



2000

## On Going Home

Cara Anderson

[DigitalCommons@Cedarville](#) provides a publication platform for fully open access journals, which means that all articles are available on the Internet to all users immediately upon publication. However, the opinions and sentiments expressed by the authors of articles published in our journals do not necessarily indicate the endorsement or reflect the views of DigitalCommons@Cedarville, the Centennial Library, or Cedarville University and its employees. The authors are solely responsible for the content of their work. Please address questions to [dc@cedarville.edu](mailto:dc@cedarville.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Anderson, Cara (2000) "On Going Home," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 3 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol3/iss1/3>

---

# On Going Home

Browse the contents of [this issue](#) of *Cedarville Review*.

## Keywords

Essay

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

# On Going Home

⌘ Cara Anderson

In the fall of 1986 my father accepted a job overseas at the Goodyear plant in Luxembourg, one of the tiniest countries in Europe. Only Liechtenstein is smaller – that was the first fact my parents told my brother and I when they sat us down that summer and revealed that my entire life was going to change. Most of our friends in Akron, Ohio had never heard of Luxembourg, let alone spell it. We left for a three year assignment; I was seven years old, my brother only six. I remember my family as three hooded figures outside the Luxembourg airport, huddled against the sleeting rain, watching my father run to get the rental car. My parents stayed up late in the hotel room for a tense two months, discussing if Goldsmith was going to buy up too much stock and take over the company, and if we would have to turn our moving boxes around and go home. We stayed seven years.

I write on going home because yesterday I was in the middle of the bargain book section at Barnes and Nobles. I always see coffee table books here, oversized, glossy, and garishly exotic. It 's hard to pass over splendid photos of Egyptian mummies and candid of Princess Diana, but I do, and leaf through pages of fairy-tale French castles and German cobblestone villages. They draw me in, but suddenly these pictures seem terribly unreal, as they must appear to most people who look at them. I have been back in the States so long – six years. It seems long to me because, like most people, I have changed with time, and the Europe I experienced growing up has changed as well. It unnerves me to think that I was once a part of that lavish, glossy world jumping out of the coffee table book in front of me. I write on going home because I am also looking at a Swissair plane itinerary that will, in three days, take me back to the cobblestone streets, sidewalk cafes, and concrete neighborhoods where I grew up. And I wonder, just in the back of my mind, if the Luxembourg I'll fly back to will seem as strangely foreign as the coffee table book in my hand.

We never had many coffee table books at my house. Exotic living never found its way into our split-level ranch in the same way that it came into our lives in the fall of 1986. My mother decorated our house simply, and after we moved a few times, a lot of things got lost in the shuffle. We spent our first Christmas in an empty, furniture-less house, with a flat, two-dimensional Christmas tree made out of green construction paper taped to the wall. All our pictures from that year's holiday have the smooth beige background of barren walls and cardboard moving boxes. But I think that was somehow our family's best Christmas, despite gifts made out of construction paper, dinners on a blanket in the living room, and the dust moths that covered everything.

I appreciate that Christmas, looking back. It took all the romantic sensibility of living a fashionable "European" existence out of our minds. Out of my parents' minds, I should say, in retrospect. My six-year old brother and I were oblivious to any cultural excitement beyond the fact that we were in a strange, new place. We learned a new kind of life, not so different from what it might have been had we never left Akron, Ohio. My mother became domestic, mechanic, and government liaison all in one (she spoke fluent French). I think I got some language ability from my mother. We would parlay the dishwasher repairmen and order in French at McDonalds, while Dad would try to learn German via Berlitz foreign language tapes in the car on the way home from work. In the early summer evenings when our windows were open, we could always hear him coming before his gray Opel was even in sight. Driving up the street past our pink concrete townhouses, we heard a serious voice through the rolled-down car window, repeating cultural phrases such as "*Please pass the butter.*" But we didn't need to speak the native language in our expatriate world, for the locals spoke English well enough to let us order restaurant food and get the oil changed in our car. In our second house on *rue Charles Quint*, there were five American families on our street alone. I still think it awfully regal to name a suburban street after a French ruler. I remember wondering, too, if royal Charles the Fifth would have turned over in his grave to hear our Southern neighbor Mrs. Williams fondly refer to our neighborhood as *Roosharleykin*. We met her shopping at the market on a warm summer

day before we were to move to 36, rue Charles Quint. “We’re so glad y’all are movin’ to Roosharleykin.” She beamed exuberantly at us. My brother and I nodded. Our new street sounded exotic and terribly long to remember. It took us weeks to figure out that our street was named after a famous person.

We truly lived an international existence, hearing an Alabama accent followed by Italian at the checkout counter. I attended the American International School, and our elementary building proudly displayed twenty-five brightly colored felt balloons on the hall board. Twenty-five different nationalities, all bubbling up to a rainbow of international harmony... all exemplified in October’s United Nations Week. For four years I took my spot on the carpet floor of the school auditorium and did my part for the ceremonies. Our whole class dressed up in our national costumes (I never quite figured out what the American national costume was - I was deeply disappointed that we didn’t have one), and paraded onstage in front of all the parents and teachers. But the meaning of United Nations Week – the glorious, intrinsic truth – I think it eluded us. *United* - in our small classes on the assembly carpet floor, we never really got it. We were celebrating our international unity, but it was in those weeks that our differences were most apparent. We didn’t sit in little groups of friends - we had to sit as Americans on the left under the flag, Norwegians left center, Great Britain lower right, and Indians in their silk saris brightly coloring the front rows. We’d stand, do our country’s performance, and everyone would clap, clap, clap.

I do remember some feeling of patriotic unity with my fellow Americans. We clapped for truth and king and country, and found security in the fact that we all *knew* who MC Hammer was and that baseball is a sport at least as great as football (alias soccer) and that root beer is a sacred drink. But more distinctly, I remember the strangely uncomfortable feelings of awe that accompanied watching my other “international” friends stand and perform. Each year, the Swedish students would end with a tribute to St. Lucia, the patron saint of hope and purity. In sixth grade my best friend Elisabeth Johansen was chosen to be Santa Lucia, the oldest girl who would lead the rest in the procession. The lights dimmed in anticipation, and the audience could hear the girls singing softly as they started their traditional

song down the halls. Closer they came, louder, until the light of the candles that they carried illuminated the auditorium. Dressed in white choir robes and with gold tinsel wreaths atop their blond heads, singing strange Scandinavian words, they seemed ethereal and terribly far away, transformed by *culture* into strange and wonderful beings. It may have been then that I realized Elisabeth was not like me, she had such a different culture surrounding her, holding her up in that ethereal glow. I half-wished she could come and sit beside me in our normal clothes and we could be comfortable, giggle at the boys, and just be friends. Just *be*. But during United Nations Week, we were different.

Oh, I applaud my cultural experiences now, but they were lost on me then. I admit it. I couldn't have appreciated them in the same way that I do now, now that that time is a closed chapter in my childhood. How can you awe at your own daily life while you're living it? I'm sure the President's children, running around the corridors of the White House, don't stop to every day to ponder the immense privilege and fragility of their position in one of the greatest homes in the world. They just play cards in the Blue Room and tease Secret Service men. Mundane stuff if you're used to it. Humans are resilient creatures: we can get used to anything. Even if we live in the greatest wealth or privilege, the old adage holds true: the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. For us in Luxembourg, the grass was greener on the other side of the ocean.

Because Luxembourg was familiar, it became my home. Across the Atlantic, I viewed the States as a vacation spot: thirty flavors of ice cream and Gaps on every street corner. I confess this - while walking downtown along quaint village streets six hundred years old, I dreamt of shiny mall plazas a continent away. I did! There was nothing like the anticipation of the week before we left to fly back to Boston or Cleveland for three weeks State-side, visiting all our family and friends and cramming two years of shopping into clothes and shoe orgies. We'd pour over the Penneys and Sears catalogues for weeks in advance. Whenever a package arrived from the States, it was like Christmas. New movies and shows to watch (we didn't have local TV). A wealth of precious Oreo cookies, Doritos, A&W Root Beer, Kool Aid, Fruit Rollups, and Kraft Macaroni and Cheese!

We rationed and stored these, of course. I cherish memories of Sunday drives along the green and yellow lined vineyard slopes of the Mosel river, for these times and others made our life sweet. But sometimes we did crave a taste of *Americana* in the midst of European splendor. One Sunday our family (led by my father, the patriarchal sweet tooth) embarked on a search for a banana split that spanned three countries, two rivers, and ended up at the airport – the only place open that served decent ice cream. It turned out to be a torrential downpour that afternoon, and with the rains and winds rocking our car, my father, mother, brother, and I sat in the leather seats and played cards until the storm died down. Sometimes, we still look back and laugh at the desperate lengths a man can go for dairy products with a cherry on top.

*Home* is such a nebulous word to me. That is so hard to explain to those who have never left theirs. But I've had two or three "homes", and when I lived in a different country than the one I was born in, the term became confused. For months after our family moved back to the States after our seven-year stint overseas, friends would ask cheerfully, "Aren't you glad to be *home*?" Not really, I had to say. What I was feeling was that I missed *home* terribly and would give anything to go back to our familiar house at 36 Rue Charles Quint. To take one more bus trip to the busy *gare* downtown; shop with my best friend for outrageously expensive shoes that we would never buy, while sipping a *Fanta* with a thin straw and making fun of European fashion. Memory was my favorite anesthetic.

But I've lived in the States six years now; it is my home again. So what exactly has become of the place where I grew up, the streets that I still love, the country that holds so many memories for me? It's a strange sensation to call my upcoming trip to Luxembourg "vacation", but of course it is now. Europe is a closed chapter in my life; it changed me and made me who I am today. I can hold this coffee table book and love its European pictures like few people can. I can smile and picture foreign places with images of my own, and perhaps feel a twinge of regret that I experienced so much so very young. If only I had known that Gertrude Stein and Hemingway sat at that same Paris café table, and sipped coffee just as my parents did! Maybe then I could have seen our brief stop in the shade of the *brasserie* awning

as something more historically poignant, rather than a contest with my brother Seth of see-how-many-beer-coasters-you-can-flip-off-the-edge-of-the-table (This was a great game of skill, requiring quick wrist reflex. I could have beaten him, but he practiced more). The greatest joy of my first trip to Paris was the bunk bed Seth and I shared in our hotel room overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens. Who would think Paris could hold such cultural diversions? We formed our own culture, as children often do. I wonder if this ignorance was a tragedy, or instead, a strange delight that few experience.

One hot July on “home leave,” visiting the States from Luxembourg, my family was standing in a Washington DC subway station, the air damp and the cars crowded. My grandmother turned suddenly to us and asked what time our train was leaving - the loudspeaker had just announced it clearly, echoing throughout the whole platform. My father and I looked at each other blankly, and realized that we had effectively tuned it out, as we’d learned to do a hundred times before in the Paris *metro* station or the Antwerp *gare*. Over there, we never understood the language anyway, so it was useless to pay attention. It was pointless to read the billboards or propaganda fliers. We were so used to not understanding the myriad of language around us that it shocked us the first time we could eavesdrop on a fellow shopper’s conversation at an American mall. We could understand everyone. It seemed so intimate, this sharing of language.

Of course, I’m used to English now. It will be strange to hear the guttural German and quick French that I can barely understand, and I will probably be overwhelmed again when I return to that foreign world where part of me still remains. Tomorrow I will pick up the phone to confirm my tickets, and the travel agent will tell me to enjoy my *vacation* (i.e. a visit to a strange land where I don’t belong). In my mind’s eye I play the call and I open my mouth to reply, “But I’m going home...” I stop. I don’t say it, because the phrase simply no longer fits.