

César Aira, *Ghosts*. Translated by Chris Andrews. New York: New Directions, 2009. 144pp. \$12.95

Argentine novelist, critic, and translator César Aira is best known for his cryptic novellas, which feature wandering narratives and a reflexive preoccupation with form. Aira claims to write a single page every day and resist all forms of revision; whether this claim is true, his fiction does press insistently forward, accommodating all manner of spontaneous digressions en route. These asides occur not only on the level of the page but on the level of the sentence—a series of forking paths that reveal the influence of Borges even while their universe is less intricately self-collapsing than wildly far-flung. In place of labyrinths and mirrors, Aira's work explores everything from disfiguring lightning strikes (*An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*) to murder by strawberry *helado* (*How I Became a Nun*).

Ghosts, the fourth of Aira's novellas to be translated into English, is a story in which supernatural elements are treated as commonplace. The novella transpires over the course of a single sweltering day, at an unfinished condominium high-rise in Buenos Aires. That the day in question is New Year's Eve, and that the building sits in a suspended state of construction, are relevant facts to the trajectory of the narrative, which assembles the principal characters on an unfinished, upper-level terrace for a cataclysmic midnight finale.

At the same time, these details also reflect the novella's sustained preoccupation with thresholds—with the point at which a year passes into the next, or the moment when a construction site can rightly be called a building. Thresholds are legion in the book, and they're so intricately connected that it feels at times as if Aira is using fiction to graph some kind of complex mathematical function. The titular ghosts, for example—omnipresent on the site, floating “up and down, even through the concrete slabs”—not only straddle the realm between living and dead, but also crouch on the rim of a large parabolic dish, “a sharp metallic edge on which no bird would have dared to perch.” Aira's corporeal characters perch similarly on edges—those boundaries marking adulthood, cultural assimilation, and financial stability.

For certain social classes, such boundaries seem hardly to exist—a fact that comes to frame the central drama. As Aira explains, the wealthy owners of the apartment “had their own idea of happiness; they imagined it wrapped in a delay, a certain developmental slowness, which was already making them happy.... They preferred to think of the gentle slope of events.” Others find in the interstices mere opportunities for decorum: instead of gouging his clients—a practice typical of the “very rich”—the building's middle-class architect insists on always leaving “a margin, a ghostly ‘buffer’ of courtesy, between the asking price and the maximum that could be obtained.” For the family of immigrant laborers squatting on the site, however, margins are not

opportunities for pecuniary politeness, but rather haunted zones of inquiry. Abel Reyes, the nephew of the building's hard-drinking night watchman, is stalled in his development and preoccupied by the existence of a neutron bomb capable of eliminating people but not things ("how could it...since they were so inextricably combined?"). Abel's meditation takes place in a supermarket checkout line, the boy juggling the ingredients for an afternoon *asado*; the situation is indicative of how Aira himself combines realism with speculative metaphysics. Abel's cousin Patri, meanwhile, races tirelessly between the unfinished building's floors, rounding up her infant siblings and meditating on the boundaries of aural perception. Under the impression that sounds and silence both increase with altitude, Patri pauses long enough in her frantic babysitting to reason that "if a man were placed at a great height, and he looked down, somewhere near halfway he would see two corresponding limits, floating like magnetized Cartesian divers: the limit of the sound as it passed into imperceptibility, and that of his own hearing range."

For half its length, the novella remains in a suspended state of becoming. It isn't until a ten-page manifesto masquerading as dream sequence ("it is possible to imagine an art in which the limitations of reality would be minimized, in which the made and the unmade would be indistinct, an art that would be instantaneously real, without ghosts") that a protagonist emerges. That protagonist, the dreamer, is Patri; her emergence marks both the crossing of an elusive narrative threshold and the crystallization of Aira's theme. The novella's second half describes Patri's tentative but unmistakable march toward self-awareness, and it features a more suspenseful, linear narrative, still pregnant with Aira's ontological and socioeconomic concerns.

Beyond class and national status—and in this way distinct from rest of her family—Patri is suspended just shy of womanhood, the future and past alike seeming to trap her. As she drifts towards the limit of this threshold, her "vague, indefinite worry and alarm" grows to "a specific torment, a pain, which was indefinable, too, but for different reasons." Conspiring together, her mother and aunt misdiagnose her plight all too conveniently ("If only she would fall in love!"), but the ghosts inhabiting the worksite have a different idea. They float past, chattering about a midnight party they want Patri to attend, and their voices are seductive in a meaningful way—"warm voices and words she could understand, in a Spanish without accent, neither Chilean nor Argentinean, like on television." Their invitation offers a way of prolonging the instant before an important threshold is crossed forever:

Parties were serious and important too, she thought. They were a way of suspending life, all the serious business of life, in order to do something unimportant: and wasn't that an important thing to do? We tend to think of time as taking place within time itself, but what about when it's outside? It's

the same with life: normal, daily life, which can seem to be the only admissible kind, conceived within the general framework of life itself. And yet there were other possibilities, and one of them was the party: life outside life.

Aira is such a prolific writer—sixty books and counting—that *Ghosts*, originally published almost two decades ago, may seem like an arbitrary candidate for translation. In fact it's an ideal choice, translation itself functioning to expand Aira's theme. A word like *umbral*, in its conversion from source to target, maintains the formal equivalence of "threshold" while the shadowy, occluded associations of *umbra* are cast into an intertextual gap. These gaps are what *Ghosts* relentlessly plumbs—the spaces between reality and unreality, built and unbuilt, childhood and adulthood, today and tomorrow, corporeal and incorporeal, life and death.

Nathan Hogan

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Susan Howe, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*. New York: New Directions, 2007. 144pp. \$16.95

The question of poetic vocation has come to the fore in Susan Howe's work. In "Personal Narrative," a prose piece in her recent book, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, Howe returns to the epiphany in the library stacks that began her career as a poet: "I vividly remember the sense of energy and change that came over me one midwinter morning when, as the book lay open in sunshine on my work table, I discovered in Hope Atherton's wandering story the authority of a prior life for my own writing voice." Atherton was a minister in Hatfield, Connecticut, who was separated from his band of pioneers during a military excursion against a tribe of local Indians; he is a central figure in several of Howe's early poems. "Personal Narrative"—the title pays homage to Jonathan Edwards's recollection of his religious awakening—goes on to reinterpret this vocational moment, furnishing a close reading of the first word of Howe's 1987 poem about Atherton, "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time":

"P r e s t"—gives the effect of rushing forward into a syntactic chain of associative logic under pressure of arrest. Ready for action in a mind disposed to try but being upset in advance of itself by process of surrender. "In our culture Hope is a name we give women."

"Prest" is typical of the archaic-sounding neologism one might find in Howe; the term is succinctly sprung in the phrase "pressure of arrest." To capture its many valences, Howe reworks the OED entries for "press" in rhythmic pattern: