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College Writing and Research 05

7 December 2010

“Exile” by Alicia Suskin Ostriker

As Alicia Ostriker wrote the free verse poem “Exile,” the world around her was in a vile state (Ostriker, see appendix). In the span of three months in the 1970s, the Vietnam War was just beginning to intensify, there was a recent bombing of Cambodia, and four students were shot and killed at Kent State University by National Guardsmen. During the same time period, Ostriker was awaiting the birth of her son. Throughout the poem, Ostriker uses imagery, symbolism, and rhyming to describe the havoc of the world in which she was currently living and her personal thoughts and fears of bringing her son into it.

The first couple of stanzas of “Exile” give the reader a vision of how Ostriker interprets the tragedy in the lives lost in the world. In these stanzas, she uses imagery to paint a picture of the grievous events that recently occurred. Lines one and two, “The downward turning touch/ the cry of time”, allow the reader to realize how soon life can end. When one thinks of time, he/she initially visualizes a clock, maybe hanging on a wall or perhaps on the front screen of a cellphone. However, I believe Ostriker wanted the reader to not only visualize a clock, but to hear the minute and hour hand on the clock, ticking as if a time bomb. She wanted the reader to grasp the fact that our lives are like a ticking time bomb. Occasionally time “cries out” earlier

than anticipated or wanted, just like the lives of the innocent students, soldiers, and citizens of Cambodia.

The final lines in the first stanza are more of Ostriker's descriptions of the recent disasters. "Fire falling without sound/ plunge my hand in the wound" (3-4). Line three represents the bombing of Cambodia. Like a movie being played in slow-motion in her mind, Ostriker imagines watching the bomb exploding in the distance of Cambodia, fire rupturing without sound and destroying all life. The next line is Ostriker's wishing she could simply reach out her hand and cease the hurting and help save the wounded. Something I noticed about the first stanza was Ostriker's use of slant rhyming to relay to the reader the pain of the injured. By rhyming the words "sound" and "wound", Ostriker tries to emphasize the pain being expressed verbally when hurt.

The second stanza is a continuation of Ostriker's descriptions, with a greater accentuation of her frustration at not knowing how to make the pain go away. The fifth line, "Children marching and dying", either illustrates the innocent students at Kent State University who were wrongfully shot and killed by people expected to protect or the soldiers in Vietnam, marching to the command of their officers and abruptly falling to the ground after being pierced by a bullet. The next few lines are Ostriker's annoyance with herself. "All that I do is a crime/ because I do not reach/ their mouths silently crying" (6-8). She feels that by sitting back and doing nothing but watching the world grieve, she is partaking in a crime just as serious as the crimes recently committed.

In the first two stanzas, once again, I noticed Ostriker's use of end rhyming to attain the readers' attention and to stress her personal beliefs. By rhyming the word "crime" in the first stanza with the word "time" in the second, Ostriker highlights an important aspect about life. Sometimes, it feels like time is a crime in that we can easily be robbed of our time here on earth. Perhaps, like the students at Kent State, the soldiers overseas, and the citizens of Cambodia, our time ceases before we envisioned. In the second stanza, I believe Ostriker decided to rhyme the words "dying" and "crying" to express the emotional distress of death. Death of a loved one can bring about an abundance of tears, especially if it's unexpected.

The third stanza in this poem is a dramatic change of Ostriker's personal emotion. Instead of the somber and reflective tone of the first couple of stanzas, Ostriker writes about the joy and peacefulness of having a child, particularly her newborn boy. The ninth line, "my boychild reaches with his mouth", is a graphic of the maternal bond between mother and child through breast-feeding. The concluding lines in the third stanza are a continuation of Ostriker's description of the emotional and physical bond she has instantly developed with her son. In those lines, she writes about the feelings of warmth and closeness she experiences whenever she comes into contact with her son. "It is easy, being a mother/ his skin is tender and soft/ kisses stitch us together" (10-12). For a little while, it seems Ostriker forgets about the calamities outside her window and focuses on the miracle in front of her and being the best mother she can be to him.

Once again, Ostriker decides to alter the tone of the poem in the fourth stanza to a more earnest tone. Throughout the stanza, she expresses her fears of the future with her son

and starts to wonder, "What if?" The thirteenth line, "We love as long as we may", is Ostriker's attempt at explaining her beliefs of raising a child. As a parent, one should provide his or her children with unconditional love. The parents must support, nourish, and protect their children for as long as they are able to. In the remaining lines of the fourth stanza, "Then come years without kisses/ when he will turn away/ not to waste breath" (14-16), Ostriker reveals to the reader her biggest fear. She fears the day her son will leave her, whether that be because of an untimely death or because of him growing up and no longer relying on her. To Ostriker, the possibility of her son dying before envisioned or him growing up and forgetting about the intimate bond they shared when he was young are of equal heartache.

In the first couple of lines of the fifth and final stanza, Ostriker produces an imaginary situation of her son leaving her and declares her resulting feelings. In line seventeen, "When I too will fall", Ostriker reveals to the reader her reaction at the possibility of her son potentially leaving her. Whenever someone is physically hurt, the initial bodily response is to fall to the ground. However, sometimes being emotionally distressed can cause the same physical reaction. Ostriker, immensely upset by the idea of her son no longer around, will fall as if a part of her has been severely injured. By using the word "too", Ostriker is grouping herself, not only with the fallen soldiers of the Vietnam War, civilians of Cambodia, and students of Kent State who all physically fell, but also with their families. At this point in time, she begins to empathize with the families who must be experiencing great grief and troubles with trying to come to terms with the situation.

In the eighteenth line, “Embracing a pillow at night”, Ostriker predicts her attempts at dealing with the possibility of losing her son. She understands the night is the most difficult time when trying to move on from a recent tragedy. It is the time when no more activities can distract you from your sorrow. All you’re left with is your bed, your pillow, and your memories and worrying thoughts. With a pillow, Ostriker is trying to find a physical object that can replace the void she would feel. “Touching the stone of exile” (19) is Ostriker’s first reference to the title of her poem. To be in exile is to be away from one’s home. There are many possible definitions of home; however, when Ostriker speaks of home, she is referencing the well-known saying, “Home is where the heart is.” From the day her son was born, Ostriker gave her heart to him, loving him indefinitely. The day he either no longer relies on her or unexpectedly dies (Ostriker’s greatest fears) is when her heart no longer resides in its home. Her heart is in exile; and, evident by the final line of the poem, “reaching my hand to death” (20), a part of her has died.

I believe that “Exile” is a poem that Ostriker wrote to release her personal thoughts and fears of bringing her son into a battered world. Her purpose wasn’t to make us think what she thought and fear what she feared. Instead, we should use this poem as an example of what not to do. Life is too short to sweat the small things. We should cease the “What if?” disease and start living in the now. By worrying about the future and situations beyond our control, we miss the joys, miracles, and sometimes heartaches that make up life.

Works Cited

Ostriker, Suskin Alicia. "Exile." Poets.org. 2009. Web. 9 Nov. 2010.

Appendix

Exile

- 1 The cry of time
- 2 Fire falling without sound
- 3 Plunge my hand in the wound

- 4 Children marching and dying
- 5 All that I do is a crime
- 6 Because I do not reach
- 7 Their mouths silently crying

- 8 My boychild reaches with his mouth
- 9 It is easy, being a mother
- 10 His skin is tender and soft
- 11 Kisses stitch us together

- 12 We love as long as we may
- 13 Then come years without kisses
- 14 When he will turn away
- 15 Not to waste breath

- 16 When I too will fall
- 17 Embracing a pillow at night
- 18 Touching the stone of exile
- 19 Reaching my hand to death