



A Son of Prisoners

Jezyk mulow/Language of Mules,
by **John Guzowski**

Reviewer: Czesław Miłosz
(1911–2004)

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Jezyk mulów i inne wiersze/Language of Mules and Other Poems, by John Guzowski.
Translated into Polish by Bohdan Zadura. Graphics by Tadeusz M. Siara.
Katowice: Biblioteka Slaska (www.bs.katowice.pl), 2002. ISBN 83-87849-38-3. 109 pages.
Paper. Bilingual Polish/English.

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 very Polish poem, summing up a few wartime experiences of a particular generation. And yet, no. It was not written by a Polish poet. **Its author, John Guzowski, is an American poet who writes in English. He is not only a poet but also a professor of English and American literature, and the author of works of literary criticism.** I cited the poem as it was translated by Bohdan Zadura and chose it from the bilingual volume entitled *Language of Mules and Other Poems*, published by B.S.K. in 2002.

I usually do not venture beyond poetry in Polish in my column, but I am making an exception because this case is exceptional. The author was born in Germany in 1948, into a family of agricultural forced laborers (the father was from Poznań, the mother from near Lwów/Lviv). He

himself does not remember those times, but through some kind of osmosis or empathy the stories and memories of his parents keep returning. It is somewhat unusual, this seeking of ties with the past, when in Poland the modern generation of poets are not very eager to remember. Of course, Guzłowski is no longer really young—today's youth was born around 1980.

In Guzłowski's poems the land of his parents and the work camps are always present, although at the same time they are only part of his poetic repertoire. In the volume which I have at hand, there are a lot of completely different poems, completely free of the burden of the past. **This slim volume even astonished me** with its doubleness. The first part summons precisely the camp images from the life of the author's parents, who were treated by the Nazis like beasts of burden. Their awkward language, because they were both half-illiterate, was for the Nazis a language of mules. The second part **reveals an enormous ability for grasping reality** with some distance, somehow objectively, and I cannot resist citing a poem titled "Melon" which could have found itself in my anthology, *A Book of Luminous Things*, true to my poetic ideal, which is something in the nature of a response to the Dutch "still lifes" of the XVII century.

Melon

To Gabriel Josipovici

When I see a melon on the table glinting
in the morning light, why does my heart leap up,
go out to it as it does? Why do I want
to sketch this melon, put it down in words,
or set it down in short melodic phrases?
Sometimes, I think that by doing this I'll
possess this melon in some way, not in the sense
of buying it, that's not what I mean,
but in the sense of seeing that this melon isn't
a part of me, not of me, can never, in fact,
come closer to me than it is now,
at this moment when I see it before me
on the table like some small world I dreamt
as a child in my sandbox of dreams,
and seeing it as this world, I am taken by it,
possessed by it as surely as the spring
takes the elm, thawing it until the winter
is nothing in its life, until the skin
of leaves it's lost is nothing. I become
the melon's then, exist only to admire
its beauty, its lime white skin and cold sweetness,
its Bethlehem and Golgotha, exist only to admire
its otherness, and see my self a part from it,
never closer to it than I am now, never freer
than now of my own place of skulls.

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