

Masha Tupitsyn

Houses (Or the Uncanny Glows in the Dark)

A house, Ms. Seward, cannot be made habitable in a day. And, after all, how few days go to make up a century.

Dracula, 1979

In the end, it didn't make any difference how many houses there were. Petra was surrounded by one on each side, and a surge of others down both directions of the road.

On the porch, while sitting on it, she watched a desert colored cat that belonged to one of the houses wait to cross the street. Do cats know that cars can kill them? It could have been any handful of the neighbors, and the cat was in fact a house resident as well as a non-house resident. Cats are in between, and so are houses. Between other houses, streets, people. Houses rotate lives. Collapse and inherit. It's not just people who fit into houses, houses fit into people. Do cats know where they're going? That they're moving?

At night, when Petra worried about being in the house, something she never worried about during the day, Petra forgot about all the other houses and worried only about her own, which she believed could be isolated at any time. When people decide to kill you, they choose one house over all the rest and forget about all other houses. Petra did the same thing when she imagined herself being killed in the house. She was the only one being killed and it was only her house that housed the kill. As the murdered choice, her house was the one that stood out by virtue of being the selected slain, and made all other houses disappear. It's the topic of all horror films, in some way or another, *The Last House on the Left*, *The House on Haunted Hill*, *The Amity Ville Horror*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The House That Screamed*, *The House That Dripped Blood*, *The House of Dark Shadows*, *House of Evil*, *House of the*

Damned, House of Exorcism, House of Freaks, House of Fear. People run from houses, or to them, or hop from house to house, like Jamie Lee Curtis when she bangs on all the doors in *Halloween*. Houses house things. Houses are for housing.

Houses have always been the site of the most familiar horror. The monster, whose windows become lights of dreadful invitation. Should Petra turn them on or off? If someone thinks she's home, will they leave her, and her home alone, or will they decide to enter? Or if someone sees black, like any abyss, will they steer clear of it? Petra didn't know what attracted people more, darkness or light. Empty or occupied. The proximity of houses should have made Petra feel better, but it didn't. The topography of houses should ward off people who choose to stray into them, but it doesn't. Fear and death work together. If Petra was afraid, would someone be more likely to kill her? Petra thought whoever was going to kill her didn't give a damn about what else was around. Focused on her, in her house, they'd forget. The way that being focused on her fear, and her house, made Petra forget about the houses in her vicinity.

The age of the houses, and the trees that slung over them, should also play a part. Who needs an old house that's broken and distracted by trees? Or maybe someone needs it more because it's easy to break into and the trees misdirect the intrusion like a magic act. There's nothing there to want enough to single out, thought Petra. Why not choose the fucked up house on the right, or the fucked house on the left? The fucked up person on the right, or the fucked up person on the left. Why choose the careful, anxious person in the middle? At night Petra forgot about the neighbors too, whereas during the day, she felt all they did was lurk around. Watch her walk to her mail, then back. Was it because Petra could see them during the day, but couldn't see them at night? The view darkened, and the lens narrowed.

The houses might as well be any phantasmagoria. It all looked the same. But during the day it was the details that made her confident. Petra felt watched by all the old ladies and completely unwatched at night when all the old ladies were sleeping. They went to sleep before she did and left her all alone in the house. She was the last one to turn off the lights. Sometimes she left them all on. Petra assumed that if the neighbors were facing her, and she could see them, then they were paying attention.

But she never felt noticed by people her age or younger. People her age or younger, didn't pay attention. Anyone who decided to kill Petra was going to have to be an observer, a bird watcher. And initially, she'd seem inaccessible and colorful too.

People go into attics to hide things and people go into cellars when they want to hide themselves. Secrets and boxes, and people; stored things and things kept away, from top to bottom. Like discussions with their mothers, as in the ones Norman Bates has in *Psycho*. Or where Bertha ends up while Rochester is downstairs with Jane. All kinds of things happen, and rarely in the center. From the perspective of Petra's house, she was off the hook. She had a cellar, but no attic.

Home is where the heart is, or isn't, and the heart can become bigger or smaller according to the home. Sometimes the heart bursts there or gets stuck or unravels and rolls out the door like the ball of dough that fools everyone in the Russian fairytale *Kolobok*. The air of food fills houses, or parties fill them, or sex, or no sex, or fights, or talking, or nothing, but nothing is ever nothing. Houses are bought and sold. Houses are stayed in and then left, or the other way around. You can love them or leave them. Or feel uncomfortable, or too hot, or not warm enough. You barely leave them, strive to leave them, or barely put in an appearance, or use the stove. Houses can accommodate deaths, accidental or non-accidental. Petra was once in love with a man who, like a bag, left his life in a house. Or in a room in a house. The house had a garden, which he stood in the last time he talked to Petra on the phone. Petra had once shared a room with that man. A life. Houses can be huge and irresponsible, or one room you can keep an eye on. Petra knew everyone's house by heart and when the lights were turned off she had no heart.

Allegorically speaking, and houses always speak allegorically, the house is the first thing you know. The first place you're in. Everything takes place in the house at some point. For most of us, houses take up the most amount of space and time. "Since when are you afraid to be in a house?" asked Petra's friend Joyce. "I don't know," said Petra, "I've never been in one before. Not really. I've been in rooms. But apartments and rooms are a house's amputees. I've been in the limbs, in the fragments of a house, but that doesn't count. Maybe I started being afraid when I remembered

how much I lost. Couldn't I just as easily lose my life and wouldn't a house be the perfect place to lose it in?"

"Norman, is that you?" "Who's there?" "At the door?" "Just a minute." "I'll be right there." Are all things Petra had said in the house, or near the door before opening it. She had also heard many things about houses on television and in the movies. Houses are stars in films. The house made everything familiar and unfamiliar, so Petra double-checked the lock just to be sure. Petra couldn't tell if houses made people safer or made people feel that they had to be more cautious. She had hoped for various knocks on the door, especially when she was younger. But he disappeared like a lake. The ocean remained and had such a modern way about it. No one even came near it unless there was a plane nearby. Petra thought, at the very least, houses are visited, like museums. It's a ritual. No one remembers very much about them, but everyone knows vaguely where the *Mona Lisa* lives. Because houses are so old fashioned, often people didn't even call first. Petra got stranded when she moved in. Unlike the movie *Sleeping with the Enemy*, no one arrived with a pie or a basket of apples. She offered the handy man a bag of zucchini from her garden, but he barely looked at her as she handed them to him. He worked on her house, so Petra thought she should give him something that was part of the house—the garden.

Freud thought people were houses. The ego, superego, id, are all rooms joined through the house. Guests and owners take their turns using the rooms, or blend them; open the space by knocking out the wall, push the beds together, take turns fucking in different ones. Siblings get stuck with their rooms, in their rooms, for years, until they leave and pick new ones in new houses. Petra never lived in rooms. She grew up in a modern version of a "house," in an anti-house, an open space called "loft." She could see her parents down at the end of the line. Their bed was on a platform. If she had seen something, the primal scene would have been credited as an official theater. Artists lived in lofts, now yuppies do too. But for a while, it was only artists who were willing to leave their houses behind.

Masha Tupitsyn is a fiction writer and feminist critic who lives in New York City. She received her BA in Literature and Cultural Studies from The New School for Social Research, and her MA in Literature and Cultural Theory from the University of Sussex in England. She is a freelance writer and editor, and in 2004, worked as the Assistant Literary Editor at *BOMB* Magazine in New York City. She was a 2005 finalist for the Panliterary Award for Fiction, sponsored by *Drunken Boat*, and a finalist in the Spread The Word's 2002 "Elsewhere: Back of a Postcard Contest" in England, and the 2004 winner of the 3rd LEGIBLE Open Competition Book Award. Her fiction and criticism has been published or is forthcoming in *Five Fingers Review*, *Unpleasant Event Schedule*, *Me Three*, *Monkey Bicycle*, *Zygote in my Coffee*, *Nth Position*, *Legible*, *FAQ*, and *Eye Zine*. She has written two collections of fiction, *Prone* and a book of film-based stories entitled, *Beauty Talk & Monsters*, which is due to be published by Semiotexte Press in 2007, and from which *Houses (Or the Uncanny Glows in the Dark)* is taken.