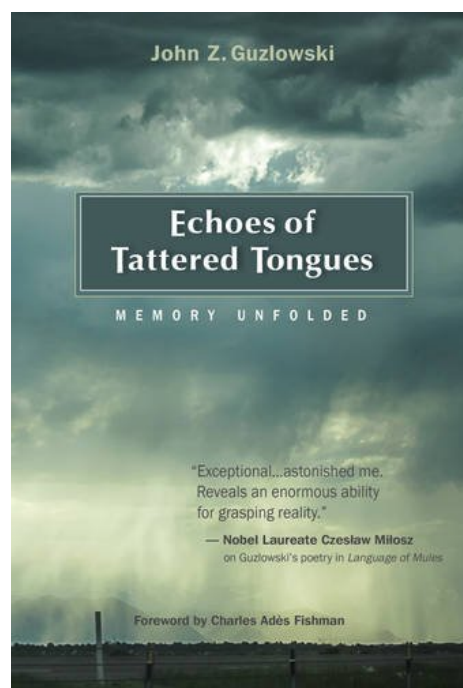


As It Ought to Be

“A lesson about the stones that wait to rise in our hearts”: A Review of John Guzlowski’s *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*

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by Eric Kroczek

My first encounter with a John Guzlowski poem was as desultory as anything in life: I was eating a solitary dinner and barely listening to the news on the local public radio station one evening after work in 2007 when I gradually became aware that I was hearing Garrison Keillor read a poem, a good one. The program was [The Writer's Almanac](#), and the last poem's stanza haunted me for days:

He believed life is hard, and we should
help each other. If you see someone
on a cross, his weight pulling him down
and breaking his muscles, you should try
to lift him, even if only for a minute,
even though you know lifting won't save him.

At the time, I didn't catch the name of the poet; I meant to Google it, but forgot. Life went on.

Fast forward several years. I friended this writer on Facebook, John Guzlowski, who was friends with some of my wife's writer friends, because I liked some of his comments, and why not, right? In any case, he wrote a lot about Polish immigrants in Chicago, which intersected with a memoir-ish thing I was working on. I bought a couple of his books of poems, and I liked them. Their unpretentious, workmanlike free verse was hard and bleak, with only just enough black humor and sympathy to leaven it. From his poems, I learned that his parents had been slave

laborers for the Nazis and his family had come to the U.S. after the War by way of a DP camp and settled in Chicago in the early 1950s. And in his book [Lightning and Ashes](#), I found the poem I’d heard years before over dinner, “What My Father Believed.”

Last year, John published [Echoes of Tattered Tongues: Memory Unfolded](#), an experimental yet deeply satisfying mongrel at the intersection of poetry, history, biography, and memoir—in the same vein as Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS*, but with poems instead of pictures. Many of its constituent parts have found print in other places, particularly in his previous collections *The Language of Mules* and the aforementioned *Lightning and Ashes*. But *Echoes of Tattered Tongues* isn’t a simple greatest-hits anthology by any means. Rather, Guzlowski resets the older material in a new framework, much as a composer might incorporate musical themes and ideas she’s previously worked out in piano sonatas and string quartets into a new symphony that coheres and magnifies her original pieces.

Echoes is largely the story of Guzlowski’s parents, as well as the story of how he came to learn from them the parts of that story he didn’t already know. It progresses in three movements, each movement delving deeper into the past—unfolding memory and uncovering missing pieces of the historical record: from his parents’ twilight years, to mid-century—John’s childhood—when they left the DP camp in Germany and emigrated to America, and finally, to the War itself, and the root of the deep unhappiness his parents carried with them to the grave.

Book I introduces us to Guzlowski’s parents in retirement, in Arizona, and gives us glimpses of what happened to them in their early lives, how it haunts them. In “My Mother Reads My Poem ‘Cattle Train to Magdeberg’”, a deft poem that is equal parts hilarious and horrifying, his mother, angry and sardonic, critiques John’s earlier effort at telling her story—a poem that we don’t actually read until Book III:

She looks at me and says
 “That’s not how it was.
 I couldn’t see anything
 except when they stopped
 the boxcars and opened the doors.

And I didn’t see any
 of those rivers,
 and if I did, I didn’t know
 their names.[”]

A serious, if wry, indictment, considering the original poem begins “My mother still remembers” and goes on to catalogue everything she supposedly saw from the eponymous cattle train. But then, she goes on to tell him some of what she did see, and to say, “Even though you’re a grown man / and a teacher, we saw things / I don’t want to tell you about.”

We come to know Guzlowski’s mother well over the course of the book—the asperity of her outlook (“Why My Mother Stayed With My Father” begins “She knew he was worthless the first time / she saw him...” and ends “She knew only a man worthless as mud, / worthless as a broken dog, would suffer / with her through all of her sorrow.”); her violent, abusive rages (“Later in the Promised Land,” “Danusia”); her sardonic bitterness (“My Mother Was 19”—the harrowing denouement of a series of poems, written at different times, that are variations on the story of what happened to her and her family before she was sent to the camps). She stands in contrast to Guzlowski’s passive, sentimental, “worthless” father, who is the viewpoint character of much of the horror we see

in the wartime Poland and Germany of Book III.

But before that, in Book II, Guzlowski guides us through his family’s experience as immigrants to America, who brought with them little more than a wooden trunk full of necessities, a heavy burden of trauma, and what few skills they had. As outlined in “What My Father Brought With Him,”

He knew there was only work or death.

He could dig up beets and drag fallen trees
without bread or hope. The war taught him how.

He came to the States with this and his tools,

hands that had worked bricks and frozen mud
and knew the language the shit bosses spoke.

The family slowly finds its bearings in the Polonia Triangle neighborhood in Chicago (made famous by Nelson Algren in *The Man with the Golden Arm*) in spite of poverty, crime, pedophile priests, his father’s frequent drinking bouts, and his mother’s violent mood swings, in which she lashes out at John, his father, and his sister Danusia—an elusive figure who holds an obvious emotional valence for Guzlowski, but who never comes clearly into focus, and whose story, one of sweetness and innocence lost, is never resolved. Several of these poems are unsettling stories told by or about others who had fled Europe after the War, and one (the charming “Kitchen Polish”) is about being a non-native speaker, who grew up speaking Polish at home and English everywhere else:

I can’t tell you about Kant
in Polish, or the Reformation
or deconstruction

or why the Germans moved east
before attacking west,
or where I came from,

But I can count to ten, say hello
and goodbye, ask for coffee,
bread or soup.

I can tell you people die.

It’s a fact of life,
and there’s nothing

you or I can do about it.
I can say, “Please, God,”
and “Don’t be afraid.”

If I look out at the rain
I can tell you it’s falling.
If there’s snow,

I can say, “It’s cold outside
today, and it’ll most likely
be cold tomorrow.”

Book III takes us into the nightmarish central Europe of Guzłowski’s parents’ wartime experience as prisoners of the Third Reich, and it is among the emotionally keenest of such chronicles. Few war poems I have read equal the intensity of “Landscape with Dead Horses, 1939”:

Look at this horse. Its head torn from its body
by a shell. So much blood will teach you more
about the world than all the books in it.
This horse’s head will remake the world for you—
teach even God a lesson about the stones
that wait to rise in our hearts, cold and hard.

Or of “The German Soldiers” (“We soldiers are only human. We love / to kill. It is the hidden God in each of us.”); or of the surprisingly surreal, sinister beauty of the book’s longest poem, “The Third Winter of War: Buchenwald,” about his father’s imprisonment there:

He remembers a movie he once saw
when he escaped from the camp.

In it, one of the heroes is a fat man,
the other skinny. On a boat lost at sea,
they look at each other in hunger and cry.

Then fatty smiles, and skinny cries harder.

[....]

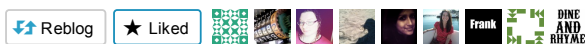
He dreams dogs change into men
and sit at a table to discuss the war,
why it began and how it will end.

He wants to ask the dogs a question
but they can’t understand his howling.

Guzłowski’s attempt to learn and feel the origins of his parents’ pain thus brings us into closer emotional touch with the entirety of the War in Europe, widening by necessity from the particular to the general. It is a unorthodox way of telling such a story: though there are many examples of poems written by poets who experienced the camps firsthand, examples of secondhand histories told in verse are thin indeed. And yet it works, in ways that defy analysis or easy summary. Guzłowski’s empathy and imagination are extraordinary, at times truly shocking. His verse, which brings to mind variously Charles Bukowski, Charles Simic, and Philip Levine, has a vernacular concreteness and clarity that is all the more startling when it breaks sharply with realism, and he deftly captures those quirks of personality that bring characters into full view. Less than halfway through the book, I had unconsciously slipped from thinking *What a novel way to tell this story to I can’t imagine how else it could be told.*

And as if that weren't enough, [Aquila Polonica Publishing](#) deserves great credit for producing a book that is a beautiful artifact, from its cloth and leather binding, to its creamy paper, to the stunning photographs that accompany the text. In every respect, *Echoes of Tattered Tongues* is an achievement that deserves wide recognition and long remembrance.

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