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Refugees and Runes of War

Echoes of Tattered Tongues: Memory Unfolded by John Z. Guzlowski. (Los Angeles: Aquila Polonica, 2016). ISBN: 978-1-60772-021-8. Hardcover \$21.95. 176 pages. Illustrated.

The Eyes of Keyholes by Milorad Pejić. Translated by Omer Hadžiselimović. (Sommerville, MA: Červaná Barva Press, 2015). ISBN: 978-09966894-1-0. Chapbook \$7.00. 48 pages.

D.P.—a displaced person. A person of no place? No. A person whose place has been taken or destroyed. A person who is forced to find a new place or die. A person. Not John Z. Guzlowski or Milord Pejić. Not a person without a name. Not a displaced non-entity to be moved at whim by more powerful human forces with more might behind them. We have in these two books **commanding poetic statements about war in terms of the involuntary displacement of human life.** Both poets rightly assert a moral responsibility to dedicate their poetic gifts to memorializing the trials and tribulations inflicted on the bodies and minds of unwilling bystanders of war.

John Guzlowski's *Echoes of Tattered Tongues* tells the story of war from the perspective of his parents Tekla and Jan who were forced into a labor camp. The story is filtered but unvarnished through articulate poetry. I say filtered because a large part of the book deals with the displaced person's lack of voice, or more precisely, how the displaced person as victim of war is not given voice. John Guzlowski, then, speaks for the innocent and unwitting participants of war—what happens to people on the ground. Not the soldiers. Not the battlefield. He communicates for the working people whose lives were ruined by killings, rape, and starvation. As his father so bleakly told him, “suffering is the sauce / we reserve for men and women” (“What My Father Knows about Killing”).

John Guzlowski's book will teach those who don't know about the horrors of war and especially those who deny that any such horrors occurred. I like how the book breaks chronology. The poet spends time early on in book I dealing with the effects of the war so as to build up to the war in book III. So as grim as books I and II are, the sharpest blows come in book III, epitomized in some heart-wrenching images, such as the death of a newborn (“A Life Story”).

To be displaced is as much figurative as literal. No one from this book could ever escape the ravages of being physically, mentally, and emotionally displaced from health. Unbearable memories can inflict as much harm as a bullet. Guzłowski's parents lived long lives and so carried the burdens of war like the guilt of the survivor, feelings of helplessness, and nightmares. They were fated to relive traumatic situations that, to most people, are only depicted in films (and mostly forgotten). I read Guzłowski's book cover-to-cover in three sittings. I was shocked. I was angry. I was upset. And I am no stranger to John Guzłowski's work, having read, for instance, *Lightning and Ashes*. In fact, I've met John and know the look in his eyes, his movements, his gestures, his voice. All of those personal intonations, in part derived from his parents, are in the poems.

These are poems whose images and metaphors have undergone the finest grinding, becoming crystal lenses to magnify the inner and outer lives of his parents. The clear poetic/narrative voice is remarkably strong yet elegant—this is not a random collection but the story of a family across generations dealing with the consequences of world war. A reader does not come away from this book necessarily feeling good; but the reader feels the lifeblood of real people (not soldiers or politicians) who endured and survived.

Much of the book deals with language and identity, what it means to be Polish, how one, even later as an adult, can be alienated or displaced by language (“Two Worlds of Language”). On the one hand, there are the Poles from the old country before, during, and after the war. On the other hand there are the Poles like Guzłowski and his sister Danusha who at some point as teens living in America of the 1950s did not want a Polish identity. But then the adult Guzłowski started writing about his parents' war ordeals, their lives as displaced persons in America, and being Polish was at the center of that story.

God also figures in this book, obliquely. The title of one poem says it well: “There Were No Miracles.” What is the good of prayer to a god one cannot imagine, a god who equals sorrow (“At the End: My Mother”), a god who only cares to accumulate piles of lives and deaths? In the war of concentration and slave camps, there is no god. There is an opaque, indifferent, almost evil god. Before the war there was god who cared (“My Father before the War”), but thereafter there is a nebulous god. Food also figures in this book—mothers, children, and nourishment. If you are a slave worker, you don't eat. If you are a displaced person in an American city after the war who does not speak English, good luck at finding work to feed your family. God and food. One for the soul, the other for the body. Beets and bread. One the work of the earth, the other the work of human labor. The book tests readers to be angry at god and (in)humanity. As in the poem “What the War Taught Her,” it's all about survival, not theological abstractions. In the work camp, god will not pull up the beet; god will not put bread in your hand. Guzłowski's mother was so tough she'd endure any pain to survive (“My Mother's Optimism”). Deathly cold also figures prominently in the book, conspicuously in the great multi-section impressionistic poem “The Third Winter of War: Buchenwald.”

Only the elements of life poke through here, not luxuries, “thin cradles / of bones” (“Pigeons”). There is the beauty of life, as in “A Garden in the Desert.” In America the refugees could at times smile. They could try to forget. They could take the kids apple picking. But the dominant verb in book II (Refugees) is work. All must work always to survive. Not the slave labor at the camp but the grind for a paycheck, the finding of work to help the kids grow and fit in (“Fussy Eaters”). Language is a barrier. One prospective employer would not hire Jan Guzowski because he had lost an eye and had a bad scar, and the man did not want to look at him. Toy blocks are burned for heat (“All the Clichés about Poverty are True”) and strangers bring clothing and food (“Friends in America: A Sonnet about Charity”).

We have through Guzowski’s persona a refugee child trying to make sense of the world with parents trying to make sense of their lives after the war’s work camp. There are, unfortunately, stories of brutality in America—American’s against Americans (“Friends in America: Murdertown”). In “Friends in America: Polack Joe’s Story,” we see how war damaged one man who further damages his son. War is a long, thin needle piercing generations. Within Guzowski’s story of his parent there are other, interpolated stories. For instance, in “Danusha,” the poet asks his older sister to forgive him for not acknowledging how the mom hurt her.

Echoes of Tattered Tongues is a life’s work asking us to bear witness to lives crushed under the stones of war. Like Thomas Gray many years ago reflecting on the lives of simple country people often forgotten, Guzowski’s book is a magnificent elegy to civilian lives lost or shattered in war and thereafter. Guzowski has successfully undertaken a monumental, moral obligation in his call to write about his parents’ misery during and subsequent to the war.

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Likewise, Milorad Pejić writes of what it means to be a displaced person—from the war in Bosnia during the 1990s. While there is a storyline to Milorad Pejić’s book, the writing is profoundly metaphorical; and while I certainly do not mean this is a negative way, elliptical. The reader is asked to mull over subtle images from nature and ordinary life and to, at times, read back to appreciate the impact of the rich figurative language. In other words, the images here are condensed through a lens that is often less brutally stark. We interpret the horrible effects of war indirectly, but the effects are there nonetheless. Whereas Guzowski’s book is like a graphic movie, Pejić’s book is like a small box of art photographs. Each book is thoroughly satisfying, but in a different way. I found that the two styles on the same broad subject complement each other. As with Guzowski, in Pejić we have a war refugee, an exile from his own country of Bosnia, a displaced person. But this subject is presented differently artistically.

Pejić’s short book is divided into six sections as follows: The Old Country; A Ship in a Bottle; The New Country; Four Lives; The Promised Land; The Eyes of Darkness. I found this arrangement conducive to the organization and chronology of the storyline. A dominant motif of the book deals with seeing—not just observation but perception. Here’s what war can do to one’s vision of life: “From that place, through my wounds / like through the eyelets of the truck tarp

during the ride, / from the darkness I look” (“Kalemegdan I”). In the second part of this poem the reader comes to understand that the poet’s life over the course of war and exile is etched “in the depths of things...” And that would be the purpose of Pejić’s poetry, to plumb the psychic images of war and record them for others as much as for himself. Outside the field of conflict, every object, even those in another country, reek of war.

In the second section the poet escapes from his homeland in 1992 (at the beginning of the war) to reach Boden in the north of Sweden (“The Trip”). Here are some of the more subtle images in terms of war conflict: “the weight of a dandelion in minefields, / a child’s piggy bank on the stairs...” Or this: “Thickly planted grave markers in potato patches.” As in Guzłowski’s book, life is suddenly unraveled. How does one wind up again all the loose strands? Some are murdered; those who survive have to imagine “all phones suddenly / turned deaf or train schedules [...] haywire.” In 1993 the poet goes to Kiruna, one of the uppermost parts of Sweden. People don’t quite grasp his predicament. He arrives and is greeted with hospitality, but “How else would I explain / that where I come from I did not live in poverty / but that something else [...] brings me to you” (“The House of H. Lundbohm”). The speaker in “A Letter” has some shame and fatigue in his lonely wandering, private conflicts that reflect the battles of war. The poet addresses his father and fears how the vast distance over time will blur the images in his memory so that all will become “overexposed film.” His poetry therefore becomes an invincible effort to memorialize thoughts and images that should not be taken away (“Father”).

In section three, The New Country, the poet finds isolation (“A Visit”), alone in a pine forest in a cabin, “solitary as / a lone tooth.” This complex image connotes ill health, old age, death, and fossilization, the metaphorical fate assigned to the exile. Here, time is measured by the decaying layers of leaves as ground cover and not by calendars. With so much time, memories harden. The speaker is reluctant when his visitor calls him back home to “rebuilt cities”—but no; he’d rather stay near the fairy-tale area of Brodslöjan Falls. In his exile, the poet finds himself literally and figuratively “at the end of the world” (“Kebnekaise”) when he climbs mountains with the photographer Pär Domeij “where the river begins as melting snow” (“The Kaitum”). Yet when you climb your back is “smoking on the sun lit slope.” That’s a study in contrasts that mimics the essence of Pejić’s literary enterprise. There’s a difference between light and dark, sight and insight, front and back: the poems look to the obscure corners of the psyche for deeper understanding. Visual and intellectual disparities are apropos to the poet’s inverted life.

Once asked to define poetry, Charles Bernstein looked at his watch and simply said, “Timing.” We see something of this idea, too, in Pejić when he says “Everything else, as in poetry, is a question / of time” (“Kebnekaise”). As recently as the Middle Ages there were no clocks, and people lived by light and dark according to the seasons. The poet grapples with finding a place in time now. Before the war we assume he had a place. But now all physical and natural effort is a strain. So in “Salmon” the poet speaks of the memory of home in nature like a directional compass. One cannot but poignantly think of the displaced poet, for in spite of a power plant on the river the salmon keep coming, “striking / the concrete and assailing the unknown.”

Section four departs from the poet himself and presents portraits of four other people, some known and some not. These are eponymous poems. There is the loss of creation with artist Ismet Mujezinović when the “purest ideals” sank in destruction. There is the poet Branko Miljković who died young, a suicide with dark irony for this collection: “a man is killed by / his own weight.” The speaker admits he comprehends such a decision in the face of utter silence. There is the art collector Ante Topić Mimara who, after his death (in 1987), “Order had been upset and dusts mixed up”—an indictment more about stuff and things rather than people. Pejić does not mention, but assumes we know, that some of the vast art collected by Mimara might have been taken illegally during World War II. What belongs to whom—which country? The world becomes a jigsaw puzzle with people, populations, and objects shifting across borders that themselves change from time to time. In “Ubian Brez,” there is sensitivity to residence without a home: “when you are dust in one place, / you are dust everywhere.”

In section five the poet equates his roaming with the Swedish adventurer Georg Forselles, for he has arrived in Sweden “seeking refuge” (“The Count of Alaska”). In other words, the exiled poet hopes to find solace in Sweden left by others, “not a / single reason for leaving could I find in your life story”—in sharp distinction to the dilemma thrust upon him. In terms of one who leaves a beautiful, peaceful country in search of gold in Alaska, “Unpredictable / are the ways.” In comparison is the one who is displaced because of war, “Incomparable are the sufferings.” What if any is the promise any land makes to its people? It’s in “the back alleys, where the soul of the city abides” (“Stockholm”). Nevertheless, there is bitterness in “Sant Ericsson” where paradise is private property, not to be shared. The reality of loneliness of an exile is “a bird belonging to no one in the besieged day” (“Summer of 1993”).

In his final section, Pejić gives the sense that far off from the homeland one travels in darkness where “ill-timed death is lurking” (“The Ride”). This point about physical and metaphysical distance is most striking in “Apollo 17,” where the poet watches men on the moon and sees mirrored in them how far away from mother earth he is. While the book seems to end on a hopeful note with the poems “Interpreter” and “Typesetter,” those who have the allegorical vision to see in the darkness, look forward, and offer signposts to others, this is not so. The interpreter speaks “without touching” and the typesetter works in the dark. In this way, Milorad Pejić offers a philosophical and personal testimonial about life after dystopia.

— Gregory F. Tague, Ph.D., Editor: *Battle Runes: Writings on War and Common Boundary: Stories of Immigration.*