

What is home?

Marina Tsvetaeva: 'One's homeland is not a geographical convention but an insistence of memory and blood.'

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A year before she was born, the country in which Marie Schreier's brothers had grown up and in which her parents had fallen in love had essentially disappeared. The country in which they lived now was her homeland, of course, automatically, but it was not her family's. Like the wall that had once marked part of its border, that country that they had called home had vanished into history. Although she and her family shared one roof, they could not share a common experience or understanding of where home was. Home for Marie was a land that had appeared almost from nowhere; home for her family had been wiped away beneath their feet.

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In his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera's heroine Tamina makes a house out of writing. Through the eleven years of her marriage, she keeps diaries, reluctantly but at the insistence of her husband: an attempted record of their life together. When they defect from communist Czechoslovakia, the notebooks are left behind, in a drawer at his mother's. Now, after her husband's death, Tamina pleads with her mother-in-law to post them on. She buys a new notebook to fill with reconstructions of what was in the other eleven, the past they contain: holidays, pet names, arguments, celebrations. Now, she desperately wants those notebooks back, so that 'the flimsy framework of events' she has been trying to rebuild 'will be provided with walls and become a house she can live in'. For Tamina, widowed and exiled, home is a drawer full of words; a series of memories inadequately expressed and captured in a form that can be stuffed into a postbag.

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Hilde Domin: 'For me, language is impossible to lose, after everything else has been lost. The last, essential home.'

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Arabic is a language with a particularly large vocabulary, capable of great subtlety and range of meaning. Immersed in its richness, the poet Taher Adel can write almost a dozen poems on the names for the moon (*11 Names of the Moon*), and still more on the words for 'love' (*14 reasons why*). In *Arabic Names for Home*, he picks six of the many possible Arabic translations of the word 'home' and translates those back into their closest English meanings: as a world, as the idea of living or resting, as family, as refuge, as independence, or as a fortress. Thus what in English would be collected under a single, inadequate term, in Arabic seeds different configurations of comfort, strength and security. Yet as he turns them over in his mind, Adel's words turn towards darkness and threat: 'what use is any, when we cannot live or rest in peace?' ... 'now we need refuge from our refuge, / while the world shelters itself from our faces'.

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For years, the lives of artist-activists Isabelle Frémaux and Jay Jordan were those of twenty-first-century nomadic artists: taking advantage of cheap travel, telecommunication technologies and the internationalisation of aesthetics, they travelled globally to pursue grants, residencies and opportunities to study or to teach. But around the turn of the millennium, in the wake of the anti-globalisation movement and the Reclaim the Streets protests, they began to feel dissatisfied with this way of being. Their version of home no longer matched their political ideologies. As they put it: 'If your artist CV says you've shown in Cape Town, Dubai, Shanghai, and Prague and live between Berlin and New York, you have value. But if your bio says that you work in the village where you have lived all your life, getting to know the humans and more-than-humans who share your territory, and that your work nourishes local life, your career is f*cked . . . To be attached to something material and relational is dangerous because it means you might fight to defend it.' Looking for new, more situated ways of being and working, they eventually found home on the *zad*, or *zone à défendre* – a 4,000-acre protest site established just north of Nantes and populated with farms, a library, a flour mill, workshops and more, all outside the reach of any official administration. What Frémaux and Jordan were defending was a bocage landscape of ditches, ponds, woodlands and pastures shaped by centuries of peasant custodianship and threatened by – of all things – the construction of an airport; a symbol of exactly the dislocation the two artists were seeking to escape. In 2018, the protestors won

and the airport plans were cancelled. The zad remains, however, and Frémaux and Jordan live there still.

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The composer Ashkan Behzadi has another twist: home is the place from which you build who you will become. He composed his *Ballads Oblique* against the backdrop of the escalating war in Palestine. As he wrote, his six short movements drifted beyond the control of his pen and became, instead, pieces written as if by the composers six children in Gaza – six from many thousands – could have grown up to become. They are children who lost not only a safe ground beneath their feet but even a safe sky above their heads. They lost the place in which they could grow. Although he found in Adel's poetic explorations of home a way in which to view the war in Gaza, these children were without world, rest, families, refuges, independence and fortresses; they were children to whom even Arabic could give no words for home. The music Behzadi imagines them having grown up to write is shaded with lullabies and playground games, lightness and dance, sharp pain and emptiness.

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Often when she performs Aaron Holloway-Nahum's *If I am from somewhere, I am from there*, Marie stands in front of a video, her silhouette positioned to interact with the images on the screen. That film – also by Holloway-Nahum – is made of clips that document her travels as an artist and the places where she has felt she has belonged: Manchester, London, the Black Forest, Thomashof, Durlach, Althof ... Holloway-Nahum's composition is similarly made. It began from Marie's voice memos, made in response to his questions about her background and upbringing. To these are added field recordings and recollections from her family of what she was like as a child. ('My little girl wanted to play trumpet.') As with the film, Marie plays within and alongside these sounds, triggering them, improvising around them, duetting with them. Recorded Marie comments on what she is doing ('It's very painful to play the violin') or experiences she has had ('I bloody love that sound'); live Marie responds in how she plays. Out of it all, a tapestry of languages is woven – German, English, private, public, recorded, improvised. At its centre are Marie and her violin: a portrait of the artist both in motion and at home, neither one dominant or settled.

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Heinrich Heine: 'One can love one's fatherland and grow to eighty years of age and never have known it. But one would have to have stayed at home. One only recognises the essence of spring in winter.'

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Marie, of course, did grow up to become a musician, if not a trumpeter. And like Frémaux and Jordan, and hundreds of artists before her, she embarked on a life of fluid and uncertain status. It is a life she loves, whose privilege she acknowledges. In 2010, she left Germany to make a new home in the UK. But she remains uncertain about where home is. 'The country in which she lives? The country in which she was born? The country of her parents and her brothers, the one no longer on any maps? Perhaps, like Tamina, her home can be placed carefully in a case. Unlike Tamina, she never leaves this one behind. Marie calculates that almost one-third of her life has been spent in physical contact with her instrument, either in her hands or strapped to her back. Her violin is her objective voice: more native than either of the two verbal languages in which she thinks and speaks and dreams. It makes sense, then, for her to use it to explore her questions of belonging and identity. To hold it and listen to it, to capture within it and express out from it everything that represents where and who she is. *All Things Must Be Audible At All Times*, the improvisatory composition in which she articulates these ideas, is music made of interpenetrating states and vocabularies, of competing realities and unsettled foundations, of movement and declamation.

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In the *zad*, Frémaux and Jordan came to practise attentiveness as a way of making home. Paying attention to an activity or an object – such as playing a violin or baking a loaf of bread – requires being in the here and now. And being present means knowing what is around, being familiar with and grounded in your surroundings, regardless of their imperfections or incompleteness. Home in this reading, then, is not about roots or geography, but about what you have with you and what you can make it become. Looking to the cup-shaped nests of mud that swallows attach to the sides of buildings in which to hatch their young, they draw inspiration: each one is unique, 'the result of deep presence and awareness of how a material feels, a deep direct attention to things'. Swallows are creatures forever in

flight, their land the sky. And in the simplicity and contingency of their nests, they reveal homemaking and inhabiting to be construction out of nothing, and freedom from everything.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson, 2025