

Too early, in those years, she began spinning the myth that would be fatal later on: that our bond was unique, that we were “the same kind of being,” that I was the only one who could truly understand her, and, consequently, that I was responsible.

It must have begun in the exodus. Stuck as she was with me, in our immense and perpetual emergency, whom else could she relax with?

• • •

The fate of the interned “enemy aliens” was indeed questionable. France’s collapse on the battlefield left the administrators of the camps in a quandary. The prison guards, many of them disabled veterans or retired policemen, tended to throw away their uniforms and run rather than face the dreaded *Boche*. The camp commandants often felt a moral obligation to protect prisoners whose only crime had been to beg France for asylum. But in the economic disaster of a lost war, these foreigners were not a priority. Most of the camps simply dissolved in the chaos of the unexpected defeat. The French officers became refugees themselves... and left the gates open.

The most vigorous inmates, like my father in La Braconne, just walked away. Others, too weak or too law-abiding to move, hung on in the disease-ridden facilities, sometimes without food or water, until they died or were hauled out by squads of rescuers, often Communist cadres. I do not know how my grandmother was able to leave the huge and dismal camp for females at Gurs. I know that I hurt my mother’s feelings by whining incessantly for my old companion, Nona, Nona...

• • •

Somehow Walther Victor and his three dependents managed to reunite in Marseille, to make their way from there to Lisbon and then be transported to the United States as members of a select group of intellectuals aboard the TSS *Nea Hellas*. It was Walther who performed most of the heroics in this phase of our journey, but my mind fixes always on my flight from Paris with my mother.

By the age of seven our physical intimacy was over; we could no longer lovingly touch. In my mother’s version, she’d condescended to my fierce (and to her, somewhat ridiculous) desire to be manly. I remember how she would

mock my alleged aversion to maternal caresses. I no longer can say which of us needed to wriggle out of the other’s humid clasp, once we had reached the United States. But despite our later troubles, when I rewind my brain’s hard drive past the files that hold the first data, I can see no evil in her. *In the beginning was love*. Particularly during that flight, I must have been held constantly—body to body—to the source of my life. Mother had been supremely available, and in some place and time during the exodus, on some seedy hotel floor, or on the ground in some rain-soaked wood, there must have been at least one hour when the two of us surrendered to one another. When we simply melted together.

I have held on to that bliss.

## GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN

*Murmur of the Innocents 23*, 2011  
Oil & Acrylic on Canvas, 71 X 109 in



Born in Switzerland of German parents fleeing the Nazis, **Vito Victor** grew up in the Bronx, New York and attended Reed College in Oregon. As German remained his first language, he went on to publish in literary journals on German topics, among them Beethoven, Thomas Mann and Rainer Maria Rilke.

COURTESY MODERNEM GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO