

## The Exile of Not Exactly

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Michael had come to give a reading at the small Iowa college where I teach – it was as much an excuse to see me, his former student, as it was a chance to sell copies of his latest book. He was shocked, I think, by just how isolated the college is. Half-way between Des Moines, the capital, and Iowa City, where the University of Iowa is located, the town boasts a population of 9,000 and is surrounded on all sides by big, agribusiness farms. You can travel an hour in either direction on I-80, one of the highways that span the US, without seeing much of anything. You can travel downtown, for that matter, without seeing much of anything. And the food, well – let's not go there, as Americans like to say.

The Plains writer Greta Erlich once titled a book *The Solace of Open Spaces*, but I have never found such openness a balm. The people seem small out here, small and bent to the core, like the scraggily pines they plant as a windbreak on their prairie homes' western borders. The fronts that come through, their endless histrionics, mock the tight-lipped stoicism of the locals. Stooping in spite of themselves, these locals seem to want to compensate for that great embarrassment of sky, that rotund relative who has forgotten what it means to be respectfully dour and repressed, which is to say Scandinavian. The weather in Iowa, I remember telling Michael, is like a Sharon Olds poem: entirely too confessional.

Michael knew I wasn't thrilled about being stranded on the Plains, but that's what the market did to newly minted PhDs: it flung them far and wide. Six years after completing an MFA, my doctorate in hand, I had set out for what mid-nineteenth-

century America called the Iowa Territories – in little more than a prairie schooner, it seemed, wife and son in tow. I hadn't yet accommodated myself to my new surroundings. In fact, I was in the habit of being rather obnoxious about said surroundings. When the legislature held a competition for a new State motto, I repeated a colleague's mordant entries over and over: 'Iowa, the Turd World'; 'Iowa, Gateway to Nebraska.' (This second submission provoked a rebuke, with the tourism official deeming it 'gratuitously unkind.')

Michael found these little geographical jabs amusing, laughing in a way that reminded me of a look from class years before: 'Ralph, you're being inappropriate again, but I would be most pleased if you would continue in exactly this manner.' (OK, that's my rather self-serving translation.) When I told him that Iowa stands for 'Idiots Out Wandering Around' or, even better, 'I Oughta Went Around it', he laughed uproariously. Iowa has more hogs than people, for God's sake – methane gas is a monumental problem.

What Michael and I shared was a sense of exile. I would joke that Mao had sent me to a re-education camp in the countryside; he would joke that Thatcher had sent him to an X-rated Disneyworld. He, of course, spent half the year in Gainesville teaching at the University of Florida – what I still refer to as the University of Baywatch after that inane, beach-and-bikini-lifeguard-show on American television. When I was a teaching assistant at UF, I put a sign on my door that said, 'No shirt, no shoes, no *parka*, no service.' UF's ignoble savages, who would sometimes come to office hours in their bathing suits, left me dumbfounded. Where, may I ask, is an instructor to look when the young woman in front of him is practically nude?

The town seemed the oddest mix of porn and God. One Gainesville strip club called itself Café Risque; another, Tits'n'Grits – that's right, Tits'n'Grits. You had to buy breakfast to watch the ladies sans pajamas. Apparently they danced

right above your huevos rancheros – on a bar that might otherwise have served alcohol. (I never went in, but it sure made me wonder: did the performers have to wear a different kind of hairnet?) Invariably, the same locale would sport an evangelical church, sometimes right next door. The threat of damnation lurked everywhere. Once, after I had embarrassed a former collegiate tennis player and current Baptist minister on the court, my forlorn opponent took a golden shovel out of his racket bag and invited me to bury my sins – I had behaved, he said, in a prideful manner. (The man would later be denounced on Palm Sunday by a parishioner with whom he was having an affair.)

At night the place could get scary; whatever hid during the day seemed to come out after dark – or, rather, to drop down from the sky like a giant palmetto bug. If you left anything unlocked, at least where I lived, it would be gone by morning. I never felt entirely comfortable walking around at night – something shady always seemed to be happening just a block in front of you.

Michael captures the sinister asininity of Gainesville in a poem entitled ‘Freebird’. It begins like this:

Six girls round the pool in Stranglers’ weather,  
tanning; then three; then one (my favourite!),  
every so often misting herself  
or taking a drink of ice water from a plastic beaker.

Anyone familiar with the town knows of Danny Rolling, the serial killer who attacked UF students. My wife and I arrived in Gainesville just after the killings had stopped, though before the killer had been apprehended. We were sufficiently alarmed as to rent an apartment in the only high-rise condominium with a doorman. Later we would live across the street from a funeral home that contractually disposed of prisoners who had died or been executed and whose bodies had lain unclaimed – ‘Old

Sparky', Florida's electric chair, was just up the road in a town called, appropriately enough, Starke. The serial killer Ted Bundy, for example, had been embalmed there. On more than one occasion, some friends and I were sitting on the front porch late at night when a delivery occurred – the State hearse strangely yellow, or so it seemed, a hornet on wheels.

In 'Freebird', the weary cosmopolitan, as a reviewer once referred to Michael, mischievously assumes the point of view of a Rolling-like figure, or perhaps I should say that the killer's psychological estrangement becomes a metaphor for the cosmopolitan's predicament – his percolating frustration, his palpable loneliness. Living abroad anywhere is alienating enough, but living abroad in Florida where, as Michael puts it in another poem, 'they give a man / five death sentences / to run more or less concurrently' and 'where little old ladies / squinny over their dashboards / and bumble into the millennium, with cryogenics to follow', well, that's just too surreal to make sense of.

The setting of 'Freebird' is

a blue by pink downtown development,  
Southern hurricane architecture in matchwood:  
live-oaks and love-seats, handymen and squirrels,  
an electric grille and a siege mentality.

Leave it to Michael to use the word 'love-seat' in this context; 'handyman', too. Rolling, after all, had been a 'handyman', someone all too handy at entering through a locked, sliding glass door.

I've been to that shoddy 'blue by pink development' – Michael rented a place there year after year despite its being overrun by drunken ignorami. A little pig's house of straw, it could have been blown down by any category 2 wolf. In the poem, the culture's 'siege mentality' finds its ironic reflection in a speaker who says of himself and of his early days in Gainesville:

I was cuntstruck and fat. My tight chinos  
came from a Second Avenue surplus store  
that had an RPG dangling from the ceiling.

The poem cleverly evokes threats from within and without – part phallic antagonist, part human war trophy, the RPG almost seems to flirt with the speaker.

I never understood why, beyond mere convenience, Michael chose to live where he lived. If readers of his exquisitely refined translations knew the setting in which he produced many of them, they would shake their heads and laugh. ‘Freebird’ concludes with the memory of a ‘fratboy overhead g[iving] it to his sorority girl steamhammer style’. As Lynyrd Skynyrd blasts away in the background, the girl’s ‘little screams peter[] out, inachevé’. By conflating audible pleasure with inaudible death, the poem affirms its ghoulish joke: the speaker would like to kill these people. Irony, it turns out, is the ultimate cosmopolitan: it manages to do what the speaker cannot: reconcile incommensurate perspectives, feel at home in both.

Of course, Michael never really took up residence in that apartment – or in any of the others that followed. ‘I lived in three bare rooms and a walk-in refrigerator,’ he declares wryly.

The telephone kept ringing for Furniture World.  
I looked at the dirty waves  
breaking on the blue carpet and said not exactly.

When I think of Michael, I think of him as forever without furniture, undecorated, certainly unconditioned. (The air in Florida, the inside air, seems to have been shipped in straight from corporate Antarctica.) Only recently, after buying a house in Gainesville, has he succumbed to the custom of populating a space with human-serving objects.

The exile of ‘not exactly’ – this is Michael’s proper home. It’s

as much a constitutional stance as a political conviction, whether the politics be actual or literary. Recall his principled thrashing of a book by Donald Justice, for which he took flak from colleagues at UF where Justice had taught, or of the more recent translation of the collected poems of Zbigniew Herbert. If Michael doesn't admire something, he won't mince words, and it matters not a wit if you're friend or foe.

The opposite is true, too, however: when he does admire something, he becomes its indefatigable champion. For instance, he never really cared for my poems, but after I sent him the first chapter of my prose book *Reasonable People*, he spotted an editor on a London street corner, ran after her, and insisted that she read it immediately. The next day, the woman called from a ferry to Brittany and offered me a contract. Of course, my guardian agent refused to take credit for this or even to be thanked.

With adjustment, 'not exactly' is also how we might conceive of Michael's philosophy of translation. During a roundtable on his first trip to Iowa, he suggested that a translation ought to manifest a literary work's difficult passage into another language and culture. I took him to mean that the reader ought to be able to sense the transcontinental flight and three-hour wait at customs. He ought to be able to sense the language-lag, which is to say that a journey has been undertaken and a new world discovered. The word 'translation', after all, finds its origin in the phrase 'to bear across', as in to convey a saint to heaven. I don't believe that Michael has made this point in print, though I'm enormously attracted to it (especially if we conceive of a smooth yet impossibly long linguistic flight).

He has, however, explicitly resisted 'functional' understandings of translation, where the translator is anything but an agent in his own right. To most people, translation, he laments, is 'not fully personalized and accredited work. No one sees it. You're an ambulance driver, not a surgeon.' He 'want[s] it to matter that a book has had [his] time and [his] English expended on it,

and not someone else's'. He 'want[s] both the choice of book, and the manner of the translation, to be expressive of [him]'. Thus, he has no patience at all for those pushing literal fidelity. Responding to a reader who took him to task for a translation of Gottfried Benn, Michael avers:

There is no more dismal – or, frankly, stupid – way of reading a translation than to pick on single words (as though the first duty of a translation were that it should be reversible – it's not – and as though words were tokens of unchanging value, the way money used to be, in its dreams – they're not either) . . . I don't see how I could have served Benn any better in English, both in large and in little. My 'choices' (detestable word) are absolutely 'the best available' (certainly to me), and if they can be improved, then at least it won't be by any obvious so-called 'literal' so-called 'dictionary equivalents.'

'Not one of the things I have done is a liberty, or even close,' Michael concludes. 'I have merely said things the way they get said in English, precisely, and with tact.'

*Precisely*, not exactly. This difference makes, as it were, all the difference: two traditions in the world of letters communicate through the intervention of a translator – through, as Michael puts it elsewhere, the 'strange bi-authorship of translation'. As he pointed out in an OpEd bemoaning the end of the foreign language requirement in English secondary education, now more than ever, the globe needs such cooperation: 'Surely, apart from anything else, with more language-learning, there would have been fewer wars over the past decades?' Preposterous as it might be to try, imagine Blair and Bush studying Arabic, even translating Iraqi poetry. Imagine pens and word processors, not tanks and fighter jets, as the communicative instruments of choice.

In a poem entitled 'Letter from Australia', published in the

*London Review of Books* and dedicated to his former wise-guy student, Michael fancies, if only for a few moments, an exile so geographically removed from the center of Anglo-American imperialism that his anger and frustration at the state of things might abate. It was the run-up to the 2008 election – McCain vs. Obama. Michael had been out to Iowa a second time, joined by our dear friend Peter Sokol. The District Court of Iowa had ruled that marriage licenses cannot be denied on the basis of sexual orientation – to the delight of nearly everyone at my college and to the dismay of the State’s many right-wing evangelicals. (The Supreme Court would unanimously uphold this ruling, paving the way for gay marriage, though successful recall elections for a number of justices would follow.) The price of gas was alarmingly high, and farmers were downright giddy about the prospects for that corn-based alternative, ethanol.

The poems begins aubade-like, but something is askew:

The early worm gets the bird –  
it’s morning in Australia.  
It’s strange to be so bilious  
so far away.

Little to do with Australia,  
which as far as I can see  
seems mostly delightful:  
airy pastel buildings and trees I can’t name.

After pondering a number of local problems, which seem utterly trivial, even quaint, when compared to the corruption and dishonesty some seven thousand miles away, the speaker at last identifies the source of his biliousness:

And still we wake haunted by  
the familiar American *galère*:



Cheney the sinisterly skewed orangutan,  
the worn charmlessness of Bush,  
the clumping one-armed snowman McCain,  
looking either to club or hug.

And now – the commentariat agog  
at the promised melange of snowsports and watersports –  
Sarah P., the driller killer  
the uterine shooterine.

The poet's parodic rhymes, his verve, nearly neutralize the truculent absurdity of conservative politics. 'If you can have Little Englanders,' the speaker asks,

can't you have Little Americans,  
half-awash with Washington's hormones,  
half in rebellion against them?

And so the private anthem morphs from 'not exactly' to 'not at all'.

The poem then concludes with an apostrophe, and we come full circle – with Michael remembering the joke I had once told him about the acronym that is IOWA:

My friend in the bonsai liberal exclave  
in your biodiesel flyover state,  
I can still register my first  
Zolaesque frisson of horror

at the fried turnip smell of the cars  
that ate not Paris, but whatever you called it –  
I Oughta Went Around It.  
There is no going around it.

This recognition paradoxically fuels Michael's restive itinerancy – his movement a counter to that of global American hegemony, not a reflection of, or escape from, it. Michael, it probably need not be said, has never gone around anything, and in friendship he has never, not once, been an expat.

At the end of his second trip to Iowa, I drove him to the airport in Des Moines. The unusually warm, sunny weather had turned: it was snowing furiously. I-80 took on that *Dr Zhivago* quality, only updated with tanker trucks and the careless skirmishing of red and white compact cars. Michael was about to commence an essay on Joseph Brodsky – yet another exile, Brodsky, of course, was one of his heroes. Two days later, I received an email from Michael asking if he had left a book by Brodsky at my house – he hadn't. 'The book must be in the airport,' he wrote, and I remember thinking how plaintively ironic that was. Brodsky – or, rather, his poems waiting for their flight.