

Vox Populi

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John Guzowski: Two poems about my mother

Cattle Train to Magdeburg

My mother still remembers

The long train to Magdeburg
the box cars
bleached gray
by Baltic winters

The rivers and the cities
she had never seen before
and would never see again:
the sacred Vistula
the smoke haunted ruins of Warsaw
the Warta, where horse flesh
met steel and fell

The leather fists
of pale boys
boys her own age
perhaps seventeen
perhaps nineteen
but different
convinced of their godhood
by the cross they wore
different from the one
she knew in Lvov

The long twilight journey
to Magdeburg—
four days that became six years
six years that became sixty

And always a train of box cars
bleached to Baltic gray.

~~

How Her Mother and Sister Died

Sometimes, my mother says, her home
West of Lvov comes back to her in dreams
That open in grayness with the sounds
Of a young, flowered girl in white
Singing a prayer of first communion,
The dirt streets around the church pure
With priests and girls and boys.

The singing prayer leads her to the grave
Where her mother and her sister Genja
And her sister's baby daughter lie,
The marshy graves where the hungry men
Dropped them after shooting them
And cutting them in secret places.

My mother says, these men from the east
Were like buffaloes: terrible and big.

She waves the dreams away with her hand
And starts again, talking of plowing the fields
Of cutting winter wood, of that time
When the double bladed axe slipped
And sank a wound so deep in her foot
That she felt her heart would not
Jar loose from its frozen pause.

~~~~~

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Tekla Hanczarek Guzowski and her two children John and Donna in the United States circa 1956.

John Guzowski's poems about his parents' experiences as slave laborers in Nazi Germany appear in his award-winning *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*. His most recent books of poems are *Mad Monk Ikkyu*, *True Confessions*, and *Small Talk: Writing about God and Writing and Me*. His novels include *Retreat: A Love Story* and the Hank and Marvin mysteries.

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## 17 comments on “John Guzowski: Two poems about my mother”

Marty Williams  
December 11, 2025



The subject of these poems about his mother is difficult and compelling, and the precision searing. That pause!

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Vox Populi  
December 11, 2025



Yes.

>

[Reply](#)

jzguzlowski  
December 11, 2025



thanks, Marty. I miss talking to you.

[Reply](#)

Marty Williams  
December 16, 2025



I miss hanging out with you, too, John, talking about poetry over coffee.

Reply

jmnewsome93c0e5f9cd

December 11, 2025



These two poems touch my life in many ways. Just a few thoughts:

how mothers handle grief and devastation... my mother hid her horrors till the wall she had built shattered.

Those young boys convinced of their godhood by the different crosses they wore...the crooked cross swastikas. The crooked cross now of christian nationalism.

My soul friend Etty Hillesum threw a letter through a slat as her trip on the cattle car from Westerbork Transit Camp in the Netherlands to Auschwitz began. Her final known words: *We left the camp singing*. I'm haunted by the cattle car chronicles we will never know. So much evil to stand against, it is sometimes overwhelming, and I just want to turn away to pour a cup of serenity. The Guzowski poems rebuild love and hope. But they also remind us of what history has produced, and is producing.

Reply

Vox Populi

December 11, 2025



What a beautiful post, Jim. Thank you.

>

Reply

Sean Sexton

December 11, 2025



Aye Jim: You've really said it. What a mess we find ourselves in, this point in our lives, and I once believed human culture, post Viet Nam would be progressing toward some kind of common realization of peace. It's gone quite the other way, presently Pell Mell!

Here's wishing you, all of us some vestige of solace. "Let all mortal flesh keep..."

Reply

jzguzlowski

December 11, 2025



thank you. When my mother found out I was writing poems about her experiences, she said I should tell people that she was not the only one who suffered, not the only one in the camps. I try to do that with every word I write about my mom and dad.

Reply

jmnewsome93c0e5f9cd

December 11, 2025



Thank you so much for keeping your mother's memory alive, and reminding us of what she and others faced. Peace to you tonight.

Reply

Vox Populi

December 12, 2025



You've done that task admirably.

>

Reply

boehmrosemary

December 11, 2025



Haunting poems. "And always a train of box cars / bleached to Baltic gray." And somehow I can't help but feeling they are for today.

Reply

Vox Populi

December 11, 2025



The parallels to today are frightening.

>

Reply

Bruce Morton

December 11, 2025



**So well done.**

Reply

Vox Populi

December 11, 2025



Aren't they, though?

>

Reply

Laure-Anne

December 11, 2025



I second Sean — such clarity in the grief of those memories and grief...

Reply

Sean Sexton

December 11, 2025



What superb poetry—so clear flowing, this stream of memory and word. A vivid accounting so lovely in the telling, even its harsh terms safely pass the heart.

Reply

Vox Populi

December 11, 2025



Exactly, Sean. Guz writes with such courage and precision. Even horrors are brought into the clear light.

>

Reply

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