

JOHN GUZLOWSKI

Night in the Labor Camp

Through the nearest window
my father stares at the sky and thinks
of his dead father and mother,
his dead sister and brother,

his dead aunt and dead uncle,
his dead friend Jashu, and the boy
whose name he didn't know
who died in his arms, and all

the others who wait for him
like the first light of the sun
and the work he has to do
when the sun wakes him.

He hates no one, not God,
not the dead who come to him,
not the Germans who caught him,
not even himself for being alive.

He is a man held together
with stitches he has laced himself.

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Fear

(After a story told by Tadeusz Borowski)

During the war, there was only work and death.
The work broke you down, filled your stomach
with rocks and threw you in the river to drown.
The work shoved a bayonet up your ass
and twisted the blade till you were dead.

In the camps, there was only what we ate
and those we worked with—sometimes women.
But we never made love. I'll tell you why.

Fear. I remember once a thousand men
were working a field with sticks, and trucks came
and dumped naked women in front of us.
Guards were whipping them to the ovens,
and the women screamed and cried to us, pleaded
with their arms stretched out—naked mothers,
daughters, and sisters, but not one man moved.

Not one. Fear will blind you, and tie you up
like nothing else. It'll whisper, "Just stand still,
soon it will be over. Don't worry, there's nothing
you can do." You will take this fear to the grave
with you. I can promise. And after the war,
it was the same. I saw things that were as bad
as what happened in the camps. I wish
I had had a gun there. I would have
pressed it here to my forehead, right here.
Better that than what I feel now. This fear.

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Bicycle in Wartime

Let me tell you one thing
about the man who shot the woman
for her bicycle:
After he killed her,
he defecated in the street.

Landscape with Dead Horses

1.

War comes down like a hammer, heavy and hard
flattening the earth and killing the soft things:
horses and children, flowers and hope, love
and the smell of the farmers' earth, the coolness
of the creek, the look of trees as they uncurl
their leaves in late March and early April.

You smell the horses before you see them.

2.

Horses groan, their heads nailed to the ground
their bodies rocking crazily, groaning
like men trying to lift their heads for one
last breath, to breathe, to force cold air
into their shredded, burning lungs.

For these horses and the men who rode them,
this world will never again be the world
God made; and still they dare to raise their heads,
to force the air into their shredded lungs.

3.

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.

4.

In the end Hitler sat in his cold bunker
and asked his soldiers about his own horses,
“Where are they?” He asked, “Where are my horses?”
And no one dared to tell him, “They are dead
in the fields with the Poles and their horses,
bloated with death and burning with our corpses.”

JOHN GUZLOWSKI's writing has appeared in Garrison Keillor's *Writers' Almanac*, *The Ontario Review*, and elsewhere. His poems about his Polish parents' experiences in Nazi concentration camps appear in his book *Lightning and Ashes*. He blogs about his parents and the war at <http://lightning-and-ashes.blogspot.com/>.