

# Poets and Dreamers

## Book Review

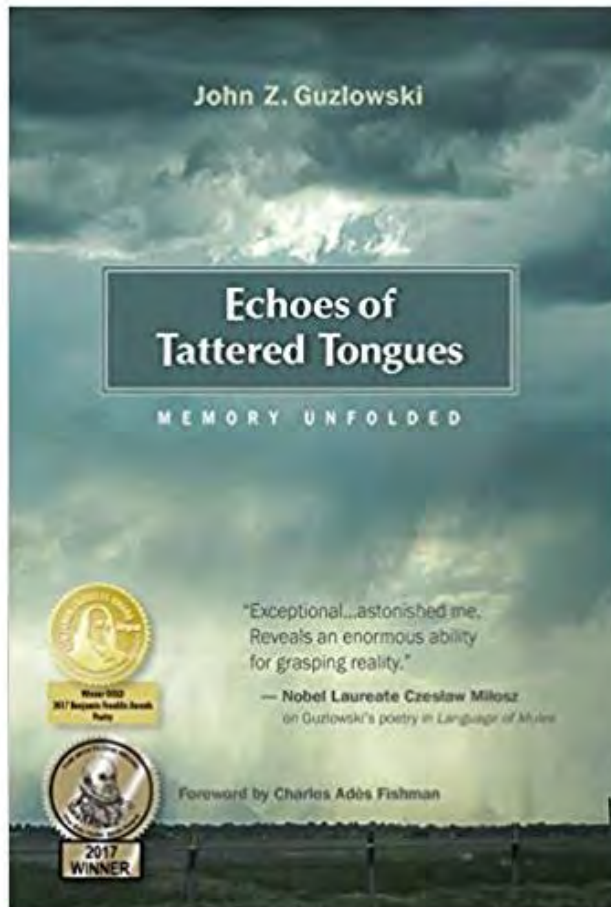
### A REVIEW OF BY JOHN GUZLOWSKI'S ECHOES OF TATTERED TONGUES

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BY ANNE TAMMEL

John Guzlowski's collection of poems and memoirs, *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*, brings us to a deeper awareness of cultural identity, to the sense of shame that drives so many immigrants to lose sight of their origins, and to the importance of reconnecting with our truths. Each of us has after all, in some way, descended from the *Displaced*; we hold an intimate tie to these "forgotten, voiceless refugees...the survivors that the last century produced, no matter where they came from"...the Dreamers of our nation.



Having myself grown up with a Polish-American father who was born in Brooklyn, New York, and a mother born in Niagara Falls, though I was born in San Jose, California, we didn't exactly fit the description of "Californians..." I recall walking through the streets of my own hometown feeling that sense of "otherness," Guzlowksi explores in his book, not understanding why.

Toward the end of his life, my father would share story after story of famous inventors, scientists, or writers; he would tell me all about what the person, sometimes Arthur Miller, or JD Salinger, or Richard Feynman...had done to change the world, wait for my reaction, then end his story with, "*He was Polish.*" Later, my aunts would joke about distant relatives in Poland who were trying to reach them, laugh, then change the subject. These women, after all, had left New York and its memories of the mother who hid her actual name—the true spelling still remains a mystery—as well as her age, and even her nationality from her own husband.



In this sunny upbeat land of Southern California, with its palm trees and glittery sidewalks, one of my aunts had modeled for Francesco Scuvallo, appeared on television in Hollywood for the Merv Griffin Show, then gone on to marry a Blue Angel, enjoying celebrity status as she strolled the gilded streets of Coronado—far from their early days in icy Brooklyn, far from the truth, the shame, and the hidden background, but not far enough to forget.

When I opened the pages of John Guzlowksi's collection, I finally began to understand all of them. The reason for the laughter, the tears, the silence...the shame.



This world often feels made up of people who won't talk, who dismiss unpleasant topics, who whitewash their personal and cultural truths to blend into the American-ness around them.

This book puts an end to that.

After opening Guzowski's extensive hardbound collection, we find his commitment to truth early on. He shares his perspective from the moments he first stepped onto American soil—to the promised land where, as Polish refugees, they were no longer going to suffer from the war, the discrimination, the division. But the promises of this faraway shore were not exactly honored. The poet shares, "*When we landed at Ellis Island, we were unmistakably foreign...My mother wore a babushka on her head, my father a woolen cloth cap with a broken brim....*" And when they sought a safe place to live, jobs where they could earn a decent living, and a community in which they could integrate with society, they became shunned and cast out as "*dirty, dumb, lazy, dishonest, immoral, licentious, drunken Polacks.*"

We read a story representative of so many who have come to America in search of a humane existence, an opportunity, and simply the chance to belong, who then find themselves in their own way... "*hobbled by being a Polack and a DP, a Displaced Person.*"

Thus, the author's early journey to forget his cultural identity...like so many who cannot establish themselves on a welcoming shore, the poet confesses he "*wanted to get as far as possible away from them and that world,*" to run from the "*hard karma.*" Like so many, the poet kept "*running away from my otherness as soon as I could...for much of my life I continued to run...*"

Through poem after poem, story after story, while revealing his family's unspeakable experiences as Polish refugees, the poet crafts these works with a spirit of compassion, wisdom, and advocacy not simply for the Polish immigrant but for all cultures. Guzlowski draws from his extensive literary background and decades as a professor of American literature to share this pain, the plight of the *Displaced Person*, with a clear awareness that whatever nation we or our ancestors have migrated from, as human beings, we each suffer from this state of "otherness" that should not be disregarded or dismissed, but rather discussed..With this book, we can each, from our own perspective, turn the pages, read the poet's words, and know our cultural identity is honored, that we are heard: "*I am writing for all the people who've sought refuge in America, whose stories were never told, whose voices got lost somewhere in the great cemetery of the 20th century.*"

Here in this book, we turn page after page of a universal testimony to discover the taboo words and stories of "*all those forgotten, voiceless refugees...*" the stories shared in support of "*All of history's Polacks.*"

We came with heavy suitcases  
made from wooden boards by brothers  
we left behind...  
hugging only ourselves...

While the reader might envision in "Refugees" a better life waiting for those fleeing crimes committed against them in their place of origin...the promise of safety, sustenance, and something greater...the stories in these poems tell us otherwise, as in "Lessons"...

There is no sky  
only Ellis Island  
the docked ship  
rusting rising  
falling as we wait

The cultural divides were so marked and the promise of America so discriminatory that the poet then shares his hesitation to rush to America, the place where his own family walked into a new period of loss and shame, as seen in "Souls Migration in the Rain."

Otherwise, I would go out  
And try to stop them,  
Bring them back  
To where I think  
They belong...

And yet the poet knows, as all Displaced Persons know, that the world they came from is often so inhumane there is no way to go back...that the only real way to survival becomes the way of the strong, that way paved not simply because we are human or because as humans we deserve the basic principles of humanity, the first of them being, "*All humans are sacred, whatever their culture, race, religion, whatever their capacities and incapacities, whatever their strengths and weaknesses may be...*" as stated by humanitarian [Jean Vanier](#). The poet knows the only true way to survival becomes paved by those few who "keep going, through the terror," as shared in "My People."

Maybe something in the souls  
of people who start with nothing  
and end with nothing, and in between  
live from one handful of nothing  
to the next handful of nothing.

They keep going—through the terror  
in the snow and the misery  
in the rain--



Reading through these works, we come to realize it is the mother and father of the poet who give voice to those few who are able to "start with nothing...end with nothing...and keep going." The poet's family emerges through these pages as nothing less than invincible...These parents, who are no longer alive by the time the book reaches our hands, remain very much alive however within these pages... Within these poems, these people speak, they dream, they laugh, they love, they argue...they share their truths. We come to know this mother and father along with their daughter and son as they share their darkest of secrets, expose their deepest shame, and give us their most cherished stories, which in the end, are stories that give voice to all the Displaced in our nation...

In "The Happy Times and Places," the poet shares,

*My father was a man plagued by nightmares about the German concentration camps he and my mother both spent years in...Even in his sleep, it was almost like he was afraid to scream. I would come to my father's bedroom, and he would be asleep and screaming and struggling in his sleep...He drank all the time to keep these nightmares back. My mother...was afraid of so many things, loud noises, whistling, even clowns she saw on TV...My sister and I often thought that our parents were crazy; our lives amid the screaming and fear and anger just didn't make sense to us.*

The voices of the poet's family are so clear that they echo not only through the stories the poet wants to tell us, but even through the stories the parents feel must be told, the stories they still feel we as a nation most need to hear.

Long after I placed the book down, the voice of the poet's mother continued to echo, her words repeating in my mind..."I'm going to tell you. You want to know what it was like, and I'm going to tell you.' And I said, 'Please don't tell me.' And she said, 'I'm going to tell you.'"

Turning these pages and taking this journey, it occurs to the reader that it is only in death that these parents truly find their freedom--not only from the German concentration camps and their recurring nightmares of them--but also from the unwelcome reception and discrimination they faced once they reached American shores...in "Pigeons," the poet gives us a vision of the father away from his torture of the camps, away from the coldness he experienced once he came to America; we see him now simply as a man...a man dreaming of birds and colors, a man dreaming of flying, of rising, wings beating into dreams....

My father dreams of pigeons,  
their souls, their thin cradles  
of bone, but it is their luck

he admires most. A boy in Poznań  
in a dawn all orange and pinks,  
his hands opened like a saint's

and taught those birds to fly, to rise  
on the air, their wings beating  
the rooftops into flesh, into dreams

of angels above the crystal trees.

We see the beauty and power possible in humanity...through this poet's words, we catch a glimpse of what is possible for each of us if we can simply honor ourselves and one another as human beings...if we can practice the basic principles of humanity...

If we can love ourselves and one another.

*John Guzłowski's collection, [Echoes of Tattered Tongues](#), is available on [Amazon](#), and directly through the publisher, [Aquila Polonica Press](#).*

<http://www.poetsanddreamers.com/current---book-reviews>