

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Conversation with Mark Statman About Exile Home

Marcia Epstein · Wednesday, July 1st, 2020

beauty may not

be enough
the things
of this world
up against
everything we
do reminds us how
who we are
is by our doing how
looking for *is*
who we
are how looking
for what's
left is
how we
so become

– Mark Statman, *Exile Home*

The seeds of this conversation were planted in 2016 when poet John Yamrus urged me to invite poet-translator Mark Statman to my podcast, *Talk With ME*. Mark and his family, dogs included, were preparing for their move from Brooklyn to Oaxaca in rural southern Mexico in September 2016. Mark experienced the deaths of two loved ones, the beloved Black Labrador, Cannonball, in 2017, and Mark's dear father, Al Statman, in 2018. Lavender Ink / Diálogos published *Exile Home* in March 2019.

We established the strong roots of this conversation via videocall on June 8, background music by Oaxacan birds, related emails, and the poems.

While befriending the book before our conversation, I identified some topics I hoped we'd discuss. Our conversation included laughter and tears. We shared stories of beloved dogs, thoughts on writing and reading poetry, and of the many layered beauty of southern Mexico. Enjoy some highlights from our talk. To learn more about Mark and *Exile Home*, buy or borrow the book and read!

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Mark Statman and *Exile Home*

The beauty of the physical book: cover art by Katherine Koch, as well as the poems on the pages

I've been fortunate that of my ten books, Katherine has done the cover art for eight—it helps that we're married—she really is a fantastic artist. She read *Exile Home* in manuscript and from her reading did a number of paintings from which Bill Lavender (of Lavender Ink / Diálogos), a superb book designer, chose one. I love what they came up with. It's like the amazing old black and white New Directions books from the late 1960's. Katherine's colors are the colors of southern Mexico, especially the rainy season flowers: orange, purple, yellow, blue.

In my poetry I think about the page, the arrangement of words, line. In *Exile Home*, I worked on slowing down or speeding up line. It's something I admire in William Carlos Williams and I wanted to see how I would do it. I also wanted to have a book in which each poem exists by itself, every poem should, but also exists directly in relation to others. Instead of a single poem per page, the poems follow each other, multiple poems on multiple pages. It was tricky, making sure each poem stopped, but the reader shouldn't get a chance to stop.

That sense of stopping and not stopping is important in the lines as well. I wanted to make them free of the adornment of punctuation. Could words and lines create punctuation? Could how the words sound?

Everything here is very deliberate.

***Exile Home* poems in 2020 with the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the protests about police killings of black people in the USA**

You asked about “I can't wake up” from the Brooklyn section. It resonates, no? The masks, the inability to breathe, to wake up. Of course we write poems in the present, but poems also have futures. And we don't always know into what future the poem talks. But if the poetry we write will live, it has to have legs, pay forward. Who knew it could mean this in 2020? The pandemic of racism has been going on for so long. The pandemic of diseases as well. If a poem is any good, it should have a number of lives.

Love and grief

I had planned on writing a different book for Spring 2019. But after moving to Mexico everything I'd been writing didn't seem as relevant. There I was with a book to publish and the sudden need for something wholly different. My new life. Then Cannonball dies in March 2017. My father in March 2018. I had written most of *Exile Home*, but then my father. I had a poem I had to write, to put it in this book that focused on leaving Brooklyn and moving to Oaxaca. A weird thing? I had worked on the poem for some two weeks. Then I lost my notebook! I re-wrote the poem from memory, with one addition. At Katherine's suggestion, I added the part about shaving my father in

the hospital. Later, one of my brothers, Russell, said, “You didn’t write that poem, it wrote itself.” He’s right.

The initial move to Oaxaca had grief as a catalyst. The death of my friend and colleague, the scholar and writer Robin Mookerjee, at the age of 54. I realized then that somehow my life had to change.

García Lorca writes, “Grief is a small infinite burn.” It’s there a long time, and then leaves a scar forever. The book opens with my father’s poem, “Green Side Up,” a celebratory grief. After that, leaving Brooklyn and entering a new life. Except I’m not turning my back, I’m moving forward, my old life with me. Exile and home. I moved from home. I’m now home. Exile, partly, and choice.

Dogs are family

Growing up, we always had dogs. Even in college I had one. Then there was a lull. I really wanted one, but the family outvoted me. Then in May 2004, I got this card for my birthday with a yellow Lab puppy on the cover, a daisy in its mouth, that read (in Jesse’s handwriting): *Note: Card is good for ONE AND ONLY ONE PUPPY (A beautiful one of course!).* That card turned into the zen-dog Cannonball. Jesse, a gifted musician, singer-songwriter, took his stage name from him—they were very close, slept together at night while Jesse was growing up. When Cannonball died, John Yamrus wrote me: *All dogs are good. Some dogs are better. Then there was Cannonball.* John knew.

When Cannonball started growing a little old, we decided a puppy might help make his old age lively. We went back to Cannonball’s breeder. On the drive, we pre-determined we would get a female yellow Lab. Of course we returned home with a male chocolate. Apollo. Who is kind of a goof and very sweet. When we got home, Jesse was looking at Apollo’s papers and he noticed some familiar names. Apollo is, in fact, Cannonball’s great-great nephew. They were quite a team.

A goof. The other night I noticed at about 4 AM that he wasn’t in his bed, which is at the foot of ours. Which is weird. So I went downstairs and there he was, all 75 pounds, head and tail held high, prancing around with a stuffed toy in his mouth. Having a little Apollo fun.

Mexican poetry

When I first moved, I learned I knew little of Mexican poetry. I knew Sor Juana, Ramón Lopez Velarde, Octavio Paz, José Emilio Pacheco. Now I’m reading deeply modern and contemporary poets. I’ve translated some contemporary ones: Maria Baranda, Efraín Velasco, Marianna Stephania. The Mexican poets are phenomenal. And different. American poetry starts from within and goes out. Here in Mexico, it starts from without and goes in. Taking the world, internalizing it, rather than taking the world and constructing it. You look at what’s going on and see your place in it, as opposed to seeing who you are and figuring out where you want to be.

Working from home

I'm working on a new book of poems, due out in Fall 2021, tentatively titled *Hechizo* (meaning spell or enchantment in Spanish; something either wonderful or dark, depending on context). I want to put in some of the poems I'd thought would be in the book that became *Exile Home*, and newer poems, which continue as responses to my life in Mexico, as well as to the pandemic and a desire to escape the effect of the pandemic on my psyche. I'm trying to push further on the work I did with line and arrangement in *Exile Home*.

I have a couple of translation projects. One is a selected poems of mine in Spanish. Mainly I just sit on the sidelines and kibitz, explaining what it means to hit three sewers in stickball. And I'm working on a big Mario Benedetti translation, along with Marshall Malin, a very good young poet and translator who is my former research assistant. Benedetti, who died in 2009, is a major figure of Uruguayan literature. This bilingual collection, about 250 poems spanning Benedetti's career, is due out in Fall 2022.

Oaxaca is home

It's all in the poems. Anything I have to say about living here is in *Exile Home*.

Buy the Book! *Exile Home* by Mark Statman is available through:



Lavender Ink / Diálogos

<https://www.lavenderink.org/site/shop/exile-home/?v=76cb0a18730b>

Small Press Distributor (SPD)

<https://www.spdbooks.org/Products/9781944884611/exile-home.aspx>

Also, for those in the USA: By special order through your local independent bookseller

For those in other countries: If *Exile Home* is not available at your local bookseller, please have them advise you about best options for ordering.

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