocking faintly in the worn-out wicker chair, lit by the moon and the glow from the kitchen. I pulled up another chair without a word. The night was very dark over the earth, the road black, the trees, everything, but the sky was incandescent.

I let my thoughts wander with two fireflies between my feet and in the grass. Then my dad:

“See that?”

“No, what?”

“There, look.”

He pointed up and I saw it. A light unlike the others, brighter, closer, moving.

“Do you see it?”

“Yes,” I said. I was scared.

“It looks like it’s moving to the right, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah...”

And yes, it was moving, because when we started to look it was behind the house and now it was right over the barn. It was getting harder and harder to locate. I had to stand up on the chair to follow its course. My dad stood up too, craning his neck. We watched it for a while without saying anything as the crickets creaked and bugs hummed, fluttering around the light bulb.

“Go in and get your uncle, kiddo.”

I ran inside and called for him, the owner of the house, the uncle with the leathery skin.

“Tío, come outside, my dad says come look at this weird light.”

And my uncle, the only one who was ready for bed, gave me a glance as if to say *really?* but didn’t say it, only emerged barefoot and in boxers to see what was happening beyond me.

By the time I was back outside, my dad had drifted a few meters out and stood staring at the barn.

“Come here, Efraín. Look at this.”

My uncle approached reluctantly. But I caught the change in his face, the shock on it, his brows furrowed.

“What is that?”

“I have no idea. What could it be?”

On tiptoes, overcoming my fear of the toads and of what might be coming from the sky, I made my way over to my father and took his hand.

“Look, look—”

The thing started moving faster and faster, getting closer, then farther away, a zigzag.

“What’s going on?” asked my mother, peering out from the doorway. She joined us too, followed by my aunt and Luci.

“There’s nothing there. Just the fields,” my uncle said, his eyes fixed on it.

The six of us stood there quietly, watching the thing gleam and lurch about. Until we lost sight of it.

In bed that night, Luci asked me to hold her hand because she couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t either.

At dawn, we loaded the car, said goodbye, and retraced that road for the last time.

## THAT MAN

Sit.

Get up.

Thank you.

Sit.

Good morning.

Thank you.

Get up.

I live in a building with two apartments in it. Mine is on the second floor. Gutiérrez lives downstairs. His last name is on the mailbox: “1: Gutiérrez.” Not “Gutiérrez Family.” Just Gutiérrez.

The first week I lived here, I saw him go into the yard and water the only plant he has, a pothos. Nothing out of the ordinary. I saw he’d whitewashed the walls. The plant to the left and a stool, also white, to the right. It must have been the middle of the day, because the sun was blinding against all that white.

That first time, I remember well, he watered the plant, went back into the apartment, then reemerged into the yard. I was smoking by the window, trying to keep the smoke out of the kitchen.

He stood firmly in front of the white stool. He said aloud, “Sit.” He did. He stayed seated for about two minutes. Then he ordered, “Get up.” He got up. He went inside and closed the window directly below mine.

Get up.

On your feet.

Gutiérrez's voice woke me the next morning. I wasn't sure if I'd really heard him. I showered, downed my coffee, and didn't open the window. I knew I'd be late for work if I saw him there. By the time I got home that night, it was after nine and pouring rain. I was tired and hungry. I made a sandwich, ate it, got out a beer and a cigarette, and opened the window.

Gutiérrez was standing in the rain with his back to me, facing the whitewashed wall. "Thank you," he said, and sat down. Then "Get up," and got up. "Sit," and he sat. So did I. I hovered at the window, unable to look away for a long time. Gutiérrez sitting motionless in the downpour.

It was almost midnight when I decided to shut the window. The rain continued and Gutiérrez sat petrified on his stool. I went to bed anxious about the time and the workday ahead.

I switched off the light but couldn't even close my eyes. I lay there staring at the ceiling, the water stains, the glimmers and shadows cast by each passing car. The last time I glanced at the clock, it was four in the morning. My alarm went off at seven. I went to the bathroom, looked at myself in the mirror as I washed my face. I had my mother's dark circles under my eyes.

I opened the kitchen window right away. Gutiérrez wasn't there. Thank God. Thank you. I had some coffee and went out.

I've been hoping to run into Gutiérrez for a week now: in the hall, on the stairs, at the front door of the building. I've spent hours waiting for any sound that might signal his presence. I've been arriving late to work and rushing home, thinking that Gutiérrez might have gone out in between.

Every night I observe his private ritual from my window. Yesterday I waited for him to step into the yard so I could confirm he was home. I watched him water the pothos before I went downstairs. I knocked on his door, rang the buzzer, and called

his name several times, but nothing happened. When I returned to my apartment, Gutiérrez was still in the same position.

I'm losing hours at work. He keeps going into the yard each night at ten and carrying out his performance for me, his silent accomplice. I need to get back to my routine, unwind over dinner, watch TV, go to bed at eleven and get some proper rest so I can get things done the next day. What kind of idiot am I turning into? I want to slap him, slap myself. Maybe a good sledgehammer whack will settle his mind. And my own. One good blow... although maybe the spatter of blood against the white-wash would make too obvious a jigsaw puzzle for a forensic examiner. A lobotomy would be better, Freeman-style, with an ice pick and a rubber mallet. You have to drive the ice pick into the skull above the tear duct and move it until you sever the connections between the frontal lobe and the rest of the brain. Freeman wasn't even a surgeon. Neither am I. Even if Gutiérrez ends up drooling on the stool in front of the wall, I'll have spared him his own infernal commands.

I dreamed about him. I was living in the downstairs apartment and slobbering by the wall. Gutiérrez watched me from my kitchen. The nightmare jolted me awake. I got up to make some herbal tea and opened the window like an automaton. Gutiérrez, standing ramrod straight with his back to the wall, was looking right up at my window.

I don't go into the kitchen anymore. The proximity to the window and the possibility of an expectant Gutiérrez makes me nervous. I eat mostly junk food on my way out of the office and order take-out empanadas at home. I have dinner in the living room or in bed, with the TV cranked up as loud as it'll go.

Arriving home from work, I was hit by a terrible stench. The apartment reeked after so many days without fresh air. I went

into the kitchen and opened the window. Gutiérrez was standing in the yard, naked, staring at me. Both of us stood motionless for a long time. At first I was certain that he was looking at me, but then I started to doubt. He was far enough away that I couldn't track his line of sight. Following the axis of his head, I estimated the scope of his vision, but maybe not... maybe his eyes were fixed on the wall, or my window frame, or something else that only he could perceive.

Enough. I have to call the super, the police if necessary. Everyone has to know that there's a sick man, an autistic man, a psychopathic son of a bitch in the building.

I met with the super in the hall. I explained the situation and he listened without a word. All he said was that he'd seen the guy only a few times; he didn't go out much. He suggested we ring Gutiérrez's buzzer outside and see if he'd deign to answer. Nothing happened, of course. I insisted that we go to the door of his apartment and ring the bell. He rang, I rang. He knocked, I knocked. He called Gutiérrez's name. I called his name. I convinced the super to come upstairs and see the spectacle with his own eyes. When I opened the window, Gutiérrez was gone. The super looked at me, annoyed. "Take a photo next time," he said, and left.

I haven't seen Gutiérrez since then. I peer out every night, hoping to find him, but now I don't even know if he's downstairs. The pothos is still there. It doesn't grow or die. I wish I could at least water it from my window.