

Shoaib Laghari

## Spatial Autobiography

The idea of *home* had always confused me. Finding a space, inhabiting it, and preferring it over other spaces, seemed absurd. What did having a home mean? And even if it was possible, why would you want one? As silly as these questions may sound, I could never figure it out. Growing up, I considered myself “homeless” in this sense and found that answer to be sufficient. After a while, I realized it wasn’t. I found myself desperate to resolve this identity crisis, the same one as you may have experienced, too. The secret to mine, however, was that “home” never really meant one physical space. It was more of an idea.

My first attempt to understand what “home” meant for me was the space I resided with four walls and a roof. One memory takes me back to 2006, when I was four years old and my family had just arrived from Pakistan to the United States. I can see myself holding my mom’s hand and tugging on the left side of her traditional South Asian clothes. The seven of us were walking into a vast, empty, low-income apartment complex known as Post Ridge in Nashville, Tennessee. A few years later, we found ourselves moving to Creekwood, another apartment complex in Nashville. With family moving around (and financial situations shifting), we moved apartments again in 2012, then again in 2015. We moved back to Creekwood in 2019, and I recently moved to Seattle in 2020. Needless to say, I didn’t grow up in one space, so I had never developed a traditional “home.” So, I looked for home in other areas.

My next attempt to understand the meaning of home was to follow the classic saying, “Home is where the family is.” As you may have assumed from above, my family is rarely ever in one place. In all, my family consists of my mother, father, and four pretty cool siblings who

have raised me to become who I am (two brothers and two sisters, all older than me, ages evenly dispersed from 18-32). While I grew up with many memories of my mom, memories of my dad are a little more scant. When we moved to Nashville in 2006, my dad worked at multiple gas stations from 5 am to 9 pm (usually working two jobs every day to support our family). In 2008, he began going back to Pakistan for his actual work, and in 2012, he and my mom moved to Pakistan permanently. At that point, it was me and my four siblings living together in Nashville. When my oldest brother found a stable job, he moved out into his own apartment, and later on my other brother went to university in a different state. Up until 2019, it had just been my two sisters and I living together, with direct family spread in different homes in Nashville, New York, and Pakistan. As for what home means, I figured the answer was not here, either.

Throughout high school, I tried things a bit more personal. While I hadn't grown up in Pakistan, I had visited there a couple times now to see my parents every few years. I thought to myself, maybe home is meant to be where I'm from. After persisting through the culture shocks, heat waves, and language barriers, I came to love Pakistan, all my family there, its nature and scenery, and so much more. In fact, I hope someday to work in Pakistan and give back to the people whom my parents cherished. However, I know it's not my home. As nice as it sounds, I had always been seen as an American in Pakistan. Talking to my cousins had been hard since my Urdu was weak, and in many ways the life I lived in Pakistan is more privileged than the real life there. Frustrated, I looked elsewhere. I tried the local mosque in Nashville, since I recently became more religious after Sophomore year, having taught myself most of the foundations of Islam. While I have found comfort praying in the masjid, and gone there often, I found myself outcast there, too. Most kids my age had grown up in the mosque, and everyone's parents knew each other. My parents had not taught me my knowledge of Islam, much less introduced me to

the Muslim community in Nashville. While I made friends and met people who said the mosque is where they can find home, I knew I could not say the same.

The answer I did find, however, was everything in between. From moving apartments in 2006/2008, to being raised by my two sisters and looking up to my two brothers. From the best friends I met through the schools I went to, to the cousins I laughed with during those all-nighters in Pakistan. Yet, it was so much more. In my home, I found my schoolteachers, my soccer teammates, and the random people I met from time to time who gave me a new perspective on life. My home does consist of the many four walls and roofs I resided in, but it also includes the people who I shared those walls with. It includes the family-friends who shared their dinner with me knowing my financial situation. The public parks and rooftops my friends and I went on. My home, I found, was the community I built through my life experience. It was the people I could go to when I'm down, and the places I can see when I'm up. It didn't hold itself to one neighborhood, nor did it divide itself in class, race, ethnicity, or religion. It was one space, of everyone and everything that mattered to me, and I kept it with me wherever I went, mentally, spiritually, and as much as I can, physically.

We've all felt "homeless" in some way, as I began to describe myself above. I had a house, but I didn't know who I was, or where I was going. It was this community that guided me. I say this for one final message: we all need people to fall back on in a place called home. Whether it's the houseless or those in crisis, life is not meant to be lived alone. Today, I challenge you all to be a part of someone else's community. It can be someone who needs support, or someone you don't know at all. Whoever it is, just be there for them. That's more than enough for a home.