

# Jan Zábřana

THE LESSER HISTORIES



*Translated by Justin Quinn*

## The Lesser Histories

Jan Zábřana

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San Fabiana

*Move then with new desires,  
For where we used to build and love  
Is no man's land, and only ghosts can live  
Between two fires.*

Cecil Day Lewis

*Poetry without junk is boring.  
(Básnictví bez veteše je nuda.)*  
Vítěslav Nezval





# PART I



## SUMMER 1944

The season's last horse races. They're off!  
The fall, the finish... That day a card  
for him from S... A dog howls of  
the war, and smells the knacker's yard.

*The Great Dictator* on release.  
His father honeys the tobacco.  
July! A heat that's full of ice.  
Assassinations. Miracles also.

From the butcher shop of Omaha,  
the SS Argonauts withdraw.  
*Sterbe, Erika... sterbe wohl...*

The baths. Hay fever. Cyrillics stain  
the surface... Now, once more, in vain:  
not thus in Russian, not at all.

## DEAD GIRL REMEMBERED

It's ever closer now, the star  
that saw the urnfield culture passing.  
Back then it shone down from afar  
on the local girl, dead at the crossing.

Innocence shrives the guilt to come:  
it chooses and whites out the graves  
of people who will leave behind them  
nothing – a few stones, scattered staves.

The future simply loses sight  
of them – tossed from quick carriages,  
raped by drunk uncles, crushed by trains.

There's just some pubic bones, picked white  
in clay, in ditches where dogs piss,  
on throughways with the stink of foreskins.

## SPLENDID ISOLATION DESTROYED

Alone. At sea. It seemed to lie on  
the waters like a dream that drew you,  
an island that was called Jan Mayen.  
Europe and war meant nothing to you.

You loved it, wandering up the steps.  
White peas go clattering in the bath.  
Then Germans from the Eastern steppes –  
two lines along the muddy path.

And in the kitchen Georgian girls  
horsed round and whipped up ice-cream curls.  
The dead draped on a van, a car.

Jan Mayen Island gradually  
went floating off, lost in the sea,  
and lost among those days of war.

KHLESTAKOV ARRIVES FOR HARVEST HOME,  
SUMMER 1945

Lots of new widows to go round.  
They scrubbed until the floors were shiney.  
And in the woods a keeper found  
a shred of letter: *Lieber Heini!*

A cousin called: 'Come on back home!  
The cellar!' Villages stank of spirit.  
He jingled in his pocket some  
gold teeth (German), and near it,

on the green, music set the mood:  
The big shot's here! His driver's curse.  
Warm greetings, cheers, some honest food,

the national costume (somewhat worse  
for wear). All heard him softly sougning:  
'The first free harvest is *now in.*'

## EVENING TRAINS

The evening trains went hooting by  
the factories and the fields of wheat.  
Harmonicas would lilt and sigh  
songs such as 'Путь далек лежит'...

in the year of nineteen forty-five,  
in that year of first cigarettes,  
when farms without a soul alive  
gave hope – like red sunsets.

The evening trains made their way fast  
to Prague and to new dizziness.  
The weekend gone, I jumped a carriage

and left, the landscape rolling past.  
Along the line of that express  
youth fell away – a head of cabbage.