

# Preface

In *Place and Placelessness*, E.C. Relph writes, "To have roots in a place is to have a secure point from which to look out on the world, a firm grasp of one's own position in the order of things." Similarly Gaston Bachelard defines home as "our corner of the world." For hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of years it would have been natural to conflate the notions of "roots" and "home". Further, both of these ideas would have been tied to a single geographic space. This issue of the St. John's *Humanities Review*, entitled "Nationalism: Roots and Transgressions" aims to explore modern iterations of these same notions. As we define them today, are our roots geographic or cultural? Are they familial or linguistic? Or, are they, seemingly more often than not, some myriad combination? In our technological, global and mobile world it is easy to see how the concepts such as "roots", "home" and "nationalism" start to become blurred. We hang on to certain parts of our lives, slough off some things, adopt others. When we ourselves are the sums of many places and many peoples, how then does that inform the way in which we interpret something as complicated as nationalism?

There are no easy answers for these questions. Author Meena Alexander exemplifies how intangible the answers to these questions are in this excerpt of "No Nation Woman":

*Houses shatter and fall in me. Shards of the, bits and pieces of them, a room with a wall all askew, a kitchen with a side door blown off so the sun shines in, a bit of a threshold, part of a high*

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*latticed window, teak steps as high as a grown man, bits of sand and gravel someone's foot brought in.*

*When I try to look back at my life there's no blackness in it. It's all around, a moistness like sweet well water, the houses crumbled up inside. How many houses have there been? When I count it sears me: a hot wind that destroys generations. Makes history a mad, mad joke. Let me try to count it out in all the numbers I know, eve if I sound like a three year old.*

*Numbers tumbled in the spray of sound: Aune, runde, mune, nale. Eak, do theen char. One, two, three, four. Wahid, ithneen, thalantha arba. Un deux trois quatre. I have used up all my languages. I have only got as far as four. But there were many more houses. Were there four times four? More than that, too. The forest of numbers makes no sense.*

*I try to lay it all out on a cloth, an imaginary cloth, but it turns uneven, stained, fit to shred with the pressure exerted on it. The houses grow tipsy.*

*Houses to be born in, houses to die in, houses to make love in with wet, sticky sheets, houses with the pallor of dove's wings, houses fragrant as cloves and cinammon ground together. Ah, the thickness of the toungue that will not let me be, will not let me lay it out, saying: I was born here, I lived here, I did this, I did that, saying it all out in the way that people do or like to do.*

*Houses in Allahbad, in Pune, the southwards through the Nilgiris and the curved rock face of the Palghat Pass, the ancestral houses in Tiruvella and Kozhencheri--houses of blood and bone where I have lived and died in countless lives before mine. In an old steamer painted white, westwards over the Indian Ocean, through Port Sudan with the waters stained maroon by hidden corals, by train through the desert till we reach the hosues in Hai-el-Matar, in Khartoum. There were acacia trees and fierce water of the Blue Nile that drew in unsuspecting swimmers, gunfire in the market place, tear gas. I carried the acid scent with me over the Atlantic, eighteen, shivering in my thin clothes as the plane touched down.*

*I live in England, in a tall house on Oxford Street, in Nottingham, Lawrence country. I have a dormer window, I paint, love riotously, write a thesis on memory. It makes me mad, writing that thesis, all about reclaiming time. While the mind cuts loose from the body and circles empty space. Small spells in Galway, in Amsterdam, in Chinon where Loire pours through rocks. In Nottingham, I lean out of the window. Where is blood hidden here? In the cherry trees?*

*I return to the Palghat Pass, the rock face harder now, echoing my cries: 'I am I, woman of innumerate houses.' Entering the old courtyard, I become mute. I roll myself in reams and reams of paper and wait in the dry house of Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad.*

*All shit and paper now, I have no eyes, no face.*

*There, There, I must stop myself, I can't.*

*This housekeeping exercise isn't getting anywhere. And what to do with the rest of I  
ife?*

*Houses in America, the little rooms painted white, the parquet floors, the rush basket*

*I set on fire in Minneapolis with a smoldering cigarette. What to do with the trucks that rumble under the windows at 242nd Street and Broadway in the great city of Manhattan where the air is never clean? Trucks rolling by Poe Cottage in the Bronx, where Edgar Allan Poe moved for the clearer air. Now the air is filthier than where he was, the bars burnt out, the street covered with potholes. They managed to set his little cottage on a piece of parkland, put chain fences around it, install a lecturer from City College who gives visitors a little speech on electricity, how Poe was struck, what lightning did to him.*

*But what is Poe to me? I have not been to his tombeau. What do I know of women called Annabelle Lee? What does he know of me, I might ask? My house is split through, a fault in the ground where it stands. They're auctioning my soul where they auction fish, catfish, swordfish, scooped from the Arabian sea, ten thousand miles from Poe's cottage by the old wharf, by the paddy beds on the Tiruvella-Kozhencheri Road.*

*Thinking of the old road calms me. It runs between the two houses that have always been there for me, the Tiruvella and Kozhencheri houses, different as idli from dosa, plum pudding from peach pie, akin nonetheless, with tiled roofs, cool floors, windows cut in teak, polished brass latches, no glass there.*

*I am at home on the road that bumps a little as it passes the old wharf, where at dawn the fishermen crowd, laying out their wares, crying out the prices of shrimp, catfish, swordfish, parrotfish, sardines, soles, hot, houseless soles dredged from the mothering sea.*

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