

## Whose Woods Are These?

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*Whose woods are these I think I know,*

*His house is in the village though;*

*He will not see me stopping here*

*To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

*--Robert Frost,*

*"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"*

After having been in America for nearly thirty years, I am only an immigrant because people want me to talk about it. Would you ask Henry Kissinger to talk on the subject of "American Foreign Policy: An Immigrant's Experience?" Still, I am more of an immigrant than Henry only because or precisely because I *have* been talking about it lately. Paradoxically, it was a recent return to Romania, my native country, that has caused me to reevaluate my American experience. Until that time, I considered myself a model American: drank Jim Beam, wore Converse high tops, quit smoking on tax day. Of course, I may have been *too* perfect.

I went back to Romania in December 1989 to report on the so-called revolution over there; but, in truth, I went back in order to smell things. I went there to recover my childhood. I wanted to take deep breaths in the old squares of my hometown. I went around sniffing the stones of the medieval tower under the Liars' Bridge where I used to lie still like a lizard in the summer. I put my cheek against the tall door of our old house, built in 1456, with its rusty smell of iron. I sniffed past people's windows to see what they were cooking. There were aromas of *paprikash* and strudel, and the eternal cabbage.

When all masonry has crumbled, all human habitation gone, there will still be a faint smell of cabbage wafting over Eastern Europe the way it still wafts out of the tenements of the Lower East Side in New York. It's curious: the early European immigrants who inhabited those New York tenements are mostly gone, but the smell of cabbage still wafts, mixed with the frying pork and jalapeños of the newer Hispanic arrivals. Someone ought to do a history of immigration based on stinks, scents, smells, and aromas. At what point do the pungent cuisines of one's native land vanish in the deodorized commuter traffic of America?

I made my way into the past through my nose, madeleinizing everything. My childhood, which had been kept locked and preserved in the crumbling city of Hermanstadt, in the centrum, was still there, untouched. It had outlasted my immigration: it was one thousand years old.

Considering then that childhood lasts for one thousand years, the last thirty years of adulthood in America do not seem like such a big deal. Of course, sniffing was not why National Public Radio (N.P.R.) had paid my way back to Romania, so I had to file some “real” stories as well. These were about adults and adult issues, which were nowhere near as interesting as my childhood. My old friends, now adults, had metamorphosed in the past twenty-five years into—mostly—fat survivors of a miserable and baroque system where material things were the supreme spiritual value. For them, America was the heavenly Wal-Mart. That’s what God was during Communism because God was every-thing, and everything can be found at Wal-Mart. Thank God, they didn’t know about the Mall of America [in Minneapolis, Minnesota], or they’d be there right now, a barefoot procession that would clog your splendid highway system. Forty years of so-called Communism have done no more than polish to perfection my grandmother’s maxim, “In America, dogs walk around with pretzels on their tails.” Loose translation: in America, the sidewalks are paved with gold.

I had fantasized coming back to my country as a celebrated author, envied by all the people who made my life hell in high school. But now I wished, more than anything, that I’d come back a Wal-Mart. If only I were a Wal-Mart, I could have spread my beauteous aisles to the awestruck of Hermanstadt and fed them senseless with all the bounty of America.

If I were a Wal-Mart  
And you were my past  
Would you make me back a child  
Would you make it last?

That’s what I sang. The fact is that I would trade adulthood for childhood in a minute, and mine wasn’t all that great.

When I came back to America, I reeled about for a few days in shock. Everything was so new, so carelessly abundant, so thoughtlessly shiny, so easily taken for granted. The little corner store with its wilted lettuce and the spotted apples was a hundred times more substantial than the biggest, bare-shelf store in Romania.

I remembered that my mother, ever a practical woman, started investing in furniture when she came to America. Not any furniture. Sears furniture. Furniture that she kept the plastic on for fifteen

years before she had to conclude, sadly, that Sears furniture wasn't such a great investment. In Romania, she would have been the richest woman on the block.

Which brings me to at least one paradox of immigration: most people come here because they are sick of being poor. They want to eat and they want to show something for their industry. But soon enough, it becomes evident to them that it isn't enough. They have eaten and they are full, but they have eaten alone and there was no one to make toasts and sing songs. They have new furniture with plastic on it, but the neighbors aren't coming over to *ooh* and *ahh*. If neighbors, American neighbors or less recent immigrants do come over, they smile condescendingly at the poor taste and the pathetic greed. And so, the greenhorns find themselves poor once more: this time they are lacking something more elusive than salami and furniture. They are bereft of a social and cultural milieu. Immigration is cruel to new immigrants: they are mostly invisible to Americans—except as objects of dismay and subjects of political demagoguery—and their fellow immigrants, with few exceptions, are in a hurry to forget their cultures and get on with the business of melting.

My mother, who was middle class by Romanian standards, found herself immensely impoverished after her first flush of material well-being. It wasn't just the disappearance of her milieu—that was obvious—but the feeling that she had, somehow, been had. The American supermarket tomatoes didn't taste at all like the rare, genuine item back at home. American chicken was tasteless. Mass-produced furniture was built to fall apart. Her car, the crowning glory of her achievements in the eyes of folks back at home—was only three years old and was already beginning to wheeze and groan. It began to dawn on my mother that she had perhaps made a bad deal: she had traded in her friends and relatives for fake chicken, ersatz tomatoes, and phony furniture.

Leaving behind your kin, your friends, your language, your smells, your childhood is traumatic. It is a kind of death. You're dead for the home folk, and they are dead to you. When you first arrive on these shores, you are in mourning. The only consolations are these products, which had been imbued with religious significance back home. But when these things turn out not to be the real things, you begin to experience a second death, brought about by betrayal. You begin to suspect that the religious significance you had attached to them was only possible back home where these things did not exist. Here, where they are plentiful, they have no significance whatsoever. They are inanimate fetishes, somebody else's fetishes, no help to you at all. When this realization dawned on my mother, she began to rage against her new country. She deplored its rudeness, its insensitivity, its outright meanness, its indifference, the chase after the almighty buck, the social isolation of most Americans, their inability to

partake in warm, genuine fellowship, and, above all, their deplorable lack of awe before what they had made.

This was the second stage of grief for her old self. The first, leaving her country, was sharp and immediate, almost tonic in its violence. The second was more prolonged, more damaging, because no hope was attached to it. Certainly, not the hope of return.

And here, thinking of return, she began to reflect that perhaps there had been more to this deal than she'd first thought. She had left behind a lot that was good, it was true, but she had also left behind a vast range of daily humiliations. If she was ordered to move out of town, she had to comply. If a Party member took a dislike to her, she had to go to extra-ordinary lengths to placate him because she was considered petit bourgeois and could have easily lost her small photo shop. She lived in fear of being denounced for something she had said. And worst of all, she was Jew, which meant that she was structurally incapable of obtaining any justice in her native land. She had lived by the grace of an immensely complicated web of human relations, kept in place by a thousand small concessions, betrayals, indignities, bribes, little and big lies. In addition to the strictures of her petit bourgeois status, she was bound to the generalized lie of the Communist state by a million small lies of survival.

"She had lived at home inside a cautious silence which was the second nature of everyone she knew. Publicly, no one spoke the truth. The newspapers lied about everything except the sports scores. (And even those were subject to Party approval). When people said something out loud, it wasn't for the person they were speaking to, it was for the "ear in the wall." At home, speaking to one's intimates, one whispered, but even this whisper was mostly a lie because "the ear in the wall" was both in the inside and the outside wall. And when one spoke privately to one's own self that was still a lie because "the ear in the wall" had become one's very own ear."

So, as much as my mother loved the tiny living room of our precious mini-apartment on the Worker's Victory Boulevard, it was not hers. It belonged to the state, like everything else, including her words.

At this point in her reminiscence, the ersatz tomato and the faux chicken did not appear all that important. An imponderable had made its appearance, a bracing, heady feeling of liberty. If she took that ersatz tomato and flung it at the head of the agriculture secretary of the United States, she would be making a statement about the disastrous effects of pesticides and mechanized farming. Flinging that faux chicken at Louise Mandrell would be equally dramatic and perhaps even media-worthy. What's more, she didn't have to eat those things, because she could buy organic tomatoes and free-range

chicken. Of course, it would cost more, but that was one of the paradoxes of America: to eat as well as people in a third-world country eat *when* they eat, it costs more.

My mother was beginning to learn two things: one, that she had gotten a good deal after all because in addition to the food and furniture they had thrown in freedom, and two, America is a place of paradoxes: one proceeds from paradox to paradox like a chicken from the pot into the fire.

And that's where I come in. My experience was not like that of my mother. I came here for freedom, not for food. I came here in the mid-sixties. Young people East and West at that time had a lot more in common with each other than with the older generations. The triple-chinned hogs of the *nomenklatura* who stared down from the walls of Bucharest were equal in our minds to the Dow Chemical pigs who gave us napalm and Vietnam. By the time I left Romania in 1966, the Iron Curtain was gone: a Hair Curtain fell between generations. Prague 1968 and Chicago 1968 were on the same axis: the end of the world had begun.

Our anthems were the songs of Dylan, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, all of whom were roundly despised by my mother because she was sure that such tastes would lead to our being thrown out of America. At that time, being anti-establishment in America was as threatening as being antiestablishment in Romania. There was a difference, of course, the massive, albeit expensive, difference of the constitutional right to freedom of speech and assembly. But for a moment or two there—and for several long, scary moment since—those constitutional rights were in real danger. And if Americans were threatened, you can imagine that many niceties of those laws simply didn't apply to refugees.

Nonetheless, I was drunk with freedom, and I wasn't about to dilute my euphoria with the age-old wariness of Eastern Europeans. I didn't want to eat anything. My mother's main pleasure and strategy in those days was to overstuff me whenever I came to visit. She believed that food would anchor me and keep me safe. Food keeps you from going out at night, it makes you sleepy, makes you think twice about hitchhiking, makes you, generally, less radical. The very things that alienated my mother—the speed, confusion, social unrest, absence of ceremony—exhilarated me. I had arrived here at an ecstatic moment in history, and I was determined to make the most of it. And when, thanks to the marketing know-how of the CIA, I got to try LSD for the first time, I became convinced that freedom was infinitely vaster than was generally acknowledged. It was not just a right: it was an atmosphere. It was the air one needed to breathe. And one had to stay skinny.

Nowadays, that glimpse, that vision, has dimmed considerably. Proportional to the flesh, I'd say. Those who may have inadvertently opened that cosmic window have been endeavoring to close it ever since. And my mother's refrigerator, a conservative god, has lumbered to the center of life, filled to the rafters with the little plastic baggies full of orderly calculations.

In 1966, my generation welcomed me into its alienated and skinny arms with a generosity born of outsidership. All young people at that time had become outsiders to America's mainstream. Those who went to Vietnam were way outside even though, ostensibly, they served the inside. The others were in voluntary exile from the suburbs all immigrants hoped to one day live in. But what mattered is that we were all on the move. I happened to be a literal exile in a world of, mostly, metaphorical exiles. It was a match made in heaven. America was nineteen years old, and so was I. I lived in a country of exiles: a place that had its own pantheon of elders, exiled geniuses like Einstein and Nabokov, and whole nomad youth armies. Exile was a place in the mid-sixties, an international idea-state, the only anarchist state in working order. It's not the kind of thing that comes around all that often in American immigrant history. It is not even the thing that most immigrants dream about when they dream of America.

I've already mentioned the pretzels.

There have been many immigrant visions of America in the four hundred years since Europeans first came here, most of them a variation of *Ubi pretzel ibi patria*, but the true, ineffable one was not a pretzel but a pear, Charles Fourier's pear to be exact. For Fourier, the pear was the perfect fruit. It was to be eaten in paradise by lovers. This vision of a utopian New World was entirely about freedom. The freedoms granted by the Bill of Rights were only the steps leading to this new state of being.

The prophetic tradition that maintains that America is chosen among nations to bring about the end of history is not just an extension of European Communist ideas. It is also an ingrained American belief, one that, it can be argued, has kept America strong, vigorous, and young. Walt Whitman's America was done with the niceties of Europe because it was bigger, ruder, and it had greater destiny. This America was also a country of immigrants who gave it their raw muscle and imagination. Diversity and industry were its mainstays. Even Allen Ginsberg, a bitter prophet at the end of the 1950s, could say, "America, I put my queer shoulder to the wheel." Despite the irony, Ginsberg, the son of a Russian Jewish immigrant, really believes that his queer shoulder is needed, that America needs not just its bankers but also its queers.

But this sustaining vision of America is, paradoxically again, marginal. It is often confused with another, similar-sounding creed, which is in all the textbooks and is invoked by policemen on the Fourth

of July. This faux creed of an immigrant-built, patriotic nation-state is the official ideology which, like the party line in Romania, is meant to drive underground the true and dangerous vision. What's more, the rhetoric of this Americanism is written so that no one has to really believe it. In reality, few people do. What most Americans think that they should believe about America is not at all what they really believe about it and, if pressed, they will admit that only freaks believe in such idealistic blather. Or, at the very least, they will admit to no contradiction between their love of freedom and their hatred of outsiders.

The history of the public opinion of immigration shows mainly resistance to it. There is nothing new about current anti-immigration sentiments. Most immigration after the mid-eighteenth century would have never happened if the majorities had a say in it. They didn't because immigration was driven by a demand for labor. The farther away we got from the revolutionary ideas of the eighteenth century, the more it appeared that compassion for the wretched and persecuted of the earth was dictated by the interests of capitalists.

Not that this was necessarily bad. Heartless capitalism in its ever growing demand for cheap labor saved millions of people from the no-exit countries of the world. It was a deal that ended up yielding unexpected and imponderable benefits: energy, imagination, the remaking of cities, new culture. Restless capital, restless people, ever expanding boundaries—the freedom to move, pick up, start again, and shed the accursed identities of static native lands... The deal turned out to have the hidden benefit of liberty. The liberty my mother discovered in America was here: it was a by product of the anarchic flow of capital, the vastness of the American space, *and* a struggle in the name of the original, utopian vision. Of course, capitalism annexed the resulting moral capital and put on an idealistic face it never started out with, and which it quickly sheds whenever production is interrupted. Nonetheless, it is this capitalism with a human face that brought most of us here. And it is that human face, that mask of utopian kindness, that has found its way into textbooks and is sold to every child with a picture of Miss Liberty—that French immigrant—with the Emma Lazarus poem somewhat blurred underneath.

But this capitalism with a human face is not the same as the original vision of America. The original American dream is religious, socialist, and anti-capitalist. It was this utopianism, liberty in its pure, unalloyed state that I experienced in non-denominational, a-historical, un-economical, transcendent flashes in the mid-sixties. It's not simple, dialectical Manichaeism we are talking about here. It's the mystery itself.

A few years ago, hard-line anti-Communists told us that America was haven for the politically oppressed. Today, the winners, without bothering to check if anything has truly changed, are telling us

to stem immigration for our economic good. In other words, this is one of those times when capitalism with a human face can afford to take off its face and breathe. It isn't easy wearing your idealistic mask in public—for years. Also, capital isn't circulating so well in this middle-age of production.

If somebody had asked my mother in the mid-sixties if she was a political refugee, she would have answered, "Of course," but privately she would have scoffed at the idea. She was an economic refugee, a warrior in quest of Wal-Mart. In Romania, she had been trained at battling in lines for every necessity. In America, at last, her skills would come in handy. Alas. But if somebody had asked me, I would have said, "I'm a planetary refugee, a professional refugee, a permanent exile." Not on my citizenship application, of course. That might have been a bit dramatic, but in truth I never felt like a refugee, either political or economic. What I felt was that it was incumbent upon me to manufacture difference, to make myself as distinct and unassimilable as possible; to increase my foreignness, if you will. That was my contribution to America. Not the desire to melt, but the desire to embody an instructive difference.

Melting pot, boiling point. Boiling pot, melting point. Boiling. Melting. Pot. J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur first put the matter this way in 1769: "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes to the world."

I have no doubt that this came to pass. Crevecoeur goes on to say: "What then is the American, the new man? He is either a European or a descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood which you will find in no other country."

An American is a European man. I won't charge old Crack-Heart with retrospective sexism, but he does seem to have left out a couple of races. Native Americans and African Americans never melted into this new American man. And that makes the metaphor suspect.

Who is tending this pot? Who is stoking the flames? What's in this pot, really? Is it possible that the new American man, having successfully melted, now stands outside the pot, rocking it, while inside it, stubbornly refusing to melt, are all of American's others: Native Americans, African Americans, religious freaks, sexual freaks, extreme libertarians? Which is to say, all the original inhabitants plus the original devotees of the vision of utopian America. A curious situation this: the elements inside the pot that most refuse to melt are the *oldest* ones. What's going on here?

This all-purpose pot, is it not a metaphor for containment?

And, is it really a pot? Isn't it more of a cauldron?

And is a witch rocking it?

And if one were to rephrase St. John the Crack-Heart's question, "What then is the American, this new man?" I would have to say, paradoxically, of course, "A new arrival who hasn't yet arrived, but has been here all along, someone whose ambition is not to melt but to differ."

To the question, "Whose woods are these?", which Robert Frost never asked because he thought that he already knew the answer—"Whose woods are these I think I know,"—my mother would have said, without hesitation, "Everybody else's." My mother, like most immigrants, knew only too well that these were somebody else's woods. She only hoped that one day she might have a piece of them. My answer to that question would have been, and I think still is, "Nobody's." These are nobody's woods, and that's how they must be kept: open for everybody, owned by nobody. This is, in part at least, how Native Americans thought of them. It was a mistake, of course. Nobody's woods belong to the first marauding party who claims them. A better answer might be, "These woods belong to the mystery: this is the forest of paradoxes, *una selva obscura*; we belong to them not they to us."