Placing the Academy
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Where Are You From?

Lee Torda

Where are you from? Since beginning graduate work, first in Maine and then in North Carolina, this was the singular question I answered over and over. And it should have been entirely expected: if you choose to live an academic life, you are subject to a fickle job market and, thus, to a certain amount of moving around. In the academic life, the assumption is relocation. Few of us work and live in the place we grew up in. We can and often do end up anywhere. It is the individual who must decide if she can stand the anywhere she finds herself in.

The question, with each year that I spend in some new place, resonates differently and with such a complexity I find it hard to bear. I am flummoxed at how to respond, though it should be such a simple answer to a simple question: where are you from?

I.

I am from Cleveland, Ohio. How do I explain the way this news is received in the Northeast, my current academic home? There is that delicious scene in The Philadelphia Story where Katharine Hepburn as Tracy Lord asks Ruth Hussey’s reporter character where she is from (South Bend). Hepburn replies, “South Bend. That’s west of here isn’t it?” To which Hussey answers, “Yes. But we occasionally get the breezes.” It is the same, much the same, when I tell a Bostonian in particular or New Englander in general that I am from Cleveland. Sometimes a music aficionado will ask me if I know the difference between Cleveland and the Titanic. It’s an old joke. There is never need of an answer (Cleveland has a better orchestra). I politely laugh along. Some ask if Lake Erie is still burning. But the worst reaction is the Tracy Lord reaction: that’s west of here, isn’t it?
My favorite drive into the city of Cleveland is over the Hope Memorial Bridge, where the major highways, I-71 North and I-90 East, converge. The bridge used to be named the Lorain-Carnegie, after Andrew Carnegie, the steel mogul, but when Bob Hope died, it was reborn the Hope Memorial. I can’t think what says Cleveland better than punch lines and dead steel. As you whiz over the arc of the bridge, the Cuyahoga River runs below you. You will know it, if not by name, then certainly by reputation: the river that burned (it was never Erie). A mishmash of warehouses dot the shores. The new Justice Center juts out precariously. Then the unimpressive skycrapers—the BP Building, the Ameritech Building. They still hold the names of companies that no longer have their headquar ters there. The Terminal Tower stands alone as the glorious thing that it is—a throwback to an earlier time when Cleveland and her terminal were not lost in a sea of taller buildings in bigger cities.

Then the city herself dips down to greet the lake. There Cleveland sits, hunkered down almost, as if she were bracing herself against the cold wind off Erie, like a passerby in February on the corner of Ninth Avenue and St. Clair. The new Rock Hall, with bold architecture by I. M. Pei, and the new football stadium and the new science center rise up out beyond the downtown proper, right along the shore of the lake. You can’t see them from the bridge, though. Back where I am, careening over the bridge, I-90 East rushes down by Jacobs Field, where the Indians play. The buildings surrounding the baseball stadium here are brick and old and low. Then you shoot out past all of that, past Public Square and the old, molder ing department stores, the Halles and the downtown Mays, all gone now. You’ll come to dead man’s curve, a sharp, hard right angle: you’ve reached the lake, the Port of Cleveland, a lovely, hideous, sprawling, working port. Now, when I am coming to or going from Cleveland—all I ever do, now that it is not my home—I shout from my car, “Hello to the lake!” or “Good-bye to the lake!” depending on the direction I’m traveling in.

I did not always have such affection for my hometown. I’m not even from Cleveland proper. I’m from Parma. If Cleveland is the Cleveland of the country, Parma is the Cleveland of Cleveland. There are jokes about Polish people, white socks, polka bands, and pink flamingos. I don’t know or understand the origin of these jokes entirely, but it has to do with a certain suburban sensibility and a large Slavic population. It could be that there are a lot houses in my neighborhood that sport more than one
plastic pink flamingo on their lawn. And there are a lot of Eastern Europeans who settled in Cleveland and moved, in the 1970s, in the full throng of white flight, to places like Parma. There was work to be had then in the Ford plant and the GM plant, steady union jobs. At my grade school, St. Columbkille (an Irish saint, a sort of cut-rate version of St. Patrick, if you ask me), on international day, the largest numbers of students identified themselves as Polish, Italian, and, a distant third, Irish.

I wish I could offer a story more entertaining and less cliché than to say that it was my lifelong dream to escape Cleveland in general and Parma in particular and that academia, of course, was my ticket out. But unfortunately, I can offer you no other explanation for either the course of my life or the nostalgia I seem steeped in as I tell the story of it. I grew up hating the very fact that I was from Cleveland, had big, heady ideas of making a name for myself someplace else, and set myself on some sort of a course that would more or less get me there. As a girl, this consisted mainly of reading about places and lives other than my own and developing a scowl to register the great distaste I had for home. I read about some other, better place, where I imagined that men wore tweed and women smelled like rosewater—Little Women, Anne of Green Gables, the Little House books, and even Gone with the Wind. Of course, pioneer life on the prairie hardly involved tweed or rosewater, but I didn’t know what rosewater was, really, and I did not see tweed, a natural fiber, until my midteens; but as a professor of mine in my PhD program once said, you may not know exactly the name for what it is you are looking for, but you know you still want the Oriental rug.

As a little girl at St. Columbkille, we would go as a class on field trips to the West Side Market, one of the oldest continuous open air markets in the entire country. We would bring home exotic fruit—like cantaloupes—to our mothers. We’d grimace at the blood sausage, and we’d squeal with fascination and repulsion at the cases of sweetbreads and cow’s tongue and everything else we wouldn’t eat. It was widely known in Cleveland that if you were looking for some spice your grandmother used in the Old Country that the Market was the place you would find it. The Market is located near Fulton road, where my mother grew up, the Old Neighborhood. The Market was and is a place full of the foreign and the familiar for me, safe and extraordinary all at once.

In terms of the relationship between the city and the suburb,
my students in Massachusetts are a lot like me. They do not live in Boston proper but in the many towns that have sprung up on the south shore of Massachusetts along the major highways of 128 and 24. They remind me a great deal of myself in some ways, but they don’t seem to want to leave. When I ask my students why not, even for a little while, they offer me a range of answers: family, mostly, is the number one answer, but also they just like it here. They want to stay.

It could be the ocean. The ocean is a powerful draw on the soul to stay in a place. A lot of my students come from the Cape. They grow up with the wide ocean in their eyes, and perhaps they think, what bigger place could there be to go? The ocean could be for my students the equivalent of what the Market was for me—both the wide world and the comforts of home. But it must not be the perfect equivalent because I still wanted to leave.

For me, the way out of Cleveland was on the very highway that holds my favorite views of the city. Of all the highways in my life, I-90 East has taken me the farthest the most often. It first took me to the University of Maine for my Masters. And, now, it is the road that connects where I live in Massachusetts to where I was born and raised. Ninety snakes through the city of Cleveland and on out. To points North. Away and away. Tempting me all my life at each tight turn to go where I don’t belong. And, finally, I went.

II.

In Maine, where you don’t think anyone lives, let alone Jews, I found an unlikely enclave of Orthodox Jews via the friendship of a less Orthodox one. I came to be the Litwacks’ babysitter more or less for the entire time I lived in Maine. I watched their three children over long weekends, the gentile keeping them from turning on lights or carrying things on the Sabbath. After pickled herring, we would sit on the front porch and play spit and war and hearts. The neighbors, the Pidulskis (I went to school with Catholic Pidulskis in Cleveland), would let me into their house on Friday and Saturday evening to begin and end the Sabbath on those weekends I babysat.

When I was a kid, I wanted to be Jewish. I was ready to cast off my entire Italian, swarming family and take on a new life. In no small part, I know my interest had to do with the fact that the Jewish neighborhoods of Cleveland were all on the East Side. As I was from the all- white, all working-class West Side, this held great appeal to me. The art museum and the best shopping malls
were all on the East Side with the Jews. And there I was, west of there, with a lake in between. It did not seem to me that we got the breezes at all.

I didn’t really learn much about being Jewish from the Pidulskis and the Litwacks in the general way I would have wanted to when I was younger and searching for something other than my own experience to help me decide on an identity. I did learn some things about the rigors of orthodoxy, about meat plates and dairy plates—things that I would have been fascinated to know as a child the way my own Protestant friends were fascinated by my rosary. Mostly, I learned about these particular families because they let me into their homes.

I learned about where they came from (Long Island). I learned about who their children were, what they did, which ones settled close to home and which ones had relocated and where. The Pidulskis were also founding and powerful members of their synagogue, and so I learned something about how this particular Orthodox community came to be. I learned about how the founding families had raised the money to build the synagogue and the school. It was a pioneer’s story, really: most of the people who started the community were from cities like New York or Boston but decided that they didn’t like the closeness of cities they were born in and moved north to the more sparsely populated, less predictable state of Maine.

Bill, the father of the Litwack family, felt suffocated in Long Island with his politically conservative family, fled to Minnesota, where he married his wife, Jane, a Lutheran, then moved back to Maine, where they both became Orthodox and raised their family in an Orthodox house. I found in his story the familiar: his move from the East Coast out of his parents’ home to the Midwest (via Nova Scotia, mind you) nearly tripled my journey in length, only in reverse. What always surprised me is that Bill had settled so permanently where he landed, both geographically and spiritually.

As I moved around in my academic life, I never lost an affinity for Jewish neighborhoods. In North Carolina I lived a block from one of the only synagogues in a three-city area. I wondered if this was coincidence. I don’t think so. All the images of Jews I encountered and all of the real Jews that I encountered were so good at setting up shop wherever it was that they landed.

I could have lived anywhere in Boston. I could have lived with the Irish in the city, because they are everywhere. I could have lived in the North End, where the Italians settled and felt at home, but I
didn’t because I couldn’t afford it now that gentrification has made the neighborhood fashionable. I could have lived with the academic elite in Cambridge, but I couldn’t afford that either, and, besides, I get tired of being around academics all the time. You can’t take a step without tripping over a PhD in Boston, Massachusetts. I could have lived in Bridgewater, where my college is, thirty miles south of Boston, equidistant from the Cape and the city. But I moved to Brighton (like the beach)—to be precise, to the very borderline of Brighton and Brookline. I can’t keep track of the temples—Orthodox, Reformed, Sephardic, Conservative—I run past every day. Biblically and historically, Jews have been forced to settle again and again among the inhospitable. I envy this ability to make a home where no home is offered. Perhaps I thought that proximity would be enough to teach me the same lesson.

III.
In Vincente Minnelli’s *An American in Paris*, Gene Kelly is always dancing and singing for and with Parisians. Kelly entertains French children and café-goers with his routines. The Parisians, every one of them, stand around smiling at Kelly the way you might smile at your kid at a school recital. That they were patronizing is the only thing French about these movie Parisians—it is the only thing French about the entire movie. I don’t care how much residual World War II gratitude towards Americans was floating around Paris in 1951. I don’t care how great Gene Kelly dances: no Parisian would be so happy to have some American dancing all over his or her cafés. I envy Kelly’s character, Jerry, and his easy entry into this world that is not his own. I have not found it so easy myself. But that’s why Jerry’s story is a movie—and a musical at that—and mine, well, mine is not.

Sometimes I have this perverse fantasy that all of Boston will fall at my feet. That I’ll run with some in-crowd and know the place as well as I know how to get to my Aunt Phil’s house. Where—this is a piece in part about Boston, and I can’t have at it without saying it at least once—*everyone will know my name*. There is no singing and dancing in my fantasy. Usually it has something to do with speaking at Harvard or marrying into the Red Sox. But, unlike Gene Kelly’s Parisians, Bostonians will have nothing to do with my song and dance.

Another one of my Boston fantasies is that I run the Boston Marathon. To run it, you have to buy a spot or place your way in
with a remarkable time at another official feeder race. Boston is the only race you have to qualify for, which is in large part the reason for much of the allure and hype for the event. And, too, it is wreck of a course, designed to make you earn every inch of it. It is to me another example of how unwelcoming a place Boston can feel. I ran my first marathon back in Ohio, surrounded by the people I love, by Ohioans and other midwesterners and many, many slow, honest, determined people.

But back to my fantasy: in this scenario, I make my way into the race the hard way, by running faster than I’ve ever run before at some other marathon. I run a good race in Boston, and, crossing the finish line, thumb my nose at all those Yankees and keep on running.

But, here’s the thing, the part I just don’t understand: I don’t run back to Cleveland. At this point the fantasy splinters in myriad directions. Sometimes I move to New York and become a book editor. Sometimes I move to New York and become a writer. Sometimes I move to Europe—to London or Paris or Rome. I have no idea what I would do to make a living in those fantasies, but that is the cool blessing of fantasy: I don’t have to know. In one version, I must have become independently wealthy just prior to the start of the fantasy because I don’t work at all; I just travel from one remarkable place to another.

I have been trying to get myself someplace new for the better part of my life, but, having got there, what do I seem to want to do? Get someplace new all over again—and again and again and again.

The summer I trained for the Ohio marathon, I learned that the allure of the race was, for me anyway, the training. It was not the race itself. To train for a marathon you have to run every day for varying distances at varying speeds. Some days I had very swift, powerful runs. Other days, I trudged miserably, and there was, I confess, the occasional fall. But, no matter what, I was always moving, like a shark through water (I’ve heard they die if they stop). For that summer, I seemed always to be in constant motion, faster and stronger as the summer progressed. And I was, if not blissfully happy, remarkably content.

But the physical sensation of all that running around I remember so very keenly is only a half of the equation, I think. The summer I trained I worked out different routes all over the city—three miles, five, ten, twenty. Having run twenty miles’ worth of Boston, I understood the layout of the city so much better. I could drive it
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better and walk it better. I found favorite places to get coffee, breakfast, Mexican food, stationary, bagels, saag paneer, and sushi. I know that such a thing as having favorites doesn’t make a city a home; there is much more to it than that, but it certainly created a rather convincing illusion for me that Boston was becoming mine. I didn’t dance in the streets of Paris; I ran by Fenway Park.

In contrast to my itch for motion and moving, there is also this yen of mine to feel, simultaneously, entirely at home. In all of my other-city fantasies, foreign and domestic, I am always ensconced in a cozy apartment, always within walking distance of many local favorites—the barriers of economics or language never sully the picture, a longing for family and friends never in evidence. It might as well be a musical, except I can’t sing.

I know that it is not that old Cleveland home, specifically, that I am longing for, but the feeling of home, of a home. If the question that academics are always asking of each other is “where are you from?” the question my family asks of me is “when are you coming home?” That is a very good question that I most wholeheartedly wish I had a good answer to, but, when it comes down to it, I simply do not. The best I can offer is this: whenever I get there.

IV.

I am endlessly fascinated by the story of my great aunt, Vincenza Sanzano, who took the boat over to this country in 1921. Even more interesting to me, she came at the age of thirty-one. You can live an entire life by the time you are thirty-one, I know, and she left the one she lived behind. I wonder if she imagined the particular kind of new life she was going to start. I certainly would have—I continue to do it even as the particular kind of life I might have is growing easier and easier to predict. According to the manifest of the Minnekahda, my great aunt left her hometown of Foggia, catching the boat in nearby Naples. In possession of fifty-one dollars, she paid for her own passage. She is reported to have been headed to 3197 Fulton Road and to her husband, a man by the name of Montanella. That is what the ship’s manifest tells me. I know she did, in fact, arrive. Within the year, I also know, she had a son.

When her son was barely four, her husband died, killed like the petty mobster he apparently was. My aunt moved into the parish house of St. Rocco’s Church, still to this day standing on Fulton Road, where my parents and all of my aunts and uncles and most
of my cousins were married. She kept house for the priests, cooking and cleaning for them, ironing their shirts. She traveled the distance between two continents but never learned to drive a car. She lived into her nineties. The parish house was her home until the very end of her life when she was moved to a nursing home. Her world must have been, it seems to me anyway, breathlessly small. I have a secret hope that she and a handsome priest had a secret and long love affair, spending clandestine nights in a narrow bed, whispering to each other in Italian.

I knew her, like I knew my grandfather, in only the vague, distant way you can know someone so old, someone who has lived only in another language from your own. The only way I knew anything about her was through my Aunt Lee, her translator and ambassador. But my memory of and affection for her are great. When Auntie turned ninety, my Aunt Lee threw her a birthday party at the nursing home. All of the family came. There was cake and ice cream and the smell of the old. The family clamored for some speech after she blew out the token candles on her cake. I don’t think any of us expected her to take us up on our request, but, filled with a kind of respect for the moment, she spoke for a long while, softly and in Italian. My Aunt Lee translated for her.

Auntie talked about her life before America, about saying goodbye to her mother (she would never see her again), about the boat over and being quarantined at Ellis Island with tuberculosis, about arriving at her new house to her husband. And then her voice rose with emphasis, surprising even my Aunt Lee, who took a minute to let Auntie finish before she translated: “I am so grateful for this life I’ve had,” Auntie said, “so grateful I’ve had it to live so long. I thank God that I got to come to this country and to have this life.”

When Auntie died, we processed from Ripepi’s funeral home on one side of the street back to St. Rocco’s on the other side of Fulton, the same small block she had lived in her entire, grateful American life. I am humbled by her satisfaction with a life that, by all accounts, was hard and largely unrewarding. She could have been mightily disappointed, and no one would have blamed her. But she was not.

V.

Several years after I settled in Boston, I went to visit a friend on the opposite coast. We worked together on an article, my first real article, at a rented cottage along a beautiful stretch of the Pacific
Ocean. I was running there in the early evening on a gray day in spring. In the distance I saw what I imagined to be a log, thick, round, and black, washed up on the shore. But something about the size of it made me wonder if it wasn’t possibly something else. What else I didn’t know, but whatever it was, it unsettled me. I purposefully stared out past the bulge to another point on the beach, trying to ignore that it was even there.

As I neared, though, I couldn’t help but finally see that it was a seal that had, presumably, beached itself. I didn’t really know because I don’t know about things like that, though my students do—another consequence of their having lived their lives by the ocean. I don’t understand the mystery or biology of casting yourself up on a shore to a certain death—although, I must admit, the idea of drifting in just the wrong direction at precisely the wrong moment without ever noticing how bad off you are until it is too late rings true enough. Every so often, the evening news will feature the heroic efforts of Cape locals and wildlife experts trying to save the lives of beached whales or dolphins (sharks, as I said, die if they stop and—savvy creatures—seem never reported as beached). These good people, more often than not, fail in their efforts.

The seal I saw on this day didn’t look like the sleek, petite pets of childhood visits to zoos and SeaWorld. It was mammoth and ungraceful. I didn’t know for sure that it was even dead and wondered for a moment if I should stop to see. But even as I slowed, I knew I wouldn’t stop, because what would I have been able to do? I passed the poor, stuck animal and kept on my pace.

When you run or walk along the beach like that, you always turn at some point and come back the way you came. That’s just how it is. As I neared this seal on the return trip of my run, an old man, very old and shrunken, was circling the seal. Just as I passed in front of them, the man turned from surveying the body. The old man and I caught each other in our respective glances, and so I broke from my run, reluctantly, and asked him if the seal had beached itself. He said only that the animal had been alive the night before. The old man’s answer wasn’t an answer to my question, but it was all I got.

There wasn’t anything else to do or say. I was itching to be back to my run, regretting the time I had already lost to this talk. I said to the old man that it was a terrible shame, but I knew as the words left me that I didn’t mean it. I couldn’t muster the sympathy I should have for the poor beast. On some level, I felt
empathy, but empathy in this instance did not make me want to do anything other than run from the spot where that animal was going to die. I didn’t want to witness in any shape or form such a miserable end. Not waiting for a reaction or a response, not looking again at the seal or the old man, I ran hard and fast the rest of the way back.

I came to be running on this beach because I was writing an article that would help me get tenure back at my New England school. That I could have written the article in my apartment in Brighton is true, but, fortunately for me, my writing partner lived on the other coast and my school was willing to help pay me to go there to work with her. Interestingly, the article we were writing together was about the way our own childhood reading habits inform our current teaching practices. The gist of our argument was that book clubs helped students otherwise unfamiliar with college-level reading and discussion by using the group experience, the community created through the club part of book club to gain more solid footing in the academic landscape (an example—of which there are many—of my own experiences of academic life so obviously informing the experience I try to design for my students).

I read my way out of one life and into another, and now I was writing about that very journey in order to secure that coveted measure of academic security: tenure. And I did get tenure. I am not at such a high-powered institution that getting tenure was as hard as it must be for some of my more auspiciously positioned graduate school friends. At my institution, I did my job as well as I could, and I got tenure.

I am not sure that I understood what this really meant in an academic’s life until I was saddled with it myself. The traditional idea of tenure is as a means to secure academic freedom but also, for better or for worse, to secure one an academic home. What such a thing as that is I am still trying to answer. It is, of course, your institutional home, the letterhead you send out with possible publications or letters of recommendation. But one imagines, or, at least, I imagined, that an academic home also meant a place where I would develop meaningful personal and professional relationships, where I would develop my own circle of friends and colleagues, where I would build a full, rich life.

While tenure is a valuable and wonderful thing to have, there is a chance that I could be burdening this one institution with too much expectation.
Tenured faculty who are happy with their institutional home speak with great reverence for tenure, while less content colleagues tell me how long they’ve held tenure the way you might tell someone how long you’ve lived with chronic pain. I personally have thought a great deal about how my institution offered me many service and teaching opportunities that helped me to prove myself worthy of tenure at this institution. But my success in these areas would make it markedly harder for me to leave the college and work elsewhere. Having made this observation to a colleague in my department, she threw up her hands in agreement and yelped, “Oh yes. We’re stuck.”

An academic home should secure every other sort of home, both in the intellectual sense and the literal sense, but that is the thing: getting tenure at a place does not guarantee a desire to stay there. And yet, despite this, we all spend our pretenure years in a hard scramble—a kind of tap dancing not fit for any musical or any movie Parisians—to make sure we are tenurable. And, thus, I was writing in Washington state.

The place where I saw the seal and wrote the article is called Cape Disappointment. It is a quiet vacation spot on the ocean in the Pacific Northwest. I can’t think of a stranger thing than such a name for such a place. It was beautiful, a beautiful place for a long run on a cool spring day. There seemed nothing to be disappointed in.

I tried, in my short stay, to locate the history of the name of the region from the few locals I ran into but could not. Left to my own devices, I decided that someone, probably from the landlocked Midwest thought, as I did, that an ocean would be a preferable place to make a home. Perhaps they arrived on a day like the one I ran on, gray and misting, and thought that the flat, gleaming rows of cornfields under cloudless skies were better in the end and went home. Perhaps they arrived on a perfectly fine day and stayed through a storm that took everything they owned out to sea. Perhaps it was nothing so dramatic: maybe this place just wasn’t what they expected.

As it turns out, in 1788, a Captain John Meares looked for shelter from a rough sea at a cape located near the mouth of the Columbia River. He found no such shelter and gave the spot the local Indians called Kah’eesee the English name of Cape Disappointment. Sixty years later, a ship bringing materials to be used in the construction of a lighthouse at the Cape ran aground before reaching land. The crew of the Oriole barely escaped with their lives; the cargo was
lost. The wreck of the *Oriole* delayed the building of the lighthouse for another two years. When, finally, the work on the lighthouse was nearly completed, it was determined that the upper reaches of the tower were not large enough to accommodate the all-important lantern lens. The entire lighthouse had to be dismantled and the construction begun again.

I have nothing but respect for Captain Meares and all those nameless men who built and rebuilt the lighthouse at Cape Disappointment. I admire Meares—and the crew of the *Oriole*—for taking the journey in the first place, despite the obvious potential for peril. And I admire Meares even more for sizing up the situation that day and without sentiment or melancholy naming the place for what it was—not every place we land holds all the delight we hope it will. And I admire the lighthouse builders, perhaps I admire them most of all, for being brave enough to dismantle what they had made, and, realizing their error, begin again, finally finishing what it was they set out to do in the place they set out to do it in.

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