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Rooms for Loss: Literature and Healing at Home

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Abstract

In March 2020, I received an email instructing me not to come back to campus to continue my coursework in person. My husband and I had recently bought a 1900 American Foursquare HUD house to restore, exploring our own spatial dimensions as renovators and first-time homeowners of a broken, rundown home we yearned to bring back to life. The interiority of the monastic experience that I loved to read about and research suddenly mirrored my own experience of being a PhD student during a pandemic.

Silva Martinez-Falquina uses the term “literary activism” to telegraph how literature has the ability to move people to action. She applies this concept to Louise Erdrich’s 2017 dystopian novel *Future Home of the Living God*, which is as much about home and belonging as about social fear, oppression, and reproductive rights. Reading about Cedar Hawk Songmaker’s decision to house her baby as the conservative government collects pregnant people for experimentation as my own growing baby kicked the novel’s hard cover from its resting place on my stomach, I circled back to the spatial dimensions of grief and loss, mourning the loss of my own “normal” pregnancy and birth experience. This article is as much an exploration of trauma and literature as a healing mechanism as it is a memoir of my own understanding of home and its iterations during 2020’s incalculable transformations.

My husband and I moved to Indiana, Pennsylvania, a small city we had visited the previous year just passing through, for me to begin my doctorate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. We bought a HUD house,¹ sight unseen, outside the city, and began restoring it as soon as we transitioned to living in Pennsylvania that summer. One of the books for my introduction to literary theory course, required of all students in the Literature and Criticism PhD program during their first year, was *Home: A Very Short Introduction* by Michael Allen Fox, one in an OUP series on a host of topics. Fox holds that the concept of home is “restless, shifting, somewhat elusive” (2016, p. 1) because, despite its universality, people have different touchpoints and associations with the concept of home and belonging. Experiencing the gloomy Pennsylvania winter after years of living in Texas and Virginia, New Zealand and Alabama, I resonated with this argument that home is not a straightforward assertion of belonging somewhere: home seizes the occupant, even if the occupant feels they are the one choosing a home in an act of ownership and autonomy. The HUD house, a ramshackle American Foursquare in an ink blot on the map in rural Indiana County, seized us from the moment we stepped inside and felt buyer’s remorse: What have we done? Grease and dog hair were coated on the ceiling, cracks split the drywall in the stairwell, electrical wires dangled exposed from the ceiling, yellow blown-in insulation leaked from the front porch doorframe like a grade B rendition of *The Blob*. Eaten with uncertainty of first-time home ownership and overwhelmed at the amount of work to be done, we rented an Airbnb: first for a few weeks, then a few more, until we had spent over a month commuting between the home improvement store, the house, and back to our Airbnb to collapse, exhausted, on someone else’s bed, smelling someone else’s smells and using garish floral dishes we would never buy for our own kitchen. We stayed in this space until the hazy summer-blue skies above us

¹ HUD homes are Housing and Urban Development homes that are seized by a bank in the foreclosure process and then listed online for realtors to bid on for purchase.

sharpened into crisp autumnal focus – August rolled into October, and we had to make the move into the house that we had been putting off as long as we could, in order to get as many projects completed as possible. I wondered, standing in clouds of sawdust with gloves and multiplying layers as the brilliant scarlets and pumpkins of the autumn melted into gossamer winter clouds pregnant with unshed snow, whether this place would ever feel like a home.

Love makes a house a home.

My first semester at IUP brought with it stacks of delicious books, multiple trips to Starbucks, lively conversation, and sceptical conjecture about this COVID-19 virus and whether it would make its way to the US. My classmates from Asian countries commiserated about not being able to visit home but to me, the virus was only an alarming current event, nothing for us to worry unduly about. My husband and I were consumed with measuring the cut of a flooring sample, calculating the price of installing a new oil tank to heat the house, and eating sandwiches perched on any clean space we could find.

In late November, I started to feel nauseous every morning when I woke up. My body ached to stay nestled in the mattress we had set up in the attic, huddled underneath an electric blanket and oblivious to the long to-do list of house projects waiting for me beyond the edge of my blankets. By early December, I was so consistently sick that I was convinced I either had the flu, had contracted some archaic form of lead poisoning from the paint we had hacked off the crumbling walls of the to-be bedroom in our 120-year-old home, or had somehow caught the virus. Before booking a doctor's appointment on my student income, I decided to eliminate all the possibilities and took a home pregnancy test: the test immediately popped positive. The space taken up in my brain by literature, analysis, theory, and mounds of highlighted articles shifted: now I was thinking about whether to

buy new-born or 3-month onesies, what I needed to know about breastfeeding, and how we were possibly going to finish the nursery in time for a summer due date. By January, COVID had snuck into nearby states and stores had conflicting messages posted on their doors: social distance; stay 6ft away; please wear a mask; or simply, closed. By spring break in March, a mass email went out: we were not to come back to campus. When class resumed in a week, we would see each other on Zoom and turn in our assignments digitally. The rest we would figure out together as we navigated this new environment.

I had left library books in my graduate assistant office. I had, a few weeks before, brought a bag of snacks to work to keep on hand for when cravings struck. I had just memorized all the professors' office numbers. My mini coffeemaker that brewed enough for one was still plugged in, waiting for me beside my work desktop. I was not to come back to campus. I was not to come out anywhere: as a pregnant person, I was getting conflicting messages about whether I was in a high-risk category, but I was not about to gamble with the person I was housing inside me. We had moved into the house, carrying bags, blankets, and cat from the Airbnb and stuffing everything we could into the attic to protect our things from dust and paint speckles. Whether we were ready or not, the 1900 American Foursquare was to become our home, our shelter during our shelter-in-place, our refuge from the unknown – replaced with an unknown of which wire goes where and what hue of floor stain matched the downstairs rooms felt considerably less risky than braving crowds, germs, places, and people. We had been in Pennsylvania for less than seven months and now we were confined to the still-unfamiliar walls of the old house, many of those walls sitting prepped but unpainted, a daily reminder of everything still left to do before baby made his entrance into a world that had suddenly grown hostile, uncertain, and unfriendly. All the pregnancy apps and parenting books I had been mindfully curating since I stared, astonished, at the positive test had one

shared oversight: none of them offered advice on how to be pregnant during a pandemic. One by one, the suggestions offered for self-care, health and fitness, and postpartum preparation fell away. No prenatal yoga because gyms were closed. No doula because that would mean bringing another person from another social circle into our socially distancing bubble. No rounds of maternity clothes dangling from a changing room hanger because shopping in person was risky, if the store was even open. I was being robbed of the experience of growing a life inside my own body, complete with all the support and gadgets and experiences I always assumed I would want or need during a period of intense transformation. It took all of my emotional energy not to try and imagine what the postpartum haze would look like: no one bringing me homemade soup, no stroller walks with other new moms who had gone through childbirth education classes with me, no fumbling with a car seat and soothies and blankets to show off my new bundle in a restaurant.

My solace was literature. The texts selected for my rigorous summer courses resonated with me as they provided numerous touchpoints into circumstances and situations that were much worse than mine or, even more unsettling, eerily similar. Of all the hundreds of pages I burned through that summer, pushing to finish my coursework before my life forever changed and I became a caregiver for a wholly dependent little creature, Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, a speculative novel, grabbed my heart and spun a web of associations between the fictional experiences of Cedar Hawk Songmaker's journey, navigating pregnancy under an oppressive conservative regime where pregnant women are literally snatched from the streets and sequestered in hospitals in order to give birth under controlled circumstances (2017, p. 72), and my own pandemic pregnancy. Evolution has begun working backwards and the Church of the New Constitution has set up surveillance processes to 'protect the unborn' (p. 124), forcing pregnant women like Cedar into hiding to preserve their autonomy. The novel illustrates in disruptive and transgressive terms Carol

Hanisch's assertion that the personal is political: Cedar's own body, the home for her unborn baby, is commodified into a resource for experimentation as the panicked government scrambles to trace the source of the devolution occurring in known species. Cedar's journey to motherhood is marked by terror and suspicion. Her final trips into town for bullets and nonperishables, disguising her swelling belly, are far removed from my feelings of anxiety as I masked up to grab a Gatorade at the petrol station because I was parched and had forgotten a water bottle, unused to this perpetual state of dehydration; yet in reading about them I felt a squeeze of empathy. Cedar's unsettling observations of how public a pregnant person becomes when they begin to show were true in my experience – I felt like a spectacle and not always in a positive way. Throughout my first pregnancy during COVID-19, I found this assertion ringing true again and again: I was acutely aware of others' eyes following me from the home improvement store to my car, hauling cans of paint and crown moulding fluttering in the wind, all crammed into a noisy shopping cart. I never knew if I was being judged for venturing outside of my house as a pregnant person during what had now become a pandemic. Once the shelter-in-place guidance lifted, it was replaced with grim warnings of the dangers of stepping one foot off the porch, but if we could not buy the materials we needed to finish the house, our baby would be born into swaths of paint-speckled drop cloths and mounds of sawdust. Sweating in the July heat, sitting in our half-finished living room with a single oscillating fan, I balanced Erdrich's novel on the house made out of my belly to read about Cedar's first ultrasound: "I see the hollows of the chambers, gray mist, then the valves of your heart slapping... Your whole heart is on the screen and then the technician does something with the machine so that your blood is made of light moving in and out of your heart" (2017, pp. 49-50). Cedar's first ultrasound ends abruptly when the doctor cautiously says "We've got one" and ends with her tying up the doctor, taping his mouth shut, and fleeing the clinic. It is fiction but I had to

remind myself of this as tears welled up in my eyes, thinking about how the most dramatic association I had with my own series of ultrasounds was being told at the clinic door, after my temperature and symptoms were verified, that my husband was not allowed in to attend the appointment with me and that if I found out the baby's sex at the pivotal 20-week anatomy scan, I would be doing so on my own. I was not tracking down my birth mother and feeling ironic disappointment that she was mundanely known as Mary Potts, not a nativist Ojibwe healer as Cedar expected; I was not at risk of being snatched off the sidewalks of downtown Indiana and taken to a hospital where my baby would be snatched from me for experimentation for the greater good, as soon as he was born. Holding the novel against my stomach and feeling the healthy, excitable, regular kicks of my son housed in my transforming body, I nevertheless felt the pang of familiarity with the arc of isolation, anxiety, and loneliness that Cedar journeys through in her own transformation on the page. Cedar's decision to carry her baby through the crests and dips of acute uncertainty intersected with my realizations that my 'COVID baby,' as everyone was now gushing, would land in the middle of uncertainty: no vaccine, no clear and consistent guideline for how to interact with others when I did have to go to appointments or pick up groceries, and no discernible end in sight. Chinua Achebe's concept of 're-storying' is problematized by Cedar's exploitation not only as a woman but an indigenous woman fighting generation trauma of colonization, which starkly intersects with the reality of indigenous women in the US, and the fictional invasion of a religiously zealous government into the pregnancies and births of pregnant people. Restoration is only possible, the story is able to be 're-storied,' only through Cedar's decisions to pursue autonomy and challenge the power structures threatening to dismantle her free choice. The speculative aperture of the novel also explores the parameters for change and their limitations set against the hierarchies of power at play in Cedar's story. These 'speculations' challenged me to explore my spaces of privilege while

finding touchpoints of connection with the anxiety of growing a person inside my house of a body, my body of a house.

There's no place like home.

Continuing to expand on the breadth of associations about the concept of home at play across history and culture, Fox argues that people have a deeper engagement with their homes than they often realize, even if their definitions vary: “Home may be somewhere we return to merely out of habit; because we love it and feel we belong there; need a special place to rejuvenate ourselves for the next round of worldly pursuits; just want a roof over our heads and a bed to sleep in; or for many other reasons” (2016, p. 16). I yearned to break away from pragmatism and own the space of our Pennsylvania house, after itinerant years of moving through all of these engagements, from the tiny house we built as a newly engaged couple to a hostel in Auckland where we split income intended for one graduate student and carried groceries miles home in our arms, a brief stint back in our tiny home and then to base housing at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama where I revelled in my weekly cleaning day and we had a prime view of torrential summer rains flooding our street. In five years of marriage, I wanted to ‘put down roots’ and see a harvest from my own garden, learn the nuances of my own oven well enough to crank out sumptuous dishes, and develop muscle memory for which direction our bedroom was in when I went up the stairs. I wanted this home to be a spatial “reference point” from which I associated myself with the rest of my surroundings (Fox 2016, p. 19), coming back to the same freshly painted porch night after night after my classes. I knew that some of the greatest thinkers whose texts peppered my coursework reading lists wrote about displacement and the lack of a home: Yaa Gyasi (2016), Bharati Mukherjee (1999), and Chinelo Okparanta (2013) danced across the syllabi and pushed me to think about the many homes I have inhabited over time and the immense privilege I have had in often choosing what sort of

space to surround myself with without being made to move, uproot, or displace myself. Reading Virginia Woolf in my lit theory class, my heart flipped at the idea of a room of my own; I reflected back on this precious commodity every time I passed what would eventually become the office, with a blur of stripped walls and holes that needed patching in the floor and a light fixture waiting to be installed. Years of peripatetic reference points, waking up in one bed thinking it was another, always working towards this milestone: our first home as a couple, bought with cash, fixed up with love, and now the home of our first child.

Hungrily following public health updates, I quickly realized that I would have to make peace with the liminal unfinishedness of the house sooner than I had thought: two weeks of self-quarantining extended into a month, extended into two months, and continued to spread like the virus itself. I questioned our wisdom every time we had to make another trip to the home improvement store, packing our car with paintbrushes and drywall and lightbulbs and smoke detectors. I had to embrace the stasis of some projects as we prioritised others, tolerate the blankets we thumb-tacked over the doorways until we could install the heater in mid-November when the snow had already darkened the sky, and reconcile myself to sleeping on a mattress in the attic while we chipped away (literally) at the bedroom. I fought to make the house feel like a home because we had no other choice. Belly growing every day and balance shaky, I lost hours of the weekends when I had no papers due to the bedroom, smoothing and painting and touching up and finding a major flaw and starting over. Bill Bryson holds that “homeliness,” the cultivation of a space that is refuge-like and distinct, is an ancient concept, and because it has perpetuated across cultures through time, it prompts the modern dweller to recognise domesticity (2011, pp. 55-56). I wrestled with this primal desire to recognise and create domesticity in my own space, in the room of my own, and to ‘nest’ as the due date crept closer. I ached for the crib to be out of the box and put together, to drape

handmade blankets over the back of a glider that had not yet been ordered, for the creaky bones of the house to feel like the safe womb of a home.

Possessing the privilege of hindsight, I realise now that the constant to-do lists for the house, the thinking and overthinking about the projects at hand, the nights for takeaway pizza and walks to the nearby park to physically remove ourselves from the overwhelming amount of work still to be done against the chime of passing time – these are the tethers that anchored me to a shelter and prevented me from wistfully pining for the pregnancy experience that was taken away from me. Instead of researching the prenatal yoga courses that were suspended “due to COVID,” I was power washing the front porch and sanding down the border for the front door to close up whistling gaps between the door and the wall. Rather than aimlessly sorting through miles of maternity clothing in the shops in town, I came straight back from my doctor’s appointments with a mental list of small projects that I felt physically and mentally able to tackle that day. As my body grew to house the son whose heartbeat I had seen, like Cedar, on the pulsing ultrasound machine screen, I grew stronger around him. Morning sickness and intense fatigue that left me horizontal in our makeshift attic room gradually gave way to bursts of energy that pushed me through another day and another day until a week had gone by and then another week and then a month. I found that we were surviving the pandemic as we created our home and my body continued to create our child.

These days filled with the fluid rhythm of positivity and a quickening sense of expectation as we, slowly, posted coveted before-and-after pictures of the rooms one by one were balanced by days whose sole purpose seemed to be humiliation. A piece of crown moulding wrongly measured and cut at an angle instead of straight, a forgotten item at the store that was necessary for finishing a project, a day filled with rain when all our planned projects were supposed to be outside in the sun – minor setbacks but to my hormonally-charged sensitivities, they seemed monumental. I had to be

coaxed from the bathroom multiple times, clutching wads of tissue, hinging on my husband's reassurances that we would start fresh tomorrow. At the end of each exhausting day, regardless of the challenges we had encountered, these truths were static: we were fixing up a house that we owned, and being pregnant, and doing both during a pandemic.

Stay home.

Most of my friends and family grew up in homes they had inhabited for decades, if not the entire time I knew them. Like Proust, certain tastes or smells or atmospheres could send them meandering down the path of nostalgic memory, using their conceptualization of home as an anchoring point of reference. Creating my point of reference during a time when homes were almost hagiographically represented by the media as spaces of immunity against the virus ("Stay home, stay alive"), I had no moment of reverie with a madeleine, but rather the opportunity to craft it anew. I was standing on a precipice of meaning-making and trying to decide if I should step forward. Hurling through the full load of summer courses, I switched between freshening up the baseboards in each room and diving into medieval texts that depicted very different associations with the idea of home. Already planning to focus my dissertation in twelfth-century monastic literature, I read the perspectives of monks with wonder – the cloistered spaces of Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Guerric of Igny both astonished and awed me, especially the hard story of the Cistercian order springing literally from nothing as a ragtag group of monks built the first monastery at Cîteaux in the Burgundian region of France out of wood while they lived off wild carrots and berries. The handbook for anchoresses, eremitic women devoted to a life of solitude and devotion and often physically attached to the church sponsoring their hermitage, described home as a necessary escape from the outside world, promoting a "negative and defensive view of the enclosed life as providing a much-needed

shelter from...one's own frailty, the world and the wiles of the devil, and...the just anger of God" (Savage and Watson 1991, p. 17). Passage from the outside world brimming with secularity and temptation into the anchorhouse was a kind of death and anchoress' cells were diversely referred to as "isolation," "prison," or "the desert" (p. 16). Anchoresses were "wardens" of their piety and devotion, responsible for maintaining a holy life that was spatially and visually supported by their intentionally sparse surroundings. The wariness towards the outside world was a theme that I began resonating with as I followed the quarantining updates in my family's states as well as in Pennsylvania and became increasingly grateful for the surety of our four walls – unpainted though they were. Incrementally, almost imperceptibly, my feet began to memorize the turns of the creaky stairs and my hands moved to flip off a light automatically instead of glancing to remind myself where the switch plate was. There was still no madeleine – but instead a hundred sights, smells, and sensations that grew familiar to me as we pressed on with our work, made the house our own, and stayed home as well the commercials, billboards, and emails from professors advised. While my own experiential meaning-making was literally shaped by these walls, I lived vicariously through the literature I consumed insatiably. I savoured the autobiographical travel narrative *At Home in the World* by Tsh Oxenreider (2017), a nine-month adventure of selling possessions that could not fit into backpacks and whisking a husband and three kids under 10 across multiple continents. Oxenreider's whirlwind adventure spans roughly the same time as growing and giving birth to a child – her mindful tone introduced me to the rhythms and meditations of someone experiencing a different sort of birth as she observes the transformation of her family as they settle into "homeliness" everywhere in the world. Reading the book in 2020 in the midst of the pandemic was an act of irony; now, reflecting back on the cusp of 2022, many of the countries Oxenreider mentions and falls in love with either currently practice closed borders or require an immunization card for

entry. It is uncertain whether such a trip will ever be possible and I am only able to feel gratitude towards stories that capture the precious moments of others on the page for my own time and space. I can only feel gratitude for the privilege of being able to create and recreate a familiar space that I could feel safe in, that I could bring my baby to without worry of infection or danger. My path did not lead me on a grand tour of anywhere, much less the world, but my appreciation for the home that I did have deepened until it took root in my heart and blossomed.

We finished the last room, the spacious dining room, a day before prodromal labour melted into true contractions. Clambering down from the ladder for the final time, I took an unsteady breath and soaked in the coveted sights: all the wallpaper stripped and thrown away, windowsills painted and sparkling, the ceiling neatly patched over a pre-existing water leak that had cost hundreds to repair, the floors scrubbed and shiny with a new finish, the faux fireplace ready for entertaining. I was 40 weeks pregnant, the house my belly had created for my kicking and somersaulting son had grown seemingly overnight, and I was covered in paint flecks and soot streaks but all I felt in my bones were surges of gratitude and, every now and then, my son signalling to my body: I'm almost ready to come home.

We admired our new dining room on a Sunday night and that Tuesday morning, my son burst into the world. On Thursday afternoon we packed up the free diapers and granny panties and carried our beautiful baby into the August sunshine and drove him home for the first time.

Since the birth of my pandemic baby, we have moved again from our home in Pennsylvania to a house on a military base in snowy, blustery Colorado and our process of creating home has begun anew. The spatiality of home as a concept has continued in step with me on this path – every so often, I will wake up and imagine myself in my bed in Alabama or the room my husband and I shared in the hostel in Auckland, or catch a whiff of fresh paint or sawdust from a neighbour's house project or notice a generic corner

of the house that could be in Pennsylvania as much as it is in front of me in Colorado. In a few years, the military will tell us that we need to move again, and we will carry the roots we have placed here to transplant them in Hawaii or England, South Korea or Virginia. My son is now a toddler, eyes wide with the world and head brimming with new skills and exciting lessons. Our families are too far away for a day trip in the car and it takes major planning to coordinate our schedules and find reasonable airfare when we can get together. Sometimes we talk about the house in Pennsylvania and I wonder if our other homes will ever feel as securely and intensely a part of our story. There is a vaccine. We are still wearing masks. I see the changes that pregnancy and childbirth coordinated on and in my body and I wonder if the new lodging of my soul and my being will be one I grow to love or will change yet again with another life housed quietly away, growing and growing, reclaiming and reshaping their brother's space. Perhaps these tensions are universal – perhaps wondering if I belong in this space of homeliness right now means that I am, messily and contentedly, at home.

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