

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Joseph V. Milford
Exile Poem I

THEMISTOCLES

Exiled from Athens in league with the Persians
Yet on a coin a patera with a slain bull at his feet
Did he die from drinking the blood of the bull
After being worshipped as a god by the Magnesians?

SOLON

Self-exiled archon, after writing the Athenian
Constitution, he left for a decade so it would stand
And watched from afar as his countrymen
Took the law and perverted it in their own hands.

OVID

Augustus Caesar called the carmens corrupt
Paraclausithyron, troubadour, poet wanton
Dead one decade from Rome, on his monument
It is written: "Here I lie, who played with tender loves,
Naso the poet, killed by my own talent.
O passerby, if you've ever been in love, let it not be too much for you
to say: May the bones of Naso lie gently."

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Exile Poem II

LEON TROTSKY

Narodnik, pro-proletariat, Siberia-bound
Escaped, naming yourself "Pero" — Russian
For feather — a human pen of the people
Secret police circle as bombers hover
Your literature was cut-throat and would
Cut you — bloody Sundays — and you became
A tyrant — your troika was not holy
Not even a real trinity — you spat on Mercader's
Ice axe as your lifeblood sped you
To your Glasnost with godspeed.

MAYAKOVSKY

Your poems confiscated in prison and thus
You were essentially imprisoned for life.
Futurist lover, revolutionary seducer, how
Could you have shot yourself, your last words
Haunt my heart as the smoke rises from the barrel:
"The love boat has crashed against the daily routine.
You and I, we are quits, and there is no point in listing
Mutual pains, sorrows, and hurts."

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DOSTOEVSKY

Alcoholic father murdered drowned by his own slaves
In vodka—your mother taken by a different consumption
And you, fierce wolf, yet epileptic, seizures of words
Plagued you for life—underground man, czar of my frozen
Heartland, languishing in the katorga prison camp.
Gambling and drinking what life was left
And your soul sustained by broken fingers, broken
Pencils of them. On your tombstone, John 12:24,
And I, Smerdyakov, salute you:
“I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to
the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed.
But if it dies, it produces many seeds”

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Exile Poem III

KING WESSANTHARA

The white elephant saunters past the open mouth
Of the empty cave with its stalactites and stalagmites
Antipodal and pulsing in microcosm, the meditative
Chasm and the mineral-rich water dripping
From the stone ceilings the juxtaposition of sacrifice
And heaven forming world inter-mingled with sweat
On the shoulders of the incarnation who moments ago
For a life of seeking gave over his children to a poor Brahmin.

BA DA SHAN REN

Oath of silence at age 19, head shaved, monk by 23
Paintings more tears than ink, in them, the Four Noble Ones:
The plum blossom, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo—
Summer, spring, autumn, winter—in brushstroke and poem
Caught—your emperor committed suicide, wife and son dead.
Your early oaths of silence developing your slantways style
Holding the bamboo brush with its badger hair and melding
The ancient art with calligraphy—you spoke there on canvas,
With ideogram—landscape, bird, flower, beast, and fish
Becoming your washed language—morphing the morphemes into poems.

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MADAME DE STAEL

Fainting with the heaving bosom of the female Rousseau
Where over-sentimentality leads to revolutionary thought
What other result than exile? Fleeing from Robespierre into a duel
With Napoleon—simply desiring, all along, a salon to bask in.
Strange that one who embodied all of the spirit of France
was not allowed within forty leagues of Paris—her visitors
in exile punished for her chateau—dangerous time for men
with duels and espionage, dangerous time for women with the pen.