

Echoes of Tattered Tongues

EXCERPT FROM BOOK 'ECHOES OF TATTERED TONGUES: MEMORY UNFOLDED'



Below are three poems from JOHN Z. GUZLOWSKI's critically-acclaimed book *Echoes of Tattered Tongues: Memory Unfolded*, his book of poems and essays about his parents' experiences as slave laborers in Nazi Germany. Make sure to read our exclusive interview with the author [here](#).

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.

WHAT MY FATHER ATE

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
in the dry dung left 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.

REFUGEES

We came with heavy suitcases

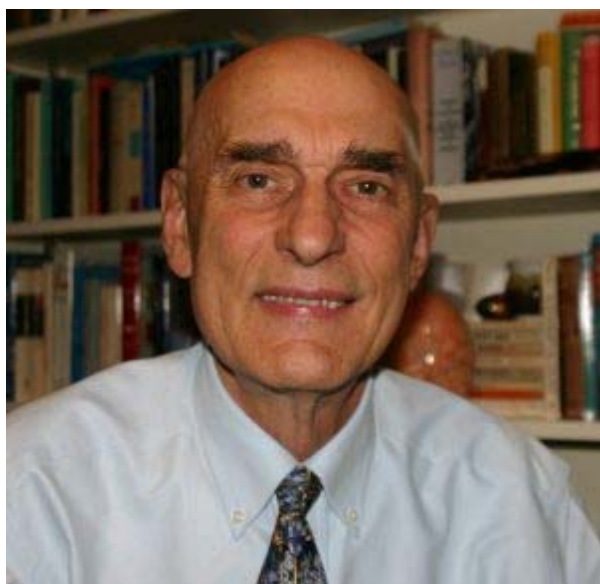
made from wooden boards by brothers
we left behind, came from Buchenwald
and Katowice and before that
Lvov, our mother's true home,

came with our tongues
in tatters, our teeth in our pockets,
hugging only ourselves, our bodies
stiff like frightened ostriches.

We were the children in ragged wool
who shuffled in line to eat or pray
or beg anyone for charity.

Remembering the air and the trees,
the sky above the Polish fields,
we dreamt only of the lives waiting
for us in Chicago and St. Louis
and Superior, Wisconsin

like pennies
in our mouths



John Z. Guzowski

JOHN Z. GUZLOWSKI's writing appears in *Rattle*, *Ontario Review*, *North American Review*, and other journals. *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*, his book of poems and essays about his parents' experiences as slave laborers in Nazi Germany, won the 2017 Benjamin Franklin Poetry Award and the Eric Hoffer Foundation's Montaigne Award. He is also the author of three novels.

You can follow Guzowski on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and his [blog](#).

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