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STORY: PETER KORCHNAK

Posted by *dailydoseoflit* on April 3, 2014 · 3 Comments

Where Are You From?

“Where are you from?” says the guide from a rock in the middle of the Khao Sok jungle. It comes out as “Where you from!” but he gets the ‘are’ for effort. He looks over my head to count the tour group. Before I say USA he turns toward the gash in the rock that constitutes the Namtalu Cave entrance, turns on his headlamp, and folds his hands and closes his eyes in a good-luck prayer.

“Where are you from?” Not, “What’s your name?” Patrick Rothfuss has said, “If you want to know the truth of who you are, walk until not a person knows your name.” I have flown and trained and bussed to where no one knows my name. No one cares either. In Thailand, I am not my name, I am where I’m from. I come from a place on the map.

“Where are you from?” A Bangkok man in a red polo says with an extended hand and a missing tooth as I wait to cross Atsadang Road. I shake the hand and say the United States. He shakes his head and informs me the Grand Palace is open only to Thais and monks today but he can take me in tuk-tuk to big Buddha at big temple no’ far away.

“Where are you from?” It’s the Thai equivalent of the American, “How are you?” They have every reason to expect a one-word reply—everybody is from somewhere. Yet just as I often find it impossible to describe my condition with, “Fine, thanks,” I find myself unable to state my origin with a simple answer without feeling like a fraud.

“Where are you from?” Before my wife and I sold everything and quit our jobs to travel around the world for a year, I’d lived in the United States for ten years and had been a citizen for two. I am from the U.S. Then I feel

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that with the country being so huge I should be more specific. Yet Oregon may well be an obscure backwater half Thailand's size so I will have to place it in relation to California. That's why I rarely venture as far as Portland. I am not from Portland, I am not from Oregon.

"Where are you from?" A woman in a headscarf on Lanta island says, puts down her brush painting a batik sarong, and reaches for the plastic bags overflowing with my dirty laundry. I say America and she smiles and says okay and tomorrow fi' o'clock.

"Where are you from?" I am not from America either. I arrived to Thailand from Europe, the continent where I was born. I am from Europe, except I haven't lived there since 2003 so I am not from Europe. Who says Europe anyway?

"Where are you from?" I am originally from Slovakia. Except even fewer people know where that is so I'd be from a blank space on the map. And I was born in 1976 when the country was part of Czechoslovakia. I am not from Slovakia either. Czechoslovakia has a more familiar ring to it and I would love to say that's where I come from but that country has been gone for more than 20 years. I am not just from a blank space, I am not on the map at all. I am not from Czechoslovakia.

"Where are you from?" The plot and footage of the 1967 Czech movie Happy End unfold in reverse: the protagonist is born at the moment of his execution by guillotine and he moves backward to his demise in a crib. I, too, rewind myself.

"Where are you from?" I connect the dots of my previous selves only to find they yield no discernible shape. A ragged line leads through a jumbled collection of origins. I come from the journey through my beginnings, falling over the world's edges.

"Where are you from?" What belongs to all belongs to none. I am from all these places and end up being from none of them. I am not just from no single place, I am from nowhere at all.

"Where are you from?" I wish they would make it easy on me and ask where I am, even though I'm standing right in front of their eyes. The only thing I can answer truthfully, anyway, is that I am far from wherever I'm from.

I am a long way from home.

Peter Korchnak explores the world through story. He co-writes the travel blog *Where Is Your Toothbrush?* and is the first-prize winner in the 2014 NW Perspectives Essay Contest (the entry is forthcoming in *Oregon Quarterly*). His work has been published in *Tablet* (USA), *Týždeň* (Bratislava, Slovakia), and other publications,

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and is also forthcoming in the spring issue of *That Magazine* (Istanbul, Turkey). In 2013 he ventured into the minefield of self-publishing with *Guerrilla Yardwork: The First-Time Home Owner's Handbook*. Find him at PeterKorchnak.com.

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