

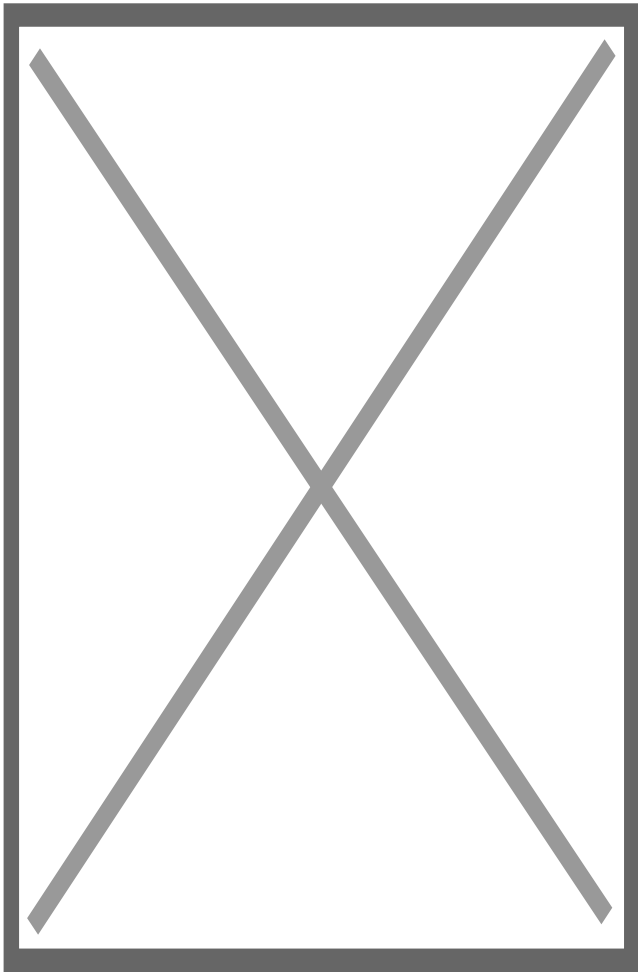
You can't go home again

But you can remember it. Margot Singer's essays explore how.

by [John W. Farrell](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue

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In Review



Secret Agent Man

by Margot Singer

Barrow Street Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

What if our homes help prolong our lives? asks one of Margot Singer's haunting essays in *Secret Agent Man*. Even after being away for years, she thinks of her childhood house in Cochituate, Massachusetts, as an anchor

and feels comforted to find her parents still embedded in its disheveled coziness: “Like an enchanted briar hedge, our parents’ house and all of their possessions have grown up around them, rooting them in place.” It can seem forbidding, she notes, even threatening as they age beyond the capacity to keep up with daily maintenance—in the yard, taking out trash, shoveling snow and ice. But then, what if the house is actually less of a looming health risk than the thing that’s helping to keep them alive?

Singer, author of the novel *Underground Fugue* and the short story collection *The Pale of Settlement*, is a professor of creative writing at Denison University. Unexpected questions permeate the essays in this collection, all of which are personal memoirs accentuated by Singer’s insistence on stepping back from the personal—changing the scale of her perspective—to connect her experiences more deeply to the wider world and humanity.

Thus, in her musings on her parents’ home, Singer summons a famous 1979 study by Ellen Langer of Harvard, who conducted an experiment with elderly men invited to spend five days in a monastery that had been designed to reflect the world of the late 1950s. As Singer describes it, “the men were instructed not just to reminisce about the past, but to try to *be* the person they’d been then.” Just one week later, Langer recorded marked improvements in all the testable biomarkers of age. The men’s memories and their grip strength improved, as well as their gait, posture, vision, and hearing. In the same way, Singer sees that her own parents are more energetic and sharper in their home—and this gives her and her brother some pause whenever they deliberate moving them to elderly housing for their own protection. Time really seems to run more slowly in the old house, and any change might break the spell.

The book’s title essay delves into the mysterious history of Singer’s father, a Jewish refugee who fled from Czechoslovakia to Palestine in 1940 before making his way to the United States. Working as a consultant after the war, her dad brought to Singer’s mind the character John Drake (played by Patrick McGoohan) in the *Secret Agent* television series in the mid-1960s. And the association wasn’t all in her imagination. Not long before he died, her father finally told her that he did some work for the Israeli Mossad:

“I didn’t do any real *spying*,” he said. “I provided some economic information. Nothing major. I just piddled around.”

“Oh,” I said again. I was touched by his humility. I didn’t know what to think.

There was a pause, and then he said, “That is the truth.”

“Okay,” I said.

I wanted to know more, but I asked no more questions. I’m not sure what else he would have told me, or what difference it would have made. We left it at that.

Altogether, Singer’s essays cover a period of over 20 years of her life—from her experience studying international relations in graduate school at Oxford through her years working in New York for McKinsey and her return to academia before settling down in Granville, Ohio. In “A Natural History of Small-Town Ohio,” which in its own evocative way echoes William Gass’s classic story “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country,” Singer commemorates her new hometown:

Out for drinks with a group of women friends, the conversation turns to the prayer meetings held beneath the high school flagpole, the “abstinence-only” Sex Ed curriculum, the unfriendly looks one

woman's dark-skinned husband gets at a local bar. The woman sitting next to you—a pretty redhead with a freckled nose—leans over with a smile and says that, growing up, she always wished that she were Jewish, too. You understand that, by *Jewish*, she means *exotic*, *different*, like a geisha, maybe, or Scheherazade. You feel conscious, suddenly of your greenish eyes, your brownish hair, your smallish nose. “But you don’t look Jewish,” people used to tell you, growing up. You took that the way they meant it—as a compliment. So what exactly does this woman see?

Whether discussing rape on campus, corporate culture in the 1980s, or the loss of her first pregnancy, Singer examines how the local (or, more accurately, the human) can be eclipsed by our tendency to consider questions from the more clinical distance of the global.

A persistent view from on high can’t help but make our tangible human struggles, frustrations, and joys seem insignificant. But in Singer’s thoughtful approach, such a view helps illuminate the puzzles and quandaries of our human condition on the ground. “Who isn’t drawn to the view from high places?” she asks. “The scenic overlook, the rooftop terrace, the lookout tower, the observation deck?” But, she continues, what is it, really, that draws us to a view? Is it a vestige of the evolutionary advantage of claiming the highest point? Or is it just a way to transcend our human puniness, if only for a moment?

There’s an ominous answer to the question. Singer quotes W. H. Auden, who reminds us that “all history is reduced to nature.” From this God’s-eye perspective, she notes, the ultimate global view both reveals and erases meaning: “Borders and divisions shrink to nothing the farther away you get. How much easier it is to destroy and kill when you can’t tell the difference between a rock and a cathedral, a person and a sheep.”

But Singer doesn’t let it rest in such gloom. Returning as she does throughout the book to her parents and the home they created for her, she finds solace in the words of another exile, Salman Rushdie, who wrote that once we leave our childhood places and start to make up our lives, we make our own home, “which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began.”

Not being able to go home again is the plight of the immigrant, in Singer’s assessment—like her father or Rushdie. And, in her own way, like herself: “The wish for home is no passing dream, but a longing for a place that exists only in the imagination, forever beyond reach.” Singer’s essays imagine home evocatively, and in their vividness readers will find them hard to forget.