

GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN

Disasters of War 36, 2014
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 67 1/2 X 46 3/4 in



COURTESY MODERNITY GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

VITO VICTOR

Escape from Occupied France

The recollections of a child
refugee in World War II

A rented flat in Paris, June 1940. A woman is alone with her toddler. His grandmother, who had always taken care of him, has been herded into an internment camp. His father too: removed by the French authorities. The woman has no experience in managing the three-year-old, who is far too vigorous.

She is ignoring him. She's nailed herself by sheer willpower to the kitchenette's table and is punishing the Remington. Her clamped jaw quivers with anger. Sweat pastes her thin dress to her pale skin while her fingers hammer out language. Her thighs rattle the metal folding chair, keeping the beat. At every pause her belligerent gaze challenges the insipid words of supplication addressed to one more government agency.

She swivels to appraise the milk she is heating for her child on the gas stovetop. Its surface bulges with a ring of tiny bubbles. The boy watches, anticipating sugared warmth, untouched by his mother's worries. He runs to a window, excited by a rumble of houses collapsing on a nearby street. An impact shudders the frame of the building. Rivers of dust trickle down its walls.

"They hit us," the woman shouts as she jumps to her feet. "The Wehrmacht is here." Grasping her son by the arm, she pulls him to her slender body. "Oh, Vito! Vito!" The high pitch of her voice scares him. She is holding him now, squeezing too hard, and he tries to wriggle out of her shaking hands.

"I want Nona!" he cries. It is a cry for his missing grandmother.

• • •

There is no telephone in this rental for transients. Newspaper delivery was discontinued to prevent panic and possible rioting. The only rumors that have reached the woman since the German breakthrough were shouted through her closed door after a rattle of a Socialist's boots up the stairwell. Does she know that the government has already fled the city, all the while assuring the citizens that Paris would be defended? Whatever she knows or believes, whether the time is right or wrong, she has decided. Once again, she is abandoning what is so sacred to her: the world of print. *We dismantled another apartment, left all the books and manuscripts behind, and just ran.*

She does not take a moment to zipper the suitcase; it swings in her left hand and will begin to spill. Hoisting her son wrapped in a towel she runs with arms full down flight after flight of stairs. She has left his milk charring over the hissing gas. The waste of the costly nutrition, the risk of an explosion will obsess her for days. With too much to handle, she finds a worry of manageable size. *I wasted the milk. I left the gas on. I am to blame.*

This mother and son will never cling to each other as hard again. They are now part of the exodus from Paris, the largest mass movement of European refugees since the Middle Ages.

• • •

My mother appears frail and elegant in sepia photographs. Her myth of a German childhood, published in 1955 for properly gullible younger readers, celebrated her own mother and father as working-class saints, living only for each other and for their lucky daughter. The idyllic picture is ominous in hindsight, evoking stifling small-town propriety.

Burdened with such standards, Maria resolved, early on, to be perfect. Her grades would always be the best in the class; that she would always be the prettiest girl, as well as the most virtuous, was not open to question. Yet at sixteen she would dismay her parents by writing for a newspaper edited by a seductive married man twice her age. My biological father, a charming, chubby Jew, would