

Streets and Houses¹

Alejandro Rossi*

I am neither a manual worker, nor a government employee, nor a millionaire. Still, I exist and if I went in for pious, vaguely hypocritical pigeonholing, I would say that I am an intellectual worker. But I eschew this bit of solace and state the plain truth: I am a teacher of philosophy. I do not, therefore, live in a working-class neighborhood; I am unfamiliar with water and power cuts; I have not had to put up with a lack of proper sewage; I do not walk through puddles; and I am not forced to share my bedroom with six other people. By the same token, I have no garden of my own, no swimming pool, no tennis court, no greenhouse, no sculptures, no conservatory, no eighteenth-century courtyard, no damp corridors in which to sit in a rocking chair and contemplate the falling rain.

I live in an average apartment—average in size, in furnishings and in comforts. Its best features are its high ceilings, wooden floors and white walls. The walls could obviously be thicker, so that I might be spared unnecessary intimate sounds, such as my neighbors' gripes, their laughter, their nightmares, their favorite radio announcers. My apartment overlooks the street via floor-to-ceiling windows. It would be very nice if, while I were dining, these windows allowed me to take in a pine forest, a lake, or even a field. But, alas, all I am permitted is a view of bedsheets, towels and television antennae. The windows are my link with the outside world, it's quite true, which is why my tables and chairs shake every time a plane passes overhead. Whenever I open these windows, in blows a dust-storm, along with carbon monoxide and a din of automobile traffic.

Perhaps the architect who built this apartment house was dreaming of a different city. Maybe he thought

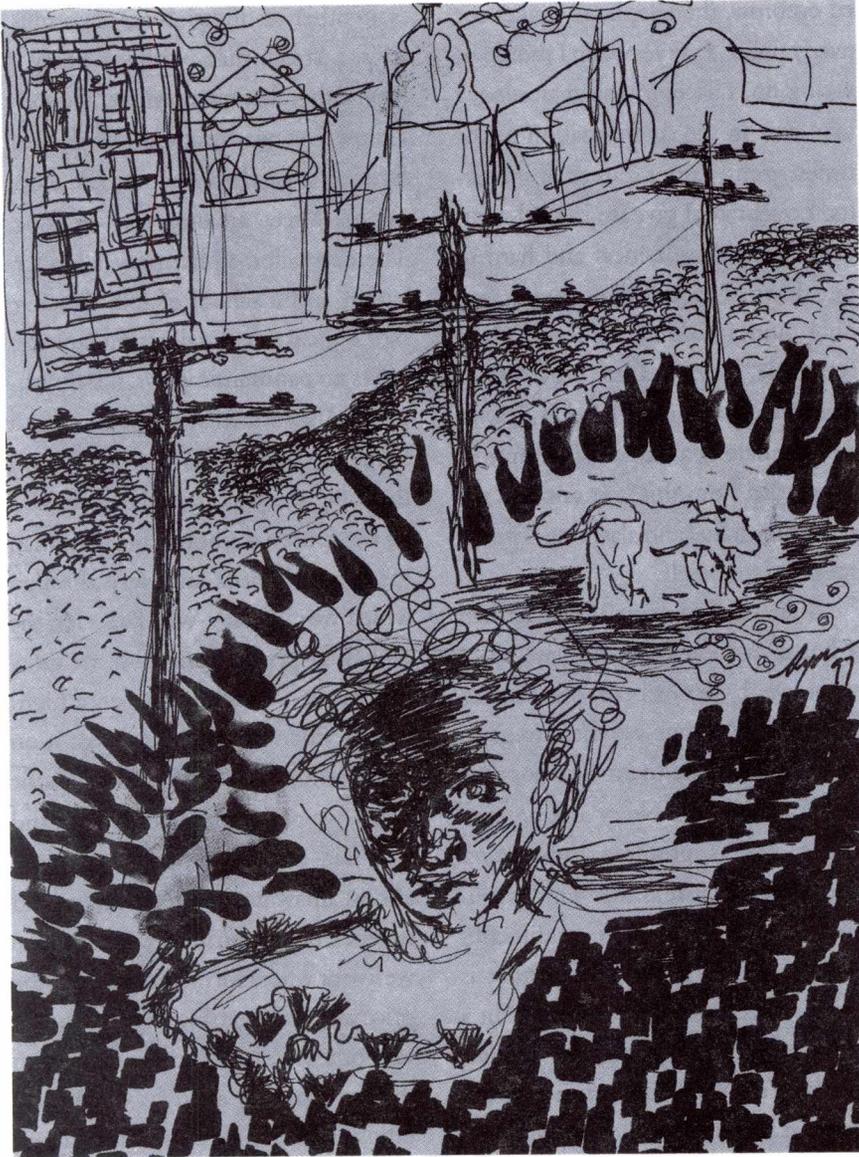
that petroleum reserves would soon run out and that everyone would be driving around in electric cars. He may also have believed in the advantages of public transportation, and I am sure he never foresaw the development of commercial aviation. The motorcycle he doubtless looked on as a prehistoric animal, on the brink of extinction, an interesting specimen out of some museum of technology. I suspect that he entertained a theory about the steady loss of solar energy, too, so that in the very near future his windows would allow in a soft sort of golden afternoon light, and we tenants would no longer perspire and have to tear off our shirts and ties, nor would the covers of all my books buckle. I do not live badly, I am not grumbling, I am in sympathy with this architect's utopian vision. I simply conclude that my home needs a different city.

As do my habits. I have friends, and every now and again I am overcome by a desire to see them, an

* Writer, member of the National College.

Drawings by Lydia Peña.

¹ Translated from the Spanish by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni.

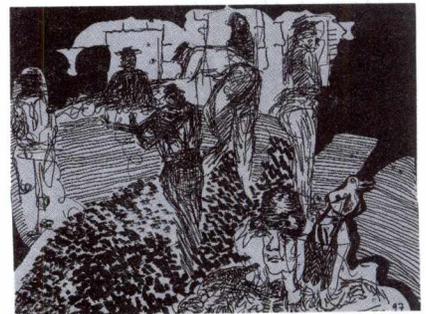


urgency to talk to them about something—a feeling, a passion, a pang of anguish—to deepen through conversation some small insight we may have had. Or to go to them to pour out my heart, to complain, to win support. Or to say nothing, to grind no ax, to converse quietly in some roundabout, relaxed, random way, without a specific topic. These are fairly straightforward needs, but they must be satisfied within a limited period of time. Enthusiasm flags if we have to wait

five days to meet someone, and within such a period it is possible that one's depression may have abated. Of course, there is Valium, self-delusion, and sleep, I should therefore like my friends to be near, so that we could get together in some familiar place without having to walk more than a few blocks. I should like friendship to be the repository of these spur-of-the-moment enthusiasms, these instances of spontaneity and sincerity, the living warp and weft of our hours.

The city does not favor such intimacy. Not one of my friends lives anywhere nearby. We continue to see each other, we still talk, but we have lost the habit of daily contact. Distance and our jobs impose complicated strategies. Tomorrow's out of the question, the day after is impossible for me, we'll have to arrange something for the weekend—not this one, of course, because he'll be out town, but maybe the one after or better still a holiday, there's one just around the corner and, anyway, Christmas isn't far off. Friendship has to rely on dinners planned formally in advance, on occasional wearying encounters, for he, obviously, lives on the south side of town and I on the north.

There's always the telephone. For some, I know, it resolves everything. They use it to call the plumber, to find out the time, to be wakened at a particular hour, to seduce, to express their indignation, or to recount in minute detail the wonderful, unique state of mind they find themselves in at that very moment. These are people who use the phone not to set up meetings but as a meeting. In my case, it's quite the opposite; I become awkward and have no telephone presence. The phone becomes a symbol



of alarm, a device used to communicate pressing matters, to receive information that alters my plans or upsets the normal course of my day. It is as though I regarded the telephone as a vehicle for the out-of-the-ordinary. When it rings, my first reaction is to hide. I approach it gingerly and am always relieved if it's a wrong number. A telephone conversation does not tolerate pauses, silences, or interruptions. Yet even in the most animated discussions we all fall into them. It is rare, however, for friends to resort to the telephone to spend an hour together barely speaking a word, each of them sipping a leisurely cup of coffee at home, uttering a sentence now and again as he or she listens to the other breathing. We say more by telephone, and our verbal halts are minimal, for our exchanges are governed by a principle—that of having to respond with words or, at least, with certain sounds. What is more, the telephone suppresses a speaker's physical reactions, the sympathetic look, the nod of approval, signs that calm or encourage the listener. As I can't see the other party, I don't know whether he has begun counting matches, is leafing through a book, or is rolling his eyes. For all I know, he may be drawing boats, fishes, flowers. Maybe, because I cannot detect a lift-

*Streets define a city.
They lengthen a
house, a room, the
intimate space where
we have our beds...*

ed eyebrow, the telephone makes me overly polite. I say yes when I should be saying no, I accept weak reasoning, I take part in the dramatization of the tiniest event, I utter sounds of solidarity, I celebrate, I give in, I avoid argument. I am hypocritical and hard to pin down. I would like to exchange only blunt information—an airplane timetable, the weather, the pope's health, the name of a Nobel Prize winner, the date of a battle. What may be concluded from this is at one and the same time banal and alarming. I prefer speaking to myself.

Streets define a city. They lengthen a house, a room, the intimate space where we have our beds, our clothes, our meals. Artisans use them to go to work. We all use them for shopping and for diversion. Noisy and promiscuous, streets promote indiscretion and affection, just as they hinder solitude and make anonymity difficult. The opposite case is a street that is characterized as foreign territory. In a decisive way, it signals the division between the public and private world. Such a street does not attract me, because if I want to buy a newspaper there I will not find one, and if I want to drink a glass of water I shall have to return home. Aspirin tablets, pencils, paper, erasers and wine are always sold much farther away. The street where I live is less arid, but it plays little part in my life. It is broad, with sidewalks and small trees on either side. I use it because I feel like walking, because I like stretching my legs, because I feel nervous, because I am sick of sitting in a chair. I use it like an athletics track or a piece of equipment in a gym. There

is no other justification for my strolls. It is a street that, without being a labyrinth, takes me nowhere. Nobody I know lives nearby, and my work is too far away to get there on foot. The shops on my street are not very exciting. There's a tailor, a pharmacy, a kindergarten and a school of folk dancing. Nor is the street visually stimulating. It offers no panoramic views, it lacks surprises. Abandoned by the pedestrian, it is rapidly turning into a public way that only accepts cars and high speeds. So the street has stopped being human space and is now an artery through which we circulate. We like seeing the asphalt in perfect condition, we grow impatient—as with cows on a highway—when people try to cross it on foot, we long for synchronized traffic lights, we praise the street's width and well laid out curves. Little by little, almost unawares, we have renounced streets. They are no longer places where we live or where we meet others but the price we pay for getting from one house to another. We have become resigned to the fact that they are ugly, violent and inhospitable. This seems to us the result of a vast, nebulous, unrelenting process. Mystery is the refuge of indolence.

A bad poem implies a bad poet, a poor story presupposes a clumsy writer, and a silly painting always makes us think of its painter. A city on the skids, by contrast, offers a multiplicity of authors, avaricious architects, complacent public figures, speculators, cowed citizens and demolition men masquerading as city planners—active players all, tireless termites who have been working away and gnawing away for years. ❧