

ANDREI CODRESCU

Notes of an Alien Son: Immigrant Visions

After having been in America for nearly thirty years, I am only an immigrant when people want me to talk about it. Paradoxically, it was a recent return to Romania, my native country, that 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 touched 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 1650, with its rusty smell of iron. I sniffed at people's windows to see what they were cooking. There were aromas of paprikash and strudel, and the eternal cabbage.

I made my way into the past through my nose, madeleinizng everything. My childhood, which had been kept locked and preserved in the crumbling city of Hermanstadt, was still there, untouched. It had outlasted my emigration. It was a thousand years old.

Considering, then, that childhood lasts for a thousand years, the past thirty years of adulthood in America do not seem like such a big deal. My old Romanian friends, now adults, had metamorphosed in those three decades 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 everything, and everything can be found at Wal-Mart. Forty years of so-called communism had 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 used to fantasize coming back to my country 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 as a Wal-Mart. If only I were a Wal-Mart, I could have spread my beautiful aisles to the awestruck of Hermanstadt and fed them senseless with all the bounty of America.

When I returned to the United States, 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 spotted apples was a hundred times more substantial than the biggest bareshelf store in Romania.

My mother, ever a practical woman, started investing in furniture when she came to America. Not just any furniture. Sears furniture. Furniture that she kept the plastic on for fifteen years before she had to conclude, sadly, that Sears wasn’t such a great investment. In Romania, she would have been the richest woman on the block.

Which brings us 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 these things aren’t enough. They have eaten and they are full, but they have eaten alone and there was no one with whom to make toasts and sing songs. They have new furniture with plastic on it but the neighbors aren’t coming over to ooh and aah. If 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.

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 in Romania. 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 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 ersatz tomatoes, fake chicken, 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 at 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 toxic 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. True, she had left behind a lot that was good, 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 extraordinary lengths to placate him because she was considered petit-bourgeois and could easily have lost her small photo shop. She lived in fear of being denounced for something she had said.

And worst of all, she was a 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.

At this point, the ersatz tomatoes 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 Barbara Mandrell would be equally dramatic and perhaps even media-worthy. And she'd probably serve only a suspended sentence. 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) costs more.

My mother was beginning to learn two things: one, that she had gotten a good deal after all, because in addition to 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 at all 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 nomenclatura 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 old 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. And she wasn't all that wrong: Her old don't-rock-the-boat instinct was an uncannily fine

instrument. At that time, being anti-establishment in America could be perilous. But this wasn't Romania. The difference, the massive difference, was the constitutional right to freedom of speech and assembly. True, for a moment or two—and for several long, scary moments since—those constitutional rights were in real danger. And if Americans felt threatened, you can be sure that many niceties of the law simply didn't apply to refugees.

Nonetheless, I was drunk with freedom and I wasn't about to temper my euphoria with the age-old wariness of European Jews. My mother's main pleasure and strategy in those days was to overstuff me whenever I came to visit. She believed that food would 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.

In 1966, my generation welcomed me into its alienated and skinny arms with a generosity born of outsidership. 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 that immigrants hoped to live in one day. 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 IdeaState, the only anarchist state in working order. It's not the kind of thing that comes around all that often in American immigrant history.

In the four hundred years since Europeans first came here, there have been many immigrant visions of America, most of them a variation of Ubipretzel ibipatria; 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 maintains that America is chosen among nations to bring about the end of history. American utopian communities, which flourished here in the nineteenth century, were reborn with a vengeance a hundred years later. The possibility of utopia is 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 had a 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 politicians on the Fourth of July. Immigrants are used as a rhetorical device to support the goals of the nation-state: America right or wrong. This is the official ideology, which, like the party line in Romania, is meant to drive underground the true and dangerous vision. Its faithful will admit to no contradiction between their love of freedom and their hatred of outsiders.

The history of public opinion on immigration shows mainly opposition to it. As the revolutionary ideas of the eighteenth century receded, compassion for the wretched and persecuted of the earth was dictated mainly 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 benefits: vigor, energy, imagination, the remaking of cities, new culture. Restless capital, restless people, ever-expanding boundaries—the freedom to move, pick up, start again, 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 byproduct 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 that it never started out with, and that it quickly sheds whenever production is interrupted. Nonetheless, it is this capitalism with a human face that brought most of us here.

But 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 nondenominational, ahistorical, uneconomical, transcendent flashes in the mid-sixties. It's not simple dialectical Manicheism we are talking about here. It's the mystery itself.

If somebody had asked my mother in the mid-sixties if she was a political refugee, she would have said, "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 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 form, of course. That may 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 in but the desire to embody an instructive difference.

To the question, "Whose woods are these?"—which Robert Frost never asked because he thought he knew the answer—my mother would have said,

without hesitation, "Somebody 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 it 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 mystery; this is the forest of paradoxes; *un bosche oscuro*; we belong to them, not they to us."