

Fishladder: A Student Journal of Art and Writing

Volume 16
Issue 1 *Fifteenth Anniversary Edition*

Article 8

2018

The Places We Call Home

Jacob Marion Van Singel
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/fishladder>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Marion Van Singel, Jacob (2018) "The Places We Call Home," *Fishladder: A Student Journal of Art and Writing*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/fishladder/vol16/iss1/8>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Fishladder: A Student Journal of Art and Writing* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

THE PLACES WE CALL HOME

JACOB MARION VAN SINGEL

My rooftop is ten stories high. It sits atop a basement for parking, a floor of administrative space, my own house, and seven other floors of dormitories and apartments. Its openness is constrained by six-foot walls, fitted with a complementary lip around its bottom to hoist its guests up into a protected form of sightseeing. It has two elevator rooms, rooms that push the roofing directly above them even further into the sky as their own separate platforms—platforms that shouldn't be climbed to, but are. It is visited often, by girls who wish to sunbathe and by boys who wish to see how many seconds it takes their spit to reach the street. It seizes its place on the city horizon, much higher than the nearby convenience stores and hair salons stationed down Shui Nan Road, but much lower than the behemoths that otherwise surround it. It has walls to direct projectors at, and crevices to sit in for hours. It has ledges to dangle my feet from as I ponder my life and watch lights fill the sky. And it has a place for me to just, simply, *be*.

For some, home is a building that you grow up in, that you stay in throughout your childhood—that you bury dead birds behind with shoeboxes and a funeral procession. For me, home is a word with markedly more fluidity. It is the vague remembrance of yellow walls in a house built by Dad. It is the suitcases we lived out of from city to city, and the baseball blanket that grandma made for the journey. It is a country far away, where Ma grew up—where I will, too. It is a bag of potstickers from Walmart to dampen the homesickness years down the road, when the fluidity of the word *home* can't stretch quite far enough. Home is a lot of things. Fickle, for one.

Kids like me answer questions dishonestly when we get to college. The landscape of small talk and inconsequential mixers gets to us. Our blood curdles and our eyes scan the skies at the mere thought of another inquiry into our place of origin. Four words level the strongest of us, forcing us into submission, widening our eyes into desperate pleas. *Where are you from?* It's a simple enough question, accompanied by many with a simple enough answer. *Hudsonville, born and raised. Novi, go wildcats.* Even the Illinois kids are met with only the quick-and-easy follow up of how far they are from Chicago. The black kids from Kenya say that they're from Kenya, and besides the freshman girl who asks if that's a city in Michigan, they are ultimately accepted with approving eyes and a couple questions of culture.

The problem arises, then, with the yellow kids from South America—the red kids from Britain. In my case, it's the white kids from Asia. Because my ma grew up there, but she was white, too. Because I *don't really look Chinese*. Because I tell them that yes, I can speak Chinese, and they say, *you mean Mandarin*, like they know. Because my skin says I'm supposed to know when to jingle my keys at a football game, but I don't.

It's a story worth telling to the friends that matter, a country worth sharing after I know they're sticking around for more than just a conversation. But kids like me default to lies most of the time. Mine is more of a half-truth than anything else. *I was born in Holland*, I say, or, *my grandparents live in Zeeland*. To kids who are familiar with the area, I have to act fast and think on my toes. To kids who aren't, they nod and they smile. And they move on, because I've given them an answer they expect—an answer they want.

My rooftop wasn't always ten stories high. Our house on Woodfield was a condo, and the Lincoln house we crammed into for three months one summer was only two floors tall. The spec house was a beautiful ranch, and the apartment that my parents first brought me home to didn't reach any more than thirty feet into the sky. Even after we finally settled down in one place—left the country and moved from everything we knew to everything my ma knew—the first high school dormitory that my missionary parents were given reign over was a nine-room-stretch on the ground level of a two story complex. Really, the ten-story rooftop only belonged to me for four or so years, a time too short to comprise a significant portion of my life. But then again, it *was* high school.

In those four years, that rooftop was the site of studying for history tests and sipping stall-bought teas into the late hours of the night. It was a place to stand on the edge—to *live* on the edge. Our parents warned us not to dangle our feet or climb over the preliminary wall of safety. We listened most of the time, and were honest when we didn't. They said to be careful. But at that altitude, and with the raging mind of a dream-filled teenager, they knew I had to roam free. So they let me be. By me, I mean we—Jesse and Angela, mostly, and others on occasion. Jesse was from China, but his Chinese was worse than mine. We called people like him “white-washed,” and he would deny the signifier with a wide smile and

a blazing dimple. Angela lived in my parents' dormitory through high school. I called people like her "family," because, essentially, they were.

With those two by my side, that roof felt like home—a haven to imagine and a perch to find rest. We would speak and we would listen, solving the problems of our classes and our homes and our world. We sat and we breathed, momentarily unhinged, answering to no one. The moments had no end. Our time at home, however, did.

I heard a song once that said home is not places—it is love. The song is sung by The Apache Relay, and I wonder where, then, they propose that home would be, in my case—when all of your love stayed in the city you left behind.

I climb mountains when I can. My favorite is *Daxueshan*, a phrase that literally means "big snow mountain." The name is ironic because *Xueshan*—"snow mountain"—is even taller, and because I've never seen snow on my hikes up the rock. The climb is an amalgamation of wooden stairs, stone cliff faces and mangled ropes, a ladder halfway through, and a canopied descent through forest trees. On most days, you are surrounded with fog. On the lucky ones, it will clear for only a moment as you near the peak. And in that slice of godlike clarity, the world below unfolds. I walk the trail once with Justin, a yellow kid from Canada—another third-culture anomaly. It's as if I am back on my roof, but this time the roof reaches the heavens—this time, the roof is made of only fog and stone.

I realize that my home is not that rooftop. Maybe it never was. Instead, home is high places. It is the vantage points from which everything below is shrunk and inconsequential—the people, the trees, the problems. I'm just as at home here as I am on my rooftop, as I am on a plane. Funny, I think: the plane that takes me far from home still feels a hint like home.

My dishonesty in college comes from an unwillingness—nay, an impossibility—to explain it all. I could try, but so much that wraps itself into the home I once inhabited transcends the common understanding, as aspects of *your* home would likely transcend *my* understanding. I lie because it hurts to remember, and because I believe that forgetting just may be the key to moving on, to finally finding a home in America.

Part of graduating from an international school is knowing that everyone you grow up with will spread across the globe for college. I land in Allendale. With my city gone and my loved ones gone, I try to find a home in high places. Nobody warned me, though, that high places are harder to come by in Allendale,

and I wander for months dissatisfied with my options—dissatisfied with the fickleness of *home*.

I am eighteen and uprooted.
I am nineteen and homeless.
I am twenty and searching.
Hoping.
Yearning.

I am twenty-one and I may have found home—another one, at least. There are people who I love in this city. They sit with me, speaking and listening, solving the problems of our world. There are places only I know, and there are things that I finally understand. I've learned how to tip barbers and waitresses, and I know how to pump gas for myself. On a camping trip up north, I find a sixty-foot cliff that overlooks the ocean we call *Lake Michigan*. Everything below is shrunk and inconsequential, and I leap into the sea below with wide eyes.

I visit my first real home once, and wall-hung pictures remind me that pieces of my heart will forever be tethered there. They are a reminder, also, that homes move on, the world still spinning in our absence. And we move on as well—holding dear to the past, but wading deeper into the changing tide all the while—seeing from high places the minuteness of our worries. Because I may never replace my hometown, but a new sense of home waits just along the horizon.

Come now, my heart tells my head. I'll take you there.