

This Must Be the Place

Poetry & Essays

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Introduction

I locked myself away for a week in Palouse to write about my relationship with place. It felt appropriate—maybe even necessary—to be somewhere unfamiliar while trying to understand what familiarity means. What better place to write about place than one that doesn't know you at all? Being born and raised in Hawaii, then moving to Washington for school, I'm asked all the time how I ended up here. The question is usually casual, but it carries an expectation—that there must be a clear reason, a clean narrative, something that explains the distance between where I started and where I am now.

I never really have a good answer. For a long time, I thought of place as something fixed—something you either belonged to or didn't. A house, a town, a city that could hold you, or fail to. But the older I get, the less stable that definition feels. Place has started to feel more like a series of lasting impressions: a voice you recognize before you see the person, a room that changes depending on who is inside it, a place that only becomes real once you've left it.

In Palouse, everything is quiet in a way that feels almost staged. The kind of quiet that makes you aware of yourself—your body, your thoughts, the fact that you are somewhere you don't quite fit. And in that awareness, I started to notice the pattern: how often I've measured myself against the places I've been, how often I've

The city is a woman—
I look for her in the mountains
the river's mouth,
the cracked lips of pavement,
the way light tests a storefront
the way she waits for me—

I think of her so much
to the point of obsession
my shoulder against brick, not
rubbing and calling out her name
her name into traffic
The city is a woman—
she slips through my screen door
I can't get enough of her now
so I press myself into her edges—
sidewalk seams,
doorway shadows,
the narrow spaces where things
are waiting to happen

She is too much for me—
too visible.
Everyone can tell by the way I
say her name,
by how her face finds me
every reflection—
bubbles, windows,
the cover of night
capturing her long enough
for me to reach

The city is a woman—
mistaken distance for clarity.
That week was about sitting inside
the question—about tracing the
line between where I've been and
what I've carried with me. About
understanding how longing can
attach itself to a place, and how
belonging, if it exists at all,
might be something we make rather
than something we find.

Or maybe something we recognize
only after we've already left.

I Learn Her by Night

The city is a woman—
I look for her in the mundane:
the river's mouth,
the cracked lips of pavement,
the way light rests on a storefront

I think of her so much
to the point of abrasion—
my shoulder against brick,
rubbing and calling
her name into traffic

The city is a woman—
she slips through my screen door
I can't get enough of her,
so I press myself into her edges—
sidewalk seams,
doorway shadows,
the narrow spaces where things
are waiting to happen

She is too much for me—
too visible.
Everyone can tell by the way I
say her name,
by how her face finds me
in every reflection—
puddles, windows,
the cover of night
capturing her long enough
for me to reach

The city is a woman—
and she takes care of me
and it ruins me.
It's better than love,
whatever this is—
our wanting without promise
this closeness without claim.

She walks me home drunk in the
snow, keeps a few paces ahead of
me
just out of reach.
I follow anyway,
through alleys, past damp garbage,

under bridges where black cats
thread themselves in shadows

The city is a woman—
and she watches me at night,
keeping me awake.

This time,
for the first time,
I think she says my name—

like something I've wanted
long enough
to almost believe
it wants me back

If You Were to Ask the Dictionary

My middle name, 'Pili'— translated 'beloved'— is one given to the women in my family.

My mother, for example, is beloved— in the way she holds up the line at Foodland with her laughter— how her voice arrives before she does:

bright, unmistakable

'pili'

to cling; to bind; to touch; to join; to adhere; to hold; to be close to

'hoa pili'

intimate friend

'ko'u pili'

my partner

'pilianā'

connection

'e pili kua'

let's be together

'he pili wehena'ole'

an unseverable relationship

'ho'o pili'

to attach oneself to

'ua ho'opili ia ma ka ma'ema'e

o ka male'

marriage

Beloved, Day Four

It's clear that I don't belong here—and I'm okay with that.

That realization used to hurt. It used to remind me of being a kid, hovering at the edge of a group that never quite opened for me, or standing at a party watching everyone else make out with each other. I used to carry that feeling like a rock that I was lacking something.

Now it feels different. Lighter, somehow.

People stare here. Old people, especially. Twenty-something queers, too. When you're the

only brown alternative for miles. You get used to love. It doesn't make it right, but it also doesn't make it wrong. You become something untamable. Learning still to be someone it comes naturally to.

I've been asked to move here, or if I'm visiting from somewhere else.

Polite ways of saying I don't belong here. It's a way of saying I don't belong here.

But I've started to think that not belonging somewhere isn't a failure. It just means the space wasn't built with you in mind. It means there are other places that might be.

That hasn't stopped me from moving through and making a life. I've been pushing up against small moments of connection that I don't

Palouse, Day Four

It's clear that I don't belong here—and I'm okay with that.

That realization used to hurt. It used to remind me of being a kid, hovering at the edge of a group that never quite opened for me, or standing at a party watching everyone else make out with each other. I used to carry that feeling like proof that I was lacking something.

Now it feels different. Lighter; somehow.

People stare here. Old people, especially. Twenty-something queers, too. When you're the only brown alternative person for miles, you get used to it. It doesn't make it right, but it also doesn't make it surprising. You become something to look at, something unfamiliar.

I've been asked, more than once, if I've just moved here, or if I'm visiting from somewhere else. Polite ways of saying I don't belong here.

And maybe I don't.

But I've started to think that not belonging somewhere isn't a failure. It just means the space wasn't built with you in mind. It means there are other places that might be.

That hasn't stopped me from moving through and making nice with the locals, though. I have been brushing up against small moments of connection.

At the grocery store, an older woman leaned in close to my arm and asked, "Did those hurt?" She meant my tattoos. I told her they only hurt if you let them. She laughed, a little surprised, and called me brave.

The next day, I saw her again in the same aisle. She looked at me like she almost recognized something, then asked, "Did you just move here?"

I told her no—I'm just passing through.

Mother's Advice

My mom and I have the kind of
relationship
where we don't tell each other
things
We don't get into specifics

But I wish she told me
what it feels like to lie there,
watching the curtains breathe in
and out—
waiting for his family to come
back from church

I wish she told me about windows—
how easy it is to climb out of
them,
how it feels to slip through a
back gate
when you don't belong anywhere
else

I wish she told me
how sand clings to damp skin,
how it follows you home
even after you've rinsed yourself
clean

I wish she told me
how loud willow trees are at
night—
how they rustle like they know
something,
like they've "watched" it happen
before

No one told me
what it would feel like to make
love,
or to sit beside someone
flipping through their records,
hoping one of them explains it
for you

No one told me
what it would feel like
to be asked to stop writing poems

Hotel Division II

Have you been to the new hotel?
They call it Hotel Division—
as many syllables as the place
it replaced.

perhaps it's easier to say,
easier to remember.
I couldn't quite say.
The hallway suggests a lift—
doors half-latched,
breaths caught between leaving
and staying.

At Hotel Division
everything is borrowed:
light, air, time—
even the feeling that you've
been here before.

He asks where you've been
or where you're going next.
It's understood that both are
temporary.
That permanence is rumor
that spreads to each other in
passing.

The evening presses close to the
balcony, and the party, list
fingers longer than it should
all think of you there.
He kissed me goodbye.

And I walked home alone,
the night stretching out like legs
past a deer standing still in the
dark—
watching, or not

And I thought of my mom,
and how we don't get into specifics
And understood, finally,
why

Hotel Divination II

Have you been to the new hotel
they built on Laupahoehoe?
They call it Hotel Divination—
as many syllables as the place
it replaced.

Perhaps it's easier to say,
easier to remember.
I couldn't quite say.

The hallways suggest a life—
doors half-latched,
breaths caught between leaving
and staying.

At Hotel Divination
everything is borrowed:
light, air, time—
even the feeling that you've
been here before.

No one asks where you've been
or where you're going next.
It's understood that both are
temporary,
that permanence is a rumor
guests repeat to each other in
passing.

The evening presses close to the
balcony,
lingers longer than it should.
I think of you then—

not as you are,
but as someone passing through,
someone I almost recognized
in the reflection of glass.

Half-seen, half-invented,
held together by distance.

Maybe you're miles ahead of me,
or just out of reach—
we miss each other by inches,
by seconds,

by the wrong turn at the end of
a corridor.

Still, I keep the room a little
longer.

Still, I wait for something to
remain.

But nothing here belongs to
anyone—

not the view,
not the quiet,
not even the wanting.

Only this:

the sense that we were almost
in the same place
at the same time.

I'll see you there.

It's a deal.

For sure.

Home is Where I Want to Be

In college, I made a zine called "On Houses." The back cover reads: "On houses, on homes, on longing, on belonging." It's strange to look back at now, to hold that object in my hands and realize I am still writing about the same subject, pressing on the same bruise.

My relationship with the idea of "home" has always been turbulent. At the time I didn't consider anything to be mine in that way. Not a place, not a room, not even a feeling I could reliably return to. I resented the word itself—home—for how easily other people seemed to say it, how naturally it appeared in their mouths. I envied the certainty behind it. The zine reflects that, it's bitter, biting, aggressive.

At the time it felt definitive. Not just about a physical place, but about the impossibility of return itself—the idea that whatever "home" is, it had already passed beyond my reach.

Pullman, Washington could not be a home for me, even after four years. I moved through it the way you move through a waiting room or a hotel lobby—temporarily, silently, and detached. A home requires people. It needs to be built and maintained through human connection. Without that, it's just a thing. Just walls and floors and a ceiling that don't mean anything.

And "community"—that word felt even further away. Abstract, false. It was something that people talked about as if it were guaranteed and I hated that. I had never seen it in a way that felt real to me, never experienced it as something stable or sustaining. It always seemed to exist elsewhere, in other people's lives—it had missed mine entirely.

Looking back, I can see how rigid I was in that thinking—how absolute. I believed that if something didn't meet my definition, then it didn't count. That if I couldn't feel it fully, then it wasn't there at all.

But I also understand where that came from: the need to protect myself from the possibility that "home" was something I simply wasn't allowed to have.

What I didn't account for was how the definition might change.

Maybe a home isn't something you arrive at fully formed. Maybe it isn't a single place, or even a consistent feeling. Maybe it's something that flickers up—appearing in moments where you least expect it. Or maybe it's less about where you are, and more about where you're allowed to be known.

"Allowed to be known"—that's what it comes back to.

I moved to Spokane a year and a half ago, though it feels longer. In that time I've gathered people: friends, lovers, mentors, confidants, enemies, all those things at the same time. They've stretched my days in both

directions—fast and slow—and, in one way or another, they've all allowed me to be seen.

Lately I've been thinking about placemaking. My apartment walls are covered in art and letters from loved ones. Some of them have copies of my house keys. And at the time of writing this I am 24 hours away from adopting a cat.

Maybe that's what home is, or the closest I've come to it: not a place I've arrived, but one I've slowly been making by letting people in, by letting people see me.

I think about that zine often. About the version of myself who wrote it with such certainty, such sharpness. I don't disagree with them, exactly. I just think they were working with a narrower set of possibilities.

*

I am still writing about houses. About homes. About longing and belonging.

But now, I'm less interested in defining them, and more interested in noticing when they appear like a small lingering thing.

home (n.)

where
you're
allowed to
be known

Evening Abcedarians

I.

A lovely humming
Even here—
In a place I've never known before
Over a highway unknown at night
Unshakeable one,
how the bouquets you've brought
me
Keep me a whole thing,
like roots that lift asphalt
meandering still—
never failing to
promise
when the blanket of stars are
overhead

*

II.

A nightly whisper
ends the gap between us
Inarticulate as it may be—
only this sound is heard:
universes abound,
how it sounds on a night like this
Knowing we cannot have
long to stay here
My insatiable one,
nearing is the day, so
please,
welcome on home to me.

III.
A come on home
echoes
if I choose to hear it
Overt in its delivery,
unwavering in its sound
Here are words that I wish
kept me around:
longer/linger/longing/lingering
thing;
May I listen?
Nestled ear to the ground that
plays
when I'm the only one to hear it

The Old House

I'm looking at a picture of myself taken when I was about thirteen or fourteen. I'm sitting on the front steps of a pale blue house with white banisters, the structure lifted high off the ground in case of a tsunami or a flood. In the upper right-hand corner, a wind chime hangs, caught in the frame but stagnant.

The house belongs to my grandparents. My grandfather grew up on that property. The original structure was torn down when I was young and replaced with this newer one—blue, clean, and slightly out of place compared to the rest of the homes on the street. My family uses it as a vacation home, though that term feels generous because no one really lives there.

It sits out in the countryside: roosters in the morning, the steady crash of waves, and at night, the sharp, repetitive calls of coqui frogs. Across from the house is a beach, though it's not quite a beach in the traditional sense. It's a freshwater spring where seawater flows in and mixes, creating something in between—brackish water, if you want to be precise. The surface is cold, but the deeper you go, the warmer it gets.

The shoreline is made of black volcanic rock, and the sand is just as dark, fine enough to cling to your skin. Sometimes you find empty Heineken bottles scattered along the ground. As a kid, I would fill them with sand, pebbles, and shells—small,

contained versions of the place. In the hotter months, sea turtles gather there. They rest on the rocks or move slowly through the water, and if you're swimming, you can feel them pass beneath you, uninterested in being noticed.

For most of the year, the house is empty. My family rents it out to vacationers, people who arrive temporarily and leave without altering anything. My grandparents visit occasionally to maintain it—cut the grass, clean the interior, make sure everything is in order for whoever comes next. Outside of that, the house simply exists, unused and uninterrupted. I think that's part of why we call it the "Hilo House." Naming it gives it a sense of identity, even if no one is there to inhabit it.

A few years after that picture was taken, my grandparents told me that the house is under my name in their will. It passed over my mother and my uncle and landed with me, unexpectedly. They asked what I would do with it one day, and I gave the most practical answer I could think of—that I'd probably keep renting it out. It felt like the kind of response they were looking for, something practical and detached.

But the truth is that I didn't know then, and I still don't know now. It's a strange thing to be given responsibility for a place that doesn't feel entirely yours, a place you're not sure you even want. The idea of maintaining it—traveling back and forth, cutting the grass, hosing down the screen doors, keeping it in order—feels distant and burdensome. At the same time, the thought of living

there feels just as unlikely. The nights are colder than you expect for a tropical place, the frogs are loud enough to keep you awake, and just when you manage to fall asleep, the roosters start up again. The tile floors inside the house somehow always leave your feet black, no matter how often they're cleaned, as if the place insists on marking you in some persistent way.

When I look back at that photo, I'm struck less by the setting and more by what I didn't know at the time. The house was just a backdrop for a photo then, a place I visited without thinking about what it meant or what it might eventually become to me. Now it feels more complicated: less like a destination and more like a question I've been asked too early.

I still don't know what I'll do with it when the time comes. I don't know what it means to inherit something that exists so independently of you, or how to decide its place in your life. Hell, I don't even know what it means to "have assets." For now, it remains what it has always been: a house that sits mostly empty, waiting for something to happen without urgency. And I remain someone looking at a photograph, trying to understand when exactly that waiting began to include me.

End of Day

I don't believe in scenery—

Beneath an unknown flowering tree
I meet eyes with a large owl,
its stillness louder than anything
I have ever tried to name

The morning rays kiss the blades
of grass and leaves,
as if the world insists on
tenderness
even when I refuse it

A river gurgles and turns,
remembering itself in every bend
Beneath the bridge where I sit,
counting seconds in peace

Down the hill is a damp evening
that lulls me to sleep—
it waits there all day, patient,
as if, for me

The plains are plain;
but they do not argue for themselves
They simply are
without asking

I don't believe in scenery—

but the owl does not leave,
and the light keeps touching
everything,
and the river keeps speaking in a
language
and the day stretches out in front
of me

so I sit a while longer,
pretending none of it is for me

I don't believe in scenery—
but there it is,
and here I am,
seen by it anyway

End of Day

The morning rays kiss the blades
of grass and leaves.
The world is soft and
tender, but the world is not
even when I refuse to let
A river gorges and turns back
remembering itself in every bend
beneath the bridge where I stand
counting seconds in peace
down the hill, a damp evening
that refuses me to sleep, a still
it waits there all day, patient
as if for me
of it, I want you
The plains are plain, it is
but they do not argue for themselves
they simply are. I am
without taking

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