



This is the Place

Women Writing About Home

Edited by Margot Kahn and Kelly McMasters

336 pages

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Review by Jordan Keller

Featuring timely stories from thirty authors, including former *High Desert Journal* contributors Terry Tempest Williams, Pam Houston, Kate Lebo, Maya Jewell Zeller, and Margot Kahn, *This is the Place*, edited by Kahn and Kelly McMasters, boldly confronts the role of women today and their relationships with home. *This is the Place* weaves stories of home across intersections of cultural identity, language, class, and gender, yet common threads like motherhood, daughterhood, and negotiation of place tie the collection together. Many of the authors wrestle with how they have been impacted by their mothers or the pressures that arise in motherhood, as in Debra Gwartney's painfully vulnerable story, "Broken Home," where the author struggles with the guilt of being unable to sense and prevent the predator who invades her home and targets her daughters. Some authors describe where they found their home, whether as a physical place, or idea, while others ruminate on the factors that make home elusive or damaged as Desiree Cooper does in "Away from Dangerous Things" when she states, "dementia, it turns out, is the one dangerous thing that finally penetrated the sanctum of their home." Each story offers a different background, a new definition of home, but each emotional experience in *This is the Place* resonates with those of the others.

The pieces in *This is the Place* vary in tone, form, point of view, and more, but this amplifies the impact of each work. Lina María Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas's powerful piece "AlláEn La Fuente" recounts a complicated upbringing in politically tumultuous Bogotá and a poignant sense of uprootedness, yet it is placed next to Akiko Busch's, "Home in Four Acts," which features several distinct instances of feeling grounded in home and place.

The placement of these pieces side by side brings the notes of longing for home and loss in both pieces into greater relief. However, Busch also argues that “it is the rooms from which we are exiled that may fasten themselves most tenaciously to our memory and imagination” which suggests a kind of grounding in places that are lost or no longer accessible. The overlap and contradictions throughout each story speak to the others to create a complex dialogue.

Many of the stories paint home in a surprising new light, as when Naomi Jackson writes about an encounter where, “I am offended but I also find myself comforted by his racism, which is a kind of home I’ve lived in for most of my life...I find solace in being recognized, even for the wrong reasons, as a Caribbean woman.” The breath-stealing reality Jackson confronts is one of many instances throughout *This is the Place* that expertly presents a conflicted relationship with home. There is a kind of power in these shared feminine experiences and the way claiming a complex relationship with place can turn it into something new and all their own. *This is the Place* as a whole is a kind of reclaiming, for how can it center around women and home without playing against the traditional role of women in the home?

This is the Place diversifies the concept of women in the home to combat the traditional stereotype. Rather than seeing women as purely homemakers, we see women grapple with what it means to take on a more traditional role like Margot Kahn in “In the Kitchen,” where “there is a beauty, a necessity, in the making of a space where we are safe and comforted, a space that reflects who we are and what we hold dear; and there is the mundane drudgery of the daily tasks this requires.” Just the title of the work in today’s context alludes to Kahn’s moral conflict. But we also see writers like Hasanthika Sirisena depict direct confrontations with traditional roles:

Propaganda depicting mother as homeland, as the source and succor for war, is ancient...I try to envision what the counter image to this image is. All that comes to me is my mother dressed in her brand new pair of black pants, perched on the edge of her church pew, staring past the minister, into the chancel, at the bare, glowing rectangle of light in which floats a single white cross.

Both women are navigating their conflict around their experiences as women and relationship to the women who came before them, but they approach them in different ways and come to different conclusions. The beauty of *This is the Place* lies in how the diverse array of stories can come from so many points of view yet navigate so many of the same issues. Each perspective

builds upon and adds complexity to the female experience and definition of home. *This is the Place* renders home, place, and femininity in a variety of ways, with the emotional vulnerability and common ties to these experiences building upon one another into a powerful and moving collection.

