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LOUIE CREW



IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING

My heavy Oxbridge accent
 —linch your molars and route
 the sounds through the wisdom teeth—
 gave away my mood.

At 29, I left Britain for the US, in 1966,
 to teach at a sleepy Southern university
 famous for its football team
 more than for its scholarship.

Just before the end of my first class,
 as I wrote the assignment on the board,
 I switched to a heavy Suthun dialect:
 "If y'all have any questions,
 you can meet me in my office
 any morning between 9 and 11."

I turned round. No one smiled.
They glared, as if I had mocked them.

Again at the board, I wrote:
"Which dialect is mine by birthright?
Raise your hands if British ____ (pause)
or if Southern ____."

Everyone mistook me for an alien.

We talked long after the bell. One student said,
"But Mr. Crew, I thought that nobody
who could talk that purty, that convincingly
would ever admit to bein from heah!"

Alabama became a state in 1819,
43 years after the 13 colonies declared
independence from Britain.

To prepare for their first papers,
my students telephoned dozens of stores
to ask for routine information,
first in British, then a few days later, in Suthun.

They found that the speech of the colonizer
uniformly privileged persons
189 years after colonialism
had allegedly left America.

(. . .)