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MEDITATIONS ON “HOME”



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Growing up in the suburbs of New Jersey, what I wanted more than anything was for my home to be a house. Frankly, I didn't know what was taking so long. Why couldn't my parents save up some cash and move us out of our ratty apartment and into a little Cape Cod? I never thought it was much to ask. It wasn't like I was expecting a ten-bedroom mansion, just a little bungalow that we could call our own. A house was permanent while an apartment was in-between, ephemeral. I always felt like we were on the verge of escaping to a better place.

Except we stayed put. Money, I was told, didn't grow on trees, and I should appreciate whatever roof I did have over my head. We lived between those anonymous white walls for my entire adolescence, and even after I left for college, my parents remained, finally relocating when the rent got too high and they found more affordable senior housing elsewhere.

During my freshman year, I lived in the dorms, which felt no different than the apartment of my youth. You weren't allowed to nail anything into the walls, so I bought sticky blue clay-goo to put up my poster of Salvador Dali's melting clocks. The welcome letter that came with the room made it very clear: at the end of the year, I was supposed to leave the room exactly as I

found it today. I was a transient, living on borrowed time, in a borrowed space.

I was miserable, and when a friend suggested that I join a fraternity, I looked at him like he was crazy. Couldn't he see how much I hated my life already? Why in the world would I want to join a bunch of beer-swilling meatheads?

Well, my friend suggested, because maybe they're not a bunch of beer-swilling meatheads?

My friend, who was a sophomore, pledged that fall with three of his buddies, and when the spring semester began and I seriously considered transferring to a different school, he invited me over to the house.

It was painted white with green trim, three stories high on a gentle hill, and unlike most of the frats I'd been to, the place actually looked like it was kept in decent shape: no empty beer cans strewn on the front lawn, no holes in the wall where a drunk person slammed his or her head through. It wasn't immaculate, of course; after all, a bunch of college kids lived there. But it was no worse than the dorms where I was living, either.

And like my friend, who was most definitely not a beer-swilling meathead, who was in fact one of the nicest people I'd met in my entire life, the rest of the members of the fraternity were just the same. A lot of them were geeky, awkward engineering majors, my kind of people, and I would soon learn all of their names and call them my brothers, because I ended up pledging.

One of the requirements of becoming a part of the brotherhood was to upgrade the house in some way, to change its physical structure. My fellow initiates and I chose to repaint the dining room, and even though I agreed with them that we were being used for slave labor, I was actually ecstatic. Here I was, dipping my brush into the paint and making my mark: I was here.

It turned out that what people hated, I loved. Once a week, everyone was given a common room to clean, such as scrubbing one of the bathrooms or vacuuming the carpeted stairs, and I couldn't have been happier performing my chores. I was taking care of this house that had stood since 1910, my first house. I never much cared for open parties, but even those I learned to adore because there were domestic duties to be performed: manning the bar, refilling bowls of potato chips and pretzels for the guests, DJing the music so my brothers and friends could dance the night away.

What I treasured most of all was coming home after a long day of classes. Walking over the suspension bridge, making a left at Fall Creek Drive, trying to forget about the test I'd flunked or the paper I'd turned in late, wondering if I had the gumption to ask out the girl in the Faulkner class – and then there it was, my safe haven, and whatever problems I had accrued seemed a little less daunting. One of my fondest memories is this: it's practically arctic out there, the snow coming down hard, the winter wind sneaky and painful, and as I wend my way through the blinding flurries, I run into one of my brothers, and we struggle up the driveway together, our boots crunching through the cake of snow and ice, and we're running and laughing and bursting through the doors, and we throw our Michelin-man coats down on the floor and scurry to the two radiators in the Red Rug Room, our backs to the warm metal, alternately blowing into our hands, thawing.

They say you can't go home again, but that didn't stop me from trying. After I graduated, I returned to the house twice, glad to see the innocent pledges turn into know-it-all upperclassmen, glad to see the dining room still in that awful yellow paint of my doing, but there was a bittersweet sadness, too, telling me this was no longer my home. This past June, I drove back to campus for my fifteenth reunion, and when I visited the house, walking through the halls I knew so well, I felt like I was being pulled apart in two. How could a place that felt so familiar also feel so distant? There were a few people staying there over summer break, and I kept thinking that they didn't belong there, that this was my house with my brothers.

But of course, it was me who didn't belong.



Sung J. Woo's s short stories and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *McSweeney's*, and *KoreAm Journal*. His debut novel, *Everything Asian* (2009), has received praises from *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review), the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and won the 2010 Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature (Youth category). His short story "Limits" was an Editor's Choice winner in *Carve Magazine's* 2008 Raymond Carver Short Story Contest. A graduate of Cornell University with an MFA from New York University, Woo lives in Washington, New Jersey.