Praise for *Symbiosis*

With style and élan, Milagros Lasarte explores middle-class social mores in this delicious – and deliciously wicked – debut novella. It is not without compassion, however. This, coupled with Lasarte’s defining leftfield sensibility, renders the familiar yet strange organism of LV irresistible. Enormously satisfying ... this is a tale that will blossom in the imagination long after it is set down.

Jane McKie  
author of *Carnation Lily Lily Rose*

The cultural microcosm of the typical neighborhood is the perfect setting for *Symbiosis*, with a deliciously uncomfortable gander into the human tendency to create an “Us v. Them” mentality in everyday life. Debut author Milagros Lasarte nails this engrossing contemplation of societal norms with a thought-provoking twist at the end that I’m still thinking about days later. An entertaining must read from an author who is sure to be your new favorite.

Leanne Kale Sparks  
award-winning crime thriller author of the *Kendall Beck* series
Symbiosis

A Blackwater Press book

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MILAGROS LASARTE
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The living together of unlike organisms.

Heinrich Anton de Bary
PREAMBLE
In her alienness, she had commanded respect.

We learned to fear, not her differences, but rather the way she manipulated what little common ground we had so as to pull us into her Fever. We were fooled by those moments of vulnerability, by the awkward candour of her responses. They were elements of her personality that we held onto, for comfort.

Our System, however, was convinced her essence would damage us. It had found a strange component within her, something unlike anything it had seen before and which she herself didn’t seem to acknowledge. It sent us a first signal of warning – but because of this mysterious component, the signal remained incomplete, and she managed to get through our defences.

We didn’t think much of it then, and we welcomed her in.

She was looking for a new home to settle into and offered to take care of one of our defective cells. The re-polished structure of the cell still stands today, firm and functional, proving in its survival that the main issue had never been in her intentions but in the inherent impossibility of her existing as a member of our community.

Our efforts to understand each other were in vain. Whenever we took a step forward, our defences reminded us to push her away. She was just as hesitant. We kept delaying the inevitable.

For only an adaptive immune system can lead to immunological memory – but at what cost? And when reconstructing the chain of events, what is to be remembered?
PART ONE
If we look deep inside our drawers, we may still find the card, small and plain, with black ink letters: our invitation to Monica’s housewarming. The card had been left in our mailboxes a week after her move. By that time, some of us had already left for the summer, but those who stayed on our street made it their duty to attend the event. Any earlier plans could be cancelled. We had to examine for ourselves what transformations had been made to no. 8 – The Hovel, as we called it – and above all, understand the terms of this new ownership.

We say ‘transformations,’ but the changes Monica made, though improving the overall quality of the house, were unable to deconstruct its original makeup: two clean layers of grey paint covered the grime of the outer walls; the metal railings were painted over with a black veneer; and once inside we discovered that the yellow velour of the couch and the green-blue walls in the kitchen were perhaps considered modern, but still reflected the hippie energy of the previous owners. Monica would later reveal the house had spoken to her, guided her in her search for inspiration.

It didn’t surprise us. No paint or trendy furniture could conceal years of negligence, or the settlement of dogs for that matter. Abandoned inside The Hovel by one of the hippies, these dogs had taken over the ground floor before slowly making their way up. Some man, whose relation to the hippies always escaped us,
came to feed them regularly. He was the only human, the only living creature besides them, allowed inside the house. Until he stopped coming. As the days passed, we could hear the dogs growing restless: barking, fighting, pushing the furniture around. Then there was silence. Had they perished, their bodies decomposing on the ground floor?

After the disappearance of the dogs, the owners decided to cut all ties with The Hovel. They had never properly owned it anyway, lacking commitment, care, or any kind of constant presence. The house was then put up for sale, and the solitude suited it well. On the very edge of ruin, this new taste of freedom seemed to stabilise it.

But the house couldn’t cleanse itself of the excess of turbulent energy. Residues of it must have nestled inside its porous walls, becoming part of its composition, a lingering aftertaste. Therefore, after having enjoyed its moment of peace, The Hovel was in want of someone new to roam its rooms. A few people ventured inside, but none were deemed suitable guests, until Monica arrived.

To this day, it is unclear to us whether The Hovel attracted a personality suited to its perversity, or if said perversity eventually got to her.

The first one to lay eyes on the new arrival was Lise, who lived opposite The Hovel, at no. 5. She was walking back from the school, where she had just dropped off her youngest, and saw three silhouettes moving inside the house.

Her first reactionary instinct was to think, *squatters,* and slightly disturbed by this thought, she stopped to study the silhouettes with a little more objectivity. Most likely these were relatives of whoever owned The Hovel. The children of that last woman, or maybe the children of those? She squinted, stepped a bit closer, and decided these were decent people. Decent clothes, decent bearing, and the shiny black car parked at the entrance had to be theirs.

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*Prospective buyers.* She had seen some of them before. Three actually. They didn’t own a shiny car. They had walked into The Hovel with nervous expectation and a smile which suggested that, more than the house itself, it was the idea of possessing something, anything at all, which brought them here. Nervous disillusion walked them out. Upon seeing these new candidates, however, Lise felt uncharacteristically excited. She ran into her kitchen, the window there offering the greatest vantage point. Fresh conversation, maybe playmates for the children…

*Wouldn’t it be lovely if they all became close friends?*  
Her enthusiasm was based on two facts.

The first was that she saw in these candidates the opportunity to train someone new. You see, Lise thought of herself as our
spiritual guide. She had assigned herself this curious title upon reaching twenty years of residence on our street – which wasn’t the highest record among us, but a span of life that did encompass various significant events: her semi-rebel teenage years, experiments as a young adult and, eventually, motherhood. Lise had visited other territories in the early months of her marriage, but she couldn’t fight the reassuring pull of familiarity for too long.

She claimed she was aware of all the things happening on our street, the flows and tides of our moods, and Lise strived to help the community by reinforcing the ties between us – one never knows when friendships can be utilised in the future. In the end, she had no concrete proof that her spiritual awareness worked, beyond the fact that the business of our street had, until then, never deviated from what she thought was the right path.

The second reason for her enthusiasm was that she believed she somehow was responsible for the silhouettes’ visit (a couple and their real-estate agent was her final verdict). Only a few weeks before, Lise had told her husband, Rob, that the street was suffering from stale air. She had noticed there was a hint of grumpiness in our conversations, peaking whenever the weather was particularly bad and humid. The only rapid solution she could find was to bring new vegetation to our street – so she researched exotic plants and ordered a few seeds online. Her package never came, but on the week the delivery was due, the shiny black car parked itself outside no. 8.

When these prospective buyers eventually emerged from The Hovel, Lise grabbed her keys and rushed back outside. *What of it?* She was just checking if she had any mail. She looked so natural, walking over to her fence, opening her mailbox and turning around when the visitors reached their car – *oh, hello there, visiting the house, so very nice to meet you, so what did you think of it, forgive me, it’s not my place, maybe we’ll see each other again, have a good day!* So natural and smooth – at least, that is what she said to her sister, later that afternoon.

Anne didn’t show the same level of fascination, but if decent people were moving in, then it meant she would finally have a nicer view when looking out of her bedroom window.

The news of prospective buyers travelled fast, though weeks passed before anyone saw the couple again and, filled with expectations, we assigned Anne and Lise the role of lookouts.

We thought this delay might mean they didn’t have the necessary funds. The house was in a dreadful state, but this was LV, after all: there were prestigious names among our standing and long-lost residents; not everyone could afford to live on our street. Or, they might have been warned about the hippies, the dogs, and the old woman (was she the hippie?), the one who had died in the master bedroom. The exact timeline of events still eludes us, making it impossible to tell which of all those previous inhabitants committed the greatest ravages.

To our general surprise, however, they returned. Well, *she* did – alone. The agent was also there, but not the husband. The woman stayed inside for a whole hour, then left as quietly as she had come. Over the following month, she repeated the same routine a few more times. Was she still looking to be convinced by the house, searching for that one hidden asset that would ultimately overshadow the general decay of the walls? At some point, we wondered if the woman mightn’t simply be the architect and we were wasting our social energy on the wrong individual. In any case, these comings and goings signalled that a contract was soon to be signed, that our street was expanding, and that The Hovel would be no more.

Not the way we had come to know it.

This troubled us, more than we liked to admit. Abandoned to
The Hovel had become a point of anchor, a reminder of a state of deterioration we couldn’t allow ourselves to reach. It had gained a shared value to us all, and by then, we were reluctant to give the house up to just anyone.

No matter, the buyers gave us six months to prepare for their arrival. It wasn’t much, considering the extent of the work to be done on the house. At the time, however, we thought it was too long a wait since, for most of those six months, the buyers kept to themselves, and we were unable to claim our rights.

The husband came occasionally, did a whole survey of the construction, then left without acknowledging us. The woman, his wife, was there quite often and stayed longer too. Sometimes she brought a gardener with her, other times she was accompanied by her young daughter. As the two of them lingered in the front garden, debating over what flowers to plant and where, we wondered if their silence was meant to tease us, force us to take the first step, and surrender our sense of propriety.

And we did.

One day, deeming she had done enough waiting, Lise leaned over their fence and introduced herself. It turned out the woman was a foreigner. South American, although she looked European: a mixture of Spanish and Italian. This explained the whole team of South Americans the contractor had brought with him. Different countries, the woman observed, but we couldn’t tell the difference.

Her name was Monica. She was very pleased with the work done.

“Then I’m happy for you,” Lise said.

There wasn’t much else she could find out, Monica suggesting by subtle backward steps that she had more pressing matters to attend to. The interaction was more than brief, but it served as a temporary balm.

Then came the day, at last. The moving trucks parked themselves in front of The Hovel, and we looked out of our windows with nervous expectation, waiting for the whole family to appear. The shiny black car arrived some minutes later.

It was just her and the girl.
On the day of the housewarming, The Hovel greeted us with undeniable pride, and a bit of relief as well. It was clear that a lot of thought had gone into each detail – from the colour on the walls to the texture of the lampshades – the house’s aesthetic value increasing far above any of our own homes.

“The advantages of starting from scratch,” Lise pointed out.

She thought it was just as commendable to make do with what was already there, and it was a valid observation, but none of our attempts to transform The Hovel could have exuded the confidence and ease (and money?) of Monica’s idiosyncratic taste.

We tried moving the conversation to a more comfortable terrain. Rob urged Monica to describe the before and after of the renovations, lingering over technical details – the material for the new windows, the composition of the walls – when what we actually wanted to know was where in the world she got the idea to place a giant cactus in the middle of the living room.

“It’s magnificent,” Flo said, all the while reminding herself it wouldn’t go with the decor of her no. 7.

Monica restricted the tour of the house to the ground floor. The choice was understandable, but it did make one wonder what might be lurking, hidden away upstairs. Could there be something in her bedroom that, absolutely ordinary to the eyes of an outsider, held a personal significance she wished to shelter from us?

Flo liked to give people the benefit of the doubt: innocent until proven guilty, and all that other positive psychology she had been
honing ever since the birth of her twins. She thought of the alarm clock on her nightstand, which had stopped working years before. She couldn’t say why she refused to get rid of it, but occasionally she moved its hands to match the time on her watch, hoping this gesture would return some relevance to the clock. Why couldn’t Monica have her own useless clock?

After scanning the living room one last time, we moved on to the kitchen. Monica proudly described it as the hidden gem of the house, so we looked around: at the large black marble island in the centre, the oven and cooker, and so on. We could see why she would love it now, but what had she seen in it before?

“None of the other houses I visited had such a spacious kitchen,” Monica stated.

The room, stripped down to its very bones, could have potential but, in our opinion, the added elements were what made it valuable. Grossly assessing the amount of that value, we were inclined to ask in what capacity Monica cooked.

“I’ve some professional experience, but I chose not to pursue that line of work.”

A soft hmm issued from our lips.

“It’s a demanding career,” Flo granted.

“Oh, that wasn’t the problem.”

She opened the fridge, pulled out a bottle of white wine, and made sure all of us had a full glass in our hands before the conversation could continue. We made a mental note of her polite dismissal then turned to the different canapés served across her counter.

“You must have noticed the school,” Fran said by way of introduction. “I live right beside it, at no. 11, and work there too. We’re all very proud of it.”

“How much does the school pay you to say that?”

Monica laughed after saying this, so we did too, taking a bite out of those curious pasties she said were her country’s speciality. They were an instant crowd-pleaser; and whether it was the combination of flavours or the delicate pattern of the folded pastry, they helped numb an uncomfortable truth: we couldn’t make sense of her kind of irony.

“What will you do for the rest of the summer?” Rob asked.

“We’re staying put.”

“Sound choice after a move.”

“Yes, it’ll give us time to explore the neighbourhood properly.”

We nodded, hoping she would explain who was included in that us. After all, we had seen a couple visiting the house; and if that man was the daughter’s father, then why weren’t we meeting him? We failed to ask this, however, finding ourselves unable to come up with the adequate words to express our concern. LV wasn’t a neighbourhood one wanted to explore alone, and perhaps it was best if she allowed us to guide her.

Sipping the last drop of wine in her glass, Fran studied her new neighbour. Monica was standing tall, her hands holding on to the edge of the island—not exactly resting on it for support, but pushing firmly against it. Fran wouldn’t have said this posture frightened her, but it certainly didn’t put her at ease. We thought we were observing Monica, but perhaps this was what she wanted us to believe. Inside The Hovel, we were under her authority; and the more she praised the various assets of the house, the closer she came to have us admit we had been completely mistaken in our original judgement of The Hovel.

As we lingered there, saying well multiple times without really departing, Monica directed her attention to the large window beside her—or rather, to the man who could be seen through that window. Her right-hand-side neighbour was entering his home, grocery bags in hand, looking somewhat scruffy. She told us she hadn’t met him yet and wondered why he hadn’t accepted her invitation.

“Clearly, he has nothing better to do.”

This might have been a clever time for us to tell her it was natural of him, that he never participated in any of the activities of the neighbourhood, and that he would most likely ignore her at every chance he got. A warning might have saved us many future quandaries.

Instead, we just said: “That’s Mr Martin.”

“Same surname—but not a relation of ours,” Anne added, pointing to both Lise and herself.
Monica paused, then smiled.
“I am surrounded.”

We laughed once again, though unsure what she meant. Should we be offended? Lise was still intent on building good relations, so she thought it best to ignore this and thank Monica for having improved the status of our street with the lovely work she had done to the house.

“It seems that the title of ‘hovel’ can now be transferred to Mr Martin’s house.”

It was intended as a throwaway comment, but then we turned to the right and studied the house in question. Lise was making a good point. Whereas The Hovel, no. 8, had risen and gained aesthetic value, Mr Martin’s house, no. 6, had proportionately declined.

It was only on that day, and through this comparison, that we became aware of their intricate connection. Sister houses, they had been – supporting each other in their unfavourableness, making up their own form of resistance. If our memories were correct, they had been built around the same time. Would it be preposterous to think they had chosen to decline together? Now no. 8 was abandoning its Sister for better prospects, and the latter was starting to act up. How hadn’t we noticed before the mouldy stain that appeared right beneath no. 6’s roof, spreading downwards as the neat paintwork of The Hovel received its final touches?

“Well,” Rob joked, “he might be tempted to call Monica for advice.”

And on this note, we gathered our things and left.

That same night, when Lise looked at the plain white paper of the invitation and the neat handwriting in black, she found she could recognise in those details the woman who had sent it. Did this mean she had successfully moved one step closer to her? The thought pleased her, and she resolved to say something about it to Anne the next day.

Anne didn’t know what to say.

If she were truly honest, Anne would tell her sister she was getting it all wrong: our position in regard to Monica hadn’t progressed but remained very much on unstable grounds. In fact, it might have worsened. Until this first interaction, Monica had been a perfect stranger and could therefore be treated as such. Now she was an acquaintance who showed no clear signs of warming up to us. There was still some margin for progression, but if we hoped Monica would become one of us, we would have to rethink our approach.

It was all a matter of adaptation.

Anne knew this because, years before, she had to ask herself how best to survive in a society like LV, when she had no interest in sharing every second of her time with others. It had nothing to do with misanthropy. Anne had her friends, her regular lovers. And it wasn’t egotism either, but something close to self-preservation. The idea of people in itself didn’t repulse her; it was adapting her behaviour to a social circle that caused her anxiety. She liked having a taste of it, but only with the option of taking a step back whenever she needed to.

For a while, she tried living in the capital, thinking the city would make it much easier to go about unnoticed; and it did, but there were still times when Anne needed a little bit of company. So, she analysed the select people in her life and realised there was only her family she could potentially share a house with: who else could she bluntly tell to leave her alone without them feeling...
insulted?

Returning to the suburbs proved to be the best compromise for the lifestyle she wished to lead. LV, and our street, acted as a bulky presence, a background noise that made her feel safe, accompanied, and which she could face as one.

If we didn’t object to her return, it was because she represented no real force of opposition. Anne thought of herself as the rebel cell, but she had been reared in our street, nurtured by LV – there were deep LV-ian instincts she couldn’t shake off. Besides, she proved useful in taking care of the elder Martins, her parents, who could no longer live in that big house by themselves.

But her return did come with a small price. Anne had lived new experiences and she noticed, through comparison with her city friends, that we all suffered from the same condition: a distinctive lack of decisiveness.

It was this indecision that had us all converge towards LV in the first place, convinced that the suburbs were a decent trade: halfway between the promise of open spaces and the pull of hectic crowds. This arrangement, however, didn’t relieve our condition. Rather, we became hyper-aware of the two lifestyles we could potentially adopt, drifting between city or country life, never able to find a balance. The city, by its immediate vicinity, prevailed at uncertain times and this manifested itself in our fickle relationship with nature.

We cared deeply for the neat line of trees on the main boulevard, smiled gently at the ducks and swans in their artificial lake. Sunday walks around the park were a staple of LV life: parents and strollers, pensioners and dogs, allowing themselves one hour of nature friendliness. Yes, LV provided us with fresh air and large spaces, but the vibration of wheels on asphalt from the city followed us into our beds. And in that landscape of red-tile roofs and blue skies hovered a dusty and corroded cloud that concealed the horizon.

This clash of elements made us fidgety, unable to stay outside for too long without some source of distraction. Those of us with green thumbs did the minimum necessary to keep the garden looking alive, while our children played ball for a few minutes, only to return to the comfort of their rooms and the consolation of their video games. Only the elder Martins spent hours tending to their garden, taking pride in winning the council’s Garden of the Year award year after year, but that was just a generational thing.

We thought this indecision was inevitable, that suffering from it was a necessary condition to reside in LV – that is, until they arrived.

Monica and the girl didn’t react to it. They didn’t even seem to acknowledge the potential risk, the danger of ever developing a similar condition. Whenever a bit of sunshine pierced through the dusty cloud, they ran outside and tended to their flowers, read on sun-loungers, or played with their dog. Walking from the school, we could see parts of their garden, and there would always be the shadow of a moving body on the lawn. How was it they preserved such rosy cheeks and a honey glaze to their complexion that was more appropriate to a summer spent on the coast than a life of urbanity?

Without properly understanding why this confused us, we would study their features and resent the complacency they represented. This reaction was what kept Anne from telling her sister what she really thought of our new neighbours. She had understood that only a body truly resistant to our indecision could display those features.

And why would a resistant body ever feel the need to adapt?