

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Post-modern “Happy Place”: Exile Home by Mark Statman

Eileen Murphy · Wednesday, July 1st, 2020

[He’s] an artist / [He] don’t look back (Bob Dylan, “She Belongs to Me”)

I am not
 wilder than love
 nor than kisses
 not wilder than wine
 not wild days
 not wilder than the trees
 nor the storms in the trees
 the broken branches
 the broken roots
 the falling leaves.....
 why this axis?
 why this spin?
 waters rising.....

(“in the beginning”)

“Click your heels together three times and say ‘There’s no place like home’ and you’ll be there,” says the good witch Glinda to Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Throughout this classic film, Dorothy is searching for a way home, and in the end, she returns to Kansas by clicking the heels of her ruby slippers. Similarly, some people, including poet-translator Mark Statman, seek out and eventually find their heart’s home and live there happily ever after. The new book *Exile Home* by Mark Statman is an upbeat post-modern poetry collection that paints an intimate portrait of a speaker who searches for and finds his true home in an enchanted land.

Mark Statman is Emeritus Professor of the Eugene Lang College at The New School in New York City, where he taught for more than 30 years. He, his wife Katherine Koch, their son Jesse, and their dogs Cannonball and Apollo moved from the United States to Mexico in 2016, not long after the death of close friend that catalyzed the project.

The poems in *Exile Home* start with a powerful poem about Statman’s father (who died in 2018) (“Green Side Up”) that “frames” the book. The poems are arranged in sections more or less corresponding to the place referenced in or implied by the poem, “El adiós de siempre” (Brooklyn, United States), “The middle of a different story” (Oaxaca, Mexico), “Casita Cannonball” (San Pedro Ixtlahuaca, Mexico), “Mi México” (Mexico), and “Once upon a time” (Mexico), reflecting

the speaker's life before, during, and after his big move.

It makes sense that Statman decided to change his residence from Brooklyn to Oaxaca, a city in South Mexico that's a major Mexican cultural center. He had visited this part of Mexico a number of times since 1986 and always found it attractive. He explains:

the Mexican sky is so
 beautiful clear and blue
 the mountain morning chill
 will warm soon into day
 that sun you have
 to see it brilliant
 in the sky....

("wear and tear")

Statman is acclaimed for his English translations of several important books of poetry by Spanish-speaking poets. He's most renowned for *Poet in New York*, his translation of poems by the great Federico García Lorca (with Pablo Medina). His most recent translation is *Never Made in America: Selected Poems from Martín Barea Mattos*, an inventive collection by a prominent contemporary Uruguayan poet. Moreover, in the last ten years or so, Statman has quietly become one of the top "go-to" experts on Latin American verse.

Exile Home is Mark Statman's fifth book-length poetry collection. The poems in *Exile Home* focus on thoughts that occur to the speaker as they fly through his consciousness in the form of memories, dreams, observations, and experiences. Without becoming Confessional, the resulting poems have a spontaneous, "moment-to-moment" vibe.

Dressed in an attractive tropical-themed cover created by Statman's wife, painter/writer Katherine Koch (daughter of poet Kenneth Koch), *Exile Home* features an unconventional style. The collection consists of 138 pages of poems that are run together, ignoring the convention of printing only one poem to a page. And the poems have practically no punctuation or capital letters, in the style of William Carlos Williams, e.e. cummings, Ezra Pound, Robert Creeley, and quite a few other poets. The speaker often uses sentence fragments, and many of the poems' lines feature radical enjambments, not to mention a generous sprinkling of Spanish words. The arrangement of the text in *Exile Home* complements the poems' in-the-moment, stream-of-consciousness style. As a result, although composed of short poems with short lines, the book has the almost-hypnotic effect of one big, sprawling poem—reminding me of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Ginsberg's *Howl*.

Many of Statman's poems have spiritual and philosophical themes or nuances. As *Exile Home* unfolds, the reader gradually becomes familiar with the speaker as a man who is a deep thinker and "old soul," someone who sees our world with childlike wonder. The speaker describes the results of the move:

...roots
 we've held up
 in the air
 put down
 in the earth

breathe a little
the silence of
the days still in
the days

(“words in order to live”)

The speaker likes his new home in Mexico right away, but towards the end of *Exile Home*, he seems to actually fall in love with it. This happens after Statman and his wife establish a second home, *una casita* (literally, a little house) in San Pedro Ixtlahuaca, a rural farm area. The speaker thinks:

the deep red
into crimson
of the neighbor’s bougainvillea tree
their goats never stop
with the bah bah bah
I imagine the life of the shepherd
noisy but maybe not
when herds go down
as if in prayer
to eat

(“breeze and trust”)

The speaker eventually realizes that Mexico is his “happy place,” *the* magical place where he’s always longed to live. The speaker asks rhetorically:

how not [to be happy here]
in the long unfolding suddenness
of where you ought to be

(“los cambios”)

The book’s last section is called “once upon a time,” implying that the speaker’s new digs are located in a land out of a fairy tale, and that he and his family will live there happily ever after in “the golden haze / partly insect, partly sun” (“there is no”). The speaker tells us,

...here I am
I think for
the rest of my
life

(“this is not us”)

Mark Statman’s “takeaway” in this book—his gift to his readers—is, above all, the gift of himself, a man comfortable in his own skin as we share his seemingly unedited perceptions and thoughts.

Stream-of-consciousness as a literary style is like the “no-makeup look”—they both give an impression of immediacy and spontaneity that’s hard to pull off without careful editing. But

Statman nails it. As a result, this book is an intensely enjoyable reading experience that gently coaxes the reader into tasting stream-of-consciousness poetry at its best. You need not be a person who normally seeks out experimental poetry in order to understand, enjoy, and be inspired by *Exile Home*.

Probably, everyone has a “once upon a time” place waiting for them. I suggest that you seek your own “happy place” –your own *casita*— your own home sweet home. Be sure to wear your ruby slippers and keep a copy of *Exile Home* by Mark Statman handy for encouragement. And when you find your true home—let the fiesta begin!

Further information:



Exile Home is available at [Lavender Ink](#)

[Small Press Distributor \(SPD\)](#) (which is how most bookstores would get it, and people can also buy individual copies) or order through your local indie bookseller.

[Mark Statman's website.](#)

Eileen Murphy's review of Mark Statman's previous book of translations on [Rain Taxi](#).

This entry was posted on Wednesday, July 1st, 2020 at 6:27 pm and is filed under [Poetry](#)
You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can skip to the

end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.