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Tongues, Tables, and Ears
A Conversation with John Guzlowski

Prologue

Two bones in the oral cavity, the mandible and hyoid, anchor the root of the human tongue. After birth, an infant's tongue curls around a nipple and suckles nutrients into its body. After death, the tongue stiffens, then swells, then rots away. In between, the tongue translates the human experience and articulates existence. But where is language rooted? What bones anchor stories?

The human ear can be broken down into three sections: outer, middle, and inner. A sound wave enters the external acoustic meatus, drums on the tympanic membrane, which triggers a set of articulations that result in the oval window converting the sound wave into a small-amplitude, high-force vibration. The vibration then flows through the snail-shaped labyrinth of the cochlea and rides the vestibulocochlear nerve to the brain, and registers as sound. But somewhere along the way, the sound diverts to a place uncharted by science, beyond reason, to a place where we don't often want to go for fear of what we might find there, pulsing, very much alive, very much terrifying.

To listen is to witness. In Echoes of Tattered Tongues*, Guzlowski tells the story of a son who yearns to understand his parents, and—like the rest of us—fails. But his failure isn't vain failure; it is everything. He listened to some of the darkest things imaginable, to things a son should never have to hear—especially from the lips of his mother.* Echoes of Tattered Tongues *is not pitch black, devoid of hope or optimism, for hope and optimism are present, just not in the way one might expect or want them to be.*

If honesty has a color, then Guzlowski writes in it. His poems are physical representations of memory—a bulwark of sorts—that exist as protection against the constructed cadence of time and the betrayal of flesh. What did Malchus hear right after Simon Peter hacked off his ear?

The title of your poetry collection, *Echoes of Tattered Tongues: Memory Unfolded*, suggests a physical quality to memory. The phrase "tattered tongues" appears in the poem "Refugees"—originally titled "DPs" [Displaced Persons] in Language of Mules. How did the title choose you and how, if at all, is it emblematic of the entire collection?

I think you're right. The title is emblematic of the entire collection. In fact, I think it's emblematic of my never-ending project to give voice to the experiences of my parents and other victims of the Nazis.

As you note, the title comes from a couple lines from "Refugees": "[We] came with our tongues / in tatters, our teeth in our pockets." For me those two lines convey a lot of what I feel about my parents and how their experiences affected them and affected their ability to speak about their experiences.

Both my parents came to America with their "tongues/in tatters." From the time I was a child, my father spoke to me about what happened to him and my mother, and when he did this he often couldn't stop himself from weeping. He would talk and cry, talk and cry. As you can imagine, it was hard to listen to him. My mother couldn't stand to be with him when he started talking about what he and she had seen in the war. She would beg him to stop, and if he wouldn't, she would leave the room. Over the years, he grew silent, absent. He would leave for work early, and when he came home from work, he would spend his time in the basement working or fixing things.

My mother was just the opposite of my father. For most of her life after the war, she would not talk about what happened. If I asked her a question about anything that happened in the war, she would wave me away. If I persisted, she'd say one thing only: "If they give you bread, you eat it. If they beat you, you run away." She hid her experiences, and she hid her grief. Sometimes, she would get letters from

her sister who had also survived the war but had returned to Poland. My mother would never read these letters with us in the room. She would hide herself in a bedroom to read the letters and to weep. She couldn't show her grief or her love or her joy or her pain.

For a long time, I shared that silence. I didn't want to speak about the things my father had told me about what my parents experienced. They seemed damaged and hobbled by what had happened, and I didn't want to be like that. I wanted to be an American boy, the kind you saw smiling on TV shows like *My Three Sons* or *Make Room for Daddy*.

I think this was pretty common among the people I grew up around.

My parents, my sister, and I settled in Chicago in the Humboldt Park area, an area with lots of other Poles and DPs, refugees, survivors, and immigrants, but we almost never talked about the war. I grew up among children who were born in refugee camps, whose parents were marked in profound ways by the war, but we never talked about this. I went to a school where half the children were refugees, but none of the teachers ever addressed this.

And it was worse in the larger world around us.

That world didn't see us as survivors or refugees, Displaced Persons, or Poles or Polish Americans. I never heard those words. What I did hear in the streets and in the schools and in the stores was that we were Polacks, dirty or dumb Polacks. We were the people who nobody wanted to rent a room to or hire or help. We were the "wretched refuse" of somebody else's shore, dumped on the shore of Lake Michigan, and most people we came across in America wished we'd go back to where we came from. And that we'd take the rest of the Polacks with us.

And then all this changed for me. I think I realized at some point, when I was away from my parents and their whole survivor and immigrant experience, that I needed to hear their voices again, needed to hear their "tattered" tongues. And that's when I started writing about them.

That writing brought their voices back to me.

You open *Echoes of Tattered Tongues* with words from your mother, Tekla: "When the war started, we didn't know what war meant." To me, she is the dominating voice of the entire collection. Why did you choose to open the collection with her voice?

I think she is the dominating voice in the book, just as she was the dominating voice in my family. My mother was the decision maker in the family. She controlled

the narrative of our family. She decided that we would come to America after the war, and she did all the necessary preparation, a preparation that took 6 years, and she decided where we would settle once we got here and how we would live.

My dad, in a lot of ways, was a broken man. He used to say that there was only work or death. He was an alcoholic too for much of his adult life. The war was always with him.

In terms of the book itself, I think my mom's voice is so powerful in part because she builds on my father's stories.

I heard my parents' stories over a lifetime. The first stories I heard were my dad's because my mom wouldn't talk about the war. It was only after he died in 1997 that she realized, I think, that she had an obligation to tell what happened to her and her family and to complete the stories my dad first told me.

Another thing that makes her dominate the story of their lives is that she felt the psychological and emotional damage more. My father was aware of this and told me that I should always forgive my mother because what she experienced was worse than anything that happened to him. He would not tell me what that was, but he would always say this. When I was a kid listening to his stories, this didn't make sense to me. He would tell me of what he suffered and what he saw, castrations and mutilations, men freezing to death by the dozens while German guards stood around joking, women having their breasts cut off with bayonets; and I couldn't understand how my mother's experience could be worse. It was only years later when my mom started telling me her stories that I understood.

And I think also that after my father's death, I realized the importance of what my dad had told me and the importance of what my mom had to tell me, and that's when I started asking her more and more to talk about the past, the Germans, what happened in the camps and after the war.

Sharing stories is one of the most intimate and essential things humans do. Yet because it is so commonplace, we don't typically stop to wonder at what a marvel the act of storytelling is. Fire is almost always present when stories are being told, whether it is a campfire, the kitchen, or the fire behind technology. Stories are how we connect to others and any story worth telling usually opens up more questions than it answers. I'm interested in the question of what one does "after the war." Such a phrase suggests that a war ends, but your poems suggest otherwise. What does war mean to you?

War is a terrible thing. I think that's one of the things I've learned from my parents and from writing about their lives.

In "Landscape with Dead Horses" I talk about the way the war began:

War comes down like a hammer, heavy and hard
flattening the earth and killing the soft things:
horses and children, flowers and hope, love
and the smell of the farmers' earth, the coolness
of the creek, the look of trees as they unfurl
their leaves in late March and early April.

This is war for me. This is the way I see war. There's nothing pretty about war, nothing heroic, nothing epic or Homeric. 50 million civilians died in World War II. And you can bet that not one of those deaths was peaceful, not one was a death you would want to wish on your mother or your father or your children.

And what I hate to admit about war—but I have to—is that sometimes war is necessary.

I'm glad that the US went to war against Hitler and dragged him and his soldiers and followers down and tried to bury every single one of them in an unmarked and unmourned grave.

War, as I see it, was terrible and it was necessary, but the thing I can't ever forget is that the Germans who fought for Hitler also thought the war was necessary and justified.

That's one of the problems with war.

What brings us together finally—brings together those who don't want war and those who want war—is that we all end up scratching our heads and grieving over the chaos and the loss.

But isn't it the attempt to order and make sense of the chaos and the loss—to create art—that defines the human experience? And further, what burden or responsibility does the storyteller—or artist—carry when attempting to convey the lived experience of others, especially the lived experience of family members?

I'm not sure what defines the human experience, but I'm pretty certain that making art, making sense of the chaos and loss, isn't part of it. Writers and artists have been trying to make sense of the chaos of war forever. You see it in the Bible,

Homer, The Bhagavad Gita, Gilgamesh, the Norse mythology, the Quran. I've read the great English poets of WWI over and over, read Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, and Siegfried Sassoon, over and over and every time I think, "These writers captured war, made it real, bled to tell us what they saw, so why are we still fighting, still making war." Art can't stop war, making sense of war can't stop war. Nothing can stop war.

The greatest responsibility of the storyteller? I think my greatest responsibility is to be true to the lived experiences of my parents.

This is not easy. I spent a lifetime teaching creative writing to students, trying to teach them how to be true to their own experiences and the experiences of the people they loved.

My parents saw and experienced things that were as terrible as anything you or I can imagine. My father saw men die singly and in large numbers. He had seen his friends hanged, shot, castrated, beaten to death with clubs, and left to stand in the snow till they fell to their knees and died. On the day the Germans came to her town, my mother saw her neighbors killed and the women in her own family raped and killed, her infant niece kicked to death. Later in the slave labor camps, my mother resorted to claiming she had typhus or VD just so the guards wouldn't rape her again.

My parents had seen something, and that something would never let them loose. It would hurt them and kick them and bleed them every day of their lives. When my dad was 77 years old and dying of liver cancer in a hospice in Sun City, Arizona, he was sure that the nurses who came to bring him comfort were Nazi guards who simply wanted to take him to the ovens. He fought so hard to get out of the bed that they had to tie him down finally. When my mother was in her 80s, she wanted to make sure that I wouldn't forget to tell her story and the stories of all the women and men who were in the camps.

I'm a tourist in their lives. I poke here and there, looking around for some souvenir, a poem. The truth of their lives in all of its misery and suffering is something I'll never know. No poem I ever wrote can tell what my parents' experiences were like.

As my mother used to say to me, "You weren't there."

But still I feel a need to write these poems, and people tell me they need to hear them. And my mother recognized this. Even though she knew that there were things that I wouldn't know about her experiences and that I could never capture what had happened, she felt that little that I could tell was better than the nothing people would know if I didn't write what I could. Before one poetry reading, she told me, "Tell them we weren't the only ones."

And how do I do this?

I think one of my first obligations as a writer is to tell these stories in a voice that is like the voice of my parents. My parents weren't educated people. My mom had a couple years of education, my dad had none. In talking about my parents' lives, I've tried to use their language, the language that I first heard their stories in, language free of emotions. When my mother and father told me many of the stories that became my poems, they spoke plainly in straightforward language. They didn't try to emphasize the emotional aspect of their experience, or their heroism or their suffering; rather, they told their stories in a matter-of-fact way. This happened, they'd say, and then this happened: "The soldier kicked her, and then he shot her, and then he moved on to the next room." Also, I've tried to make the poems story like, strong in narrative drive to convey the way they were first told to me.

Another thing about the voice of the poems that's important to me is that I've tried to incorporate my parents' actual voices into the poems. A number of the poems contain some of the language they told those stories in. An early poem in the *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*, "My Mother Reads My Poem 'Cattle Train to Magdeburg,'" is pretty much written as she spoke it. I've cut out some of the things she said, polished others in that poem, but the poem has her voice.

When my sister Donna read the book, the first thing she commented on was how much she could hear our parents in it. To me, this was the highest praise.

A third thing is that sometimes you have to "heat up" the facts to convey the truth you want to convey. This is a point the novelist Tim O'Brien makes in the "How To Tell A True War Story" chapter of his novel *The Things They Carried*.

Sometimes the facts themselves—he says—just don't convey the horror that you would hope they convey. Here's an example: 50,000,000 civilians died in WWII. I can tell that fact to a hundred people, one after another, and they probably won't react much, not emotionally at least, maybe not even intellectually.

As a writer, I need to tell my readers something more. I need to tell them about these dead people in a way that will carry the weight of 50,000,000. And sometimes this means I have to invent stuff.

My poem "Letter from Poland" shows this. I never read the letters my mom received from her sister who returned to Poland after the war, but I saw how they affected my mom, the grief they brought her, and when I set out to recreate one of these letters, I invented things, things that I hoped would convey the truth.

I talked about the death of their mother, the guilt they both felt for being alive, the sense of emotional and physical hunger they were left with after the war, the yearning for some kind of spring that would give them peace from their memories.

I don't know if this was what was actually in the letters my mother received, but it is the truth—I hope—that they carried for her.

Whenever I find my mind trying to understand things ranging from the transformation of rising bread to cloud formations to the hollow-thud of my own terminal existence, my first impulse to is reach out for a pen, pencil, or broken crayon to scribble on any available surface—napkin, notebook, paper plate, desk, wall, flesh (typically my palm)—with these mystical things called words. And I don't know why. What drives, compels, or inspires you to write?

I love writing, especially writing about my parents.

One of the great things about doing this book was that I was able to spend so much time thinking about my parents, listening to their voices again, wondering about those voices and the things they were telling me.

Really, writing about them is like a visit home.

Of course, that's what I get out of the writing, but what do I hope other people will get from hearing my parents' story and the stories of people like my parents?

I give a lot of lectures about the war and the things that happened, and I get that question a lot.

What do I want people to carry away from my poems? What do I want others to feel, think?

The answer is pretty simple.

It's what I feel my parents taught me.

First, be a good person. Don't do bad things. I remember my dad telling me that if someone comes and tells me to shoot the person in the line next to me, I shouldn't do it. Even if they threaten to kill me. That's my dad's lesson.

Second, live with hope. That's my mother's lesson. She never gave up. She always hoped, even when there was no hope, even when God and man and every philosophy and belief system had abandoned her. She still hoped. Even when it was madness to hope. She still hoped. Better that madness than living without hope.

The overall structure of *Echoes of Tattered Tongues* strikes me as daring, unconventional, and illuminating: starting with the death of your parents and guiding the reader backwards to before the moment when WWII trespassed upon their lives. Will you address the overall composition of the collection and perhaps share some academic or artistic influences that have shaped your artistic process?

When I first started working on the story of my parents, I tried to tell it in a chronological narrative that began with them as teenagers in Poland before the war and ended with them old and retired and living in Sun City, Arizona. But that structure never satisfied me. What it seemed to do was move away from the war, forget the war, and my parents never forgot the war. It was always with them. As I say in one of the prose pieces in *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*,

> My parents knew that the war had always been with them, teaching them the hard lessons, teaching them how to suffer grief and pain, how to be patient, how to live without hope or bread, how to survive what would kill a person in the normal course of life.

The war taught them that war has no beginning and no end.

To recreate that feeling, the never endingness of war, I thought that telling the story in reverse order would be a perfect solution.

I had a lot of literary models. When I was working on my doctorate in English, my favorite writers were the modernist and the postmodernist novelists. I loved the way they played with time structures in their narratives. These were writers like Faulkner and John Barth and Thomas Pynchon. They weren't afraid of creating a narrative that reflected the way the mind itself often moved back and forth between what was memory and what wasn't.

And I've also got to say that one of my favorite works about the Holocaust is Martin Amis's great *Time's Arrow*. It's a book that begins with the death of his protagonist and moves backwards in time through that protagonist's life as a fugitive Nazi and doctor in the concentration camps assisting a Mengele-like character in his experiments on Jewish children, and further back through his childhood to his birth.

All of this fed into my shaping of the collection.

To try and sum up the overall tone of a collection is reductive, but, if I was to reduce *Echoes of Tattered Tongues* to a phrase, it would be this: peaceful horror. The only image I can come up with is when an autumn leaf floats on an afternoon breeze toward the ground, but instead of landing on soon-to-be-frost-covered grass, it falls into a lake of fire, and in that instant, that flash of time, transforms into ash and smoke. I know that you have said elsewhere that poetry as a form chose you, but what does it mean to you to be a poet?

I'm not sure I know what it means to be a poet. I've done a lot of different kinds of writing in my life. I've written academic essays, novels, comic books, poems, journals, short stories, letters, and memoiristic essays. In each I've tried to do the same thing, involve a reader in my vision of things, share my memories and experiences and observations. Feel what I felt.

There is of course a different sort of rhythm and vocabulary in each, and a different sense of time probably too. For me, what poems do is slow down time. When I read a poem, I feel that I am entering a sort of "twilight zone" where time and space have slowed down. I feel that a poet creates a space between two words that becomes a door into another dimension, another form of perception. I pass through the door, and I'm free to experience the world the poet has invited me into. As a result, I'm there with Prufrock listening to the women coming and going and talking about Michelangelo and I'm there with Whitman as he tells me that he can stop and live with the animals. This sounds kind of loopie and druggie and psychedelic, but it's what I feel when I read a great poem and it's what I hope a reader will experience when he reads one of my poems about my parents.

For me, this is something that I feel when I read and write poems, but not when I read and write other things.

I get that feeling when I read Allen Ginsberg's "A Supermarket In California": "Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?" Like sharing stories, the complex interweave among reader, writer, and written word is a wondrous phenomenon. What books have you read recently and what did you find remarkable about them?

I've been reading a lot of memoirs, histories, and biographies in the last 5 years. Currently, I'm reading Andrew Nagorski's *Hitlerland* and Nancy Coldwell Sorel's *The Women Who Wrote the War*. And before that I was reading memoirs about living with slavery and biographies of Lincoln and memoirs of men who fought in WWII.

I'm fascinated by people who can carry me to some other place and time and make me feel those times and places. About a year ago, I read Fanny Trollope's memoir about moving to America from England in the 1820s. She began by describing what it was like taking a steamboat up the Mississippi to Cincinnati, the plantations, the slaves, the planters. It blew me away. Here was someone who was telling me

about an experience I would never be able to experience in language so rich that I was living it too. I feel the same thing reading Sorel's T*he Women Who Wrote the War*—especially in the frequent passages where Sorel quotes extensively from the women war correspondents she writes of. These women are giving me something so basic, so essential, and something that I could never experience in language pure and straightforward and urgent.

It's a cliché to say this, but the greatness of writing for me is that it gives that felt experience like nothing else.

Another thing I want to say about the reading I'm doing is that I seem to be interested in the misery of war and human suffering. War and slavery. I think that finally I want to know what my parents felt and saw as slave laborers in Nazi Germany. I want to be with them there in the camps—even though I know I never can.

Epilogue

My wife Meghan and I set the table for five. We sat down with a jug of water, two cups, and a copy of Echoes of Tattered Tongues *and made one rule: no talking unless you were the one reading. She started: "I never set out to write about my parents..." After she finished "Where I'm Coming From," she handed me the book and I began reading: she listened. We passed the book across the table until the closing line: "Did you miss us?" When a detail, line, or poem resonated with one of us, we just paused. As we read, the dominant voices began to take a clear, albeit smoky, shape around the table—Jan, Tekla, John—with a slow nod, a low hum, the thump of a nervous foot. The air around the table thrummed.*

I put the book down, closed my eyes, and there they were, resurrected in the present through the imagination. John's written words transformed into vibrations, moved through the space and time that separated Meghan and me, and achieved a velocity that left an indelible imprint on a vast human interior. (What happened to the words as they traveled?) Jan, Tekla, John, Meghan, and I shared something. *I could not articulate what that* something *was, but I knew that the* something *was significant; Jan's blind eye wandered around the table searching for something to laugh at, Tekla stared through me with a stern expression on her face, but an optimistic tension around her neck and shoulders, and John looked down at the table with a slight smile as if thinking: "Some experiences are best left to the imagination."*

Jan and Tekla Guzlowski in park, Chicago 1975
"Refugees"

What My Father Ate in the Camps

He ate what he couldn't eat,
what his mother taught him not to:
brown grass, small chips of wood, the dirt
beneath his gray dark fingernails.

He ate the leaves off trees. He ate bark.
He ate the flies that tormented
the mules working in the fields.
He ate what would kill a man

in the normal course of his life:
leather buttons, cloth caps, anything
small enough to get into his mouth.
He ate roots. He ate newspaper.

In his slow clumsy hunger
he did what the birds did, picked
for oats or corn or any kind of seed
left in the dry dung by the cows.

And when there was nothing to eat
he'd search the ground for pebbles
and they would loosen his saliva
and he would swallow that.

And the other men did the same.

Why My Mother Stayed with My Father

She knew he was worthless the first time
she saw him in the camps: his blind eye,
his small size, the way his clothes carried
the smell of the dead men who wore them before.

In America she learned he couldn't fix a leak
or drive a nail straight. He knew nothing
about the world, the way the planets moved,
the tides. The moon was just a hole in the sky,

electricity a mystery as great as death.
The first time lightning shorted the fuses,
he fell to his knees and prayed to Blessed Mary
to bring back the miracle of light and lamps.

He was a drunk too. Some Fridays he drank
his check away as soon as he left work.
When she'd see him stagger, she'd knock him down
and kick him till he wept. He wouldn't crawl away.

He was too embarrassed. Sober, he'd beg
in the bars on Division for food or rent
till even the drunks and bartenders
took pity on this dumb Polack.

My father was like that, but he stayed
with her through her madness in the camps
when she searched among the dead for her sister,
and he stayed when it came back in America.

Maybe this was why my mother stayed.
She knew only a man worthless as mud,
worthless as a broken dog, would suffer
with her through all of her sorrow.

John Guzlowski in a camouflage jumper sewn by Tekla out of parachute silk

"The German Soldiers—III. German Soldiers Stealing from the Dead"

Here's What My Mother Won't Talk About

Just a girl of nineteen
with the grace of flowers
in her hair

coming home
from the pastures
beyond the woods
where the cows drift
slowly, through a twilight
of dust, warm and still
as August

She finds her mother
a bullet in her throat
her sister's severed breasts
in the dust by her feet
the dead baby
still in its blanket

It all ends there
not in the camps
but there

Ask her

She'll wave her hand
tell you you're a fool
tell you

if they give you bread
eat it

if they beat you
run

Donna, Tekla, and John on a paper moon

"Danusha"

Worthless

My mother looks at herself
in her dress and striped coat
and knows she is who she is—
bones and skin, and the war
has always been here with her,

like an older brother, not mean
or evil but hard, never soft, teaching
hesitance and patience, teaching her
not to put her hand out to take
the cup of water or touch the bread.

It has always been this way
and will always be this way.
War has no beginning, no end.
War is the god who breeds and kills.

New Year's Eve, 1958

"Grief"

What the War Taught Her

My mother learned that sex is bad,
Men are worthless, it is always cold
And there is never enough to eat.

She learned that if you are stupid
With your hands you will not survive
The winter even if you survive the fall.

She learned that only the young survive
The camps. The old are left in piles
Like worthless paper, and babies
Are scarce like chickens and bread.

She learned that the world is a broken place
Where no birds sing, and even angels
Cannot bear the sorrows God gives them.

She learned that you don't pray
Your enemies will not torment you.
You only pray that they will not kill you.

A Garden in the Desert

At the end
my father sat in his garden
in the early morning

the desert in Sun City,
Arizona, that strange place,
still cool

the clear light
tinged with desert blue

the pigeons cooing.

He couldn't lift
the shovel then, drag
the bag of topsoil
from here to there.

He couldn't breathe
or stand either.
There wasn't much
left to him.

But he could nod
toward an orange tree,
its roots bound in burlap,
and point to the place
where he wanted me
to plant it.

There, he'd say
to me in Polish,
please plant it there.

SEAN PURIO is an Air Force officer currently teaching in the Department of English & Fine Arts at the United States Air Force Academy.