Grabbing the Beast by the Throat:  
Poems of Resistance—Czechoslovakia 1938-1945

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by

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Dedicated to all individuals—past and present—who have stood against or now battle oppression.
Introduction

Pavel Svoboda
b. 1919   d. 1944

Pavel Svoboda was born in 1919 in Tábor, Czechoslovakia (now known as the Czech Republic), a city located approximately 80 kilometers south of Prague in the Czech Republic’s South Bohemian region. Tábor, founded in 1420 by a radical group of Hussites, is bordered by the Lužnice River. Its location and the city’s complex, underground tunnel system have been important assets to citizens during various times in Tábor’s history.

Svoboda’s interest in writing is said to have begun during fireside story-telling evenings with his family: paternal grandparents who lived with the family: Dědeček (grandfather) and Babička (grandmother)), physician father Václav Svoboda, musically inclined mother Natálie Svobodová, younger brother Jiří, and younger sister Kateřina. The family enjoyed cultural outings during occasional trips to Prague, where they attended performances at the Prague National Theatre and Rudolfinum Concert Hall and pursued other intellectual interests.

The Svoboda children were encouraged by their parents to explore a variety of artistic endeavors, including painting, playing music, and writing; however, none achieved public acclaim while alive. Their obscurity is, perhaps, partially due to the signing of the Munich Agreement in 1938, which occurred as they were approaching adulthood. Pavel had just entered Prague’s Charles University with the intent of becoming a physician when the chaos resulting from the Munich Agreement altered his life. At that point, he began to write poems that documented student protests against the German occupation, resulting executions and deportations of students and intellectuals, the closing of Czech universities, the dismantling of the Czech military, and other violations against his homeland and the Czech people. When fellow University student and lover, Alžbeta Růžička, was transported with her Jewish mother to Terezín (Theresienstadt Concentration Camp), he joined other former University students and friends in the Czech underground resistance movement. Svoboda, who never learned
Růžička’s final fate, continued to write throughout the war until he was killed. On 24 December 1944, Svoboda was traveling from Prague to Tábor when Nazi soldiers boarded his train at a village south of the city. Svoboda and several other men were taken from the train, forced to stand in a line, and killed—all within view of other passengers. Their bodies were abandoned. A parcel of poems and papers that he gave to another passenger when he realized that the Nazis were coming aboard eventually was given to his family.

Of the Svoboda children, only Kateřina survived the war. Like his brother, Jiří became a partisan but was killed by Nazis in late 1942. Kateřina saved the poems that Pavel had written during the war, and she retained his personal family letters (no letters from family members to Pavel exist). When the Russians—who occupied Czechoslovakia after WWII—finally left the Czech Republic after the 1989 Velvet Revolution, then sixty-six-year-old Kateřina released her brother’s works for publication.

Svoboda’s death at such a young age was a loss to a country devastated by World War II and from which many people never fully recovered; however, his poems of witness using first-person narrative add an important dimension to our knowledge of Czech history during this time.
1938
Before the Munich Agreement

beautiful Czechoslovakia
sauntered onto center
stage, oblivious
to the crackling
menace just behind
the scrim.

She paused mid-stride
to give the theatre
an opportunity to notice
her bare shoulders
Her steaming glance.
On The Rails

I remember our childhood as if from a barren treetop. Kateřina, still small, wobbles down the middle: left foot to crossbeam right to chipped stones. Left to beam; right to stones. Again and again. Jiří and I flank her, each balanced on a rail.

We could walk forever like this. To Prague or, perhaps, our Czech borderlands. And we know we can see the whole world: pink and white petals stippled like torn letters beneath oaks embroidered with new leaves. The Lužnice spangled with silver.

Vibrations shiver our ribs, and I clutch Kateřina and plunge with her, over the embankment, before the train growls past. The faces inside are blurred knots of eyes and open mouths. Jiří’s legs strobe in and out of view as the iron wheels turn.
Dědeček’s Hunting Knife

We tromp across fields dank with early morning fog into the woods. He stops points to an oak There I crouch while he eases off the gun strap releases the safety cradles it. A hush settles then breaks with the first birdsong a low rustle as the doe steps into view body fully exposed. Dědeček snaps up his gun sights squeezes the trigger. A crack followed by throbbing sounds birds in flight squirrels leaping to safety my audible heart. Her head sags forelegs crumple flanks heave as Dědeček strides forward extracts rope from a pocket ties her back legs motions me to loop the rope over a thick tree branch. He hoists as I strain to hang her head down. His knife shines when he pulls it from its sheath drives it in grips the hilt with both hands opens her belly to neck bright liquid bleeds her out.
I Remember the Christmas Carp

I sneak outside and pull open the heavy door leading to the wine cellar. I am four. And I want to see our Christmas carp as it navigates its washtub prison. Its eyes, as unplumbed as dream shadows, stare. Its rubbery-peach lips break the surface and open as if to speak. Tell me a secret. I lean closer

but Father reaches past me, using both hands to yank the carp from the water. He lays it on newsprint fanned onto hard-pack. Rolls its thrashing body in the paper. Dědeček strikes with his mallet. Once. Twice. Three times. Father carries it, still jerking, to the kitchen. Keep back, Pavlik.

He exposes it again. Lips open. Close. Open. Close. Dědeček takes Mother’s biggest knife. Rocks it across the head. The tail. Bones crunch as pieces split apart. He scales it, then slices down the middle with the thinnest blade, using thick fingers to swipe out its insides. Flicking aside ropey, clinging strands.

After dinner, Mother walks around the table. Stops beside Dědeček. Babička. Father. Me. Jiří. Kateřina in her cradle. Dips her finger into the honey bowl and signs the cross on our foreheads To keep you safe. She gives us each a coin for our wallets To bring you fortune. And a carp scale For good luck.
Last Train

Alžběta and I sprint to the train station pausing only to thieve roses from a hedgerow boarding just as the whistle blows. I fasten shut the last compartment door fling aside our satchel of bread and cheese lower the window to invite summer inside. She flirts toward me then familiar crooked grin slung my direction. Side-by-side, we tilt out the open pane to wave at three bare-legged little girls running beside the tracks. Fields of yellow flowers stretch like newly laundered blankets.

In Český Krumlov, we dodge pick-pocketing gypsies ignore china smiles frozen on store-front marionettes race to the palace drawbridge where brown bears protect the moat. Their heads loll left. Right. Left. She tugs my sleeve, urging me up the steep road courtyard to courtyard to the top, where we look down on the red-roofed city below. The bending Vltava exposes herself here and there like wisps of lace visible at the top of a lowered neckline. Alžběta’s cheeks are flushed with heat. Dark hair tangles around her face. Her dark eyes are filled with life.
The Legend of the Bubaki

Quick! Clap your hands over your ears. Do not listen. Black cats drag the faceless man’s cart down the path leading to the river.

He hides under the bridge and sobs like a baby who has lost her mother. You want to find this abandoned child; take her in your arms and dab away her tears, but she does not exist. The cries you hear come from the Bubaki, who will coil tentacles around you in an unbreakable grip. He will drag you into dark, rushing water and hold you beneath the surface until your soul separates from your body. As it drifts up, he will snatch it and stuff it into his sack for transport to the forest. He will loop it like a strand of yarn over a low branch. On the next full-moon night, he will pluck slivers of nocturnal sounds from prowling animals. He will braid their shrieks into thick garments used to cloak your stolen soul.
Scarlet Scarf

At first there was little more than a glaze of ice edging the lake.
  Gone by mid-morning.
Each day a little bolder thicker
  moving toward center.
The water grew quieter. Reflected fewer and fewer stars.

November closed in. December.
Today first time this season skaters claim the surface.
  My sister is indistinguishable,
save her scarf and mittens:
  scarlet with silver thread
that flares like a siren.
1939 - 1941
The Chaos We Hear

We relinquish the old man. His abject bones and golden teeth.
His hide now drapes, splendid and translucent.
And the chaos we hear is little more than sparrows tumbling from the brooding sky.
The Czech Army Stands Down

I picture the Czech army as wild horses corralled in threatened territory. They pace to lather, manes tangled and eyes scraping the Sudetenland border. Pause then resume their restless gaits, eager to bear the saddle.

When ordered to stand down, all that harnessed power unleashes their fierce hearts. Spurred to action, they clamp the bit in their own teeth and surge to war with others who are ready to fight.
The Day Prague Fell

Impossible to know why the doe enters the city at dusk. Lost her bearings, perhaps, or drawn by the soothing hum of idling trucks. She pauses shyly on the Square, alert but preoccupied. Like a woman considering options before a mirror: Pearls? Or garnets in silver?

The sun balances between buildings, weightless as a ballerina, and her confusion blooms. She is cornered by streetcars and people pressed in from behind. When she skitters and leaps into the headlights, she extends her legs to their fullest. They snap like branches after an ice storm.
Tonight We Grieve

Tonight we yoke our shoulders with grief—
ink-in stars—tether the blood-soaked moon
with a short leash—hush dry leaves
before they chatter across frosted ground—
thumb-down unseeing eyes—swallow
lullabies as they fill our mouths.
Tomorrow is soon enough to wield swords
for the executed nine—the hundreds
transported—the shuttered university windows.
One Winter Night

I huddle with friends in a corner tavern in Little Quarter, pouring slivovitsa with a shaking hand:

*We must remember National Day. Last November. Students on Wenceslas Square. Hundreds rising up.*

We angle close. Closer. Shoulder to shoulder. The streetlamp reflects its yellowed globe through the window and onto our faces. I speak what we all are thinking:

*Nine executed.*

*More than a thousand sent east on trains.*

*Universities closed.*

We touch the rims of our glasses. Lock eyes. The burn hits my throat and travels all the way down.
Into Terezín

Today a letter from cousins living in Terezín tells what no one speaks: Gestapo arrived like newly hatched spiders, skittering through town to order residents out. Now the town will hold only Czech and German Jews of distinction. Movie stars and film directors. Olympiads. Musicians, artists, poets and intellectuals. Where will my cousins go? Will Czechs living on the outskirts of town raise their voices? Or will they bolt windows and button their thoughts inside?
Gypsy Music

One summer in Tábor
campfires combusted
near the Lužnice
and music shivered
to the place where I spied
from behind thinned-out
brush. I was seduced
by the feral dancing
and men with teeth
sharp as wolves’.
One Roma boy thrust
notes from his violin,
slashes of light
and overlong black hair
lacerating his face;
eyes snapping
like a madman’s.

Tonight, that same
music slides out
of a half-open
window in Prague’s
Little Quarter.
It must be the Gypsy boy
playing again,
seething as the mouth
of Lety Camp gapes open.
It is an immeasurable
black hole that swallows
his people in insatiable
gulps. Their hearts
crack in half. Their old
women whisper curses.
But no one breathes
a word of protest.
The Reichsprotektor Arrives in Old Town Square

Hooked-cross flags
flutter like twin handkerchiefs
as Reinhard Heydrich’s car
parades down narrow streets.
He passes crook-toothed markers
in the Old Jewish Cemetery.
The Black Tower.
The Charles Bridge.

In Old Town Square, the statue
of Jan Hus still stands
upright; he has not yet been burned
at the stake. The Astronomical Clock
still strikes the hour with the twelve
Apostles continuing to circle, frozen hands
clutching useless weapons:

Saint Paul’s sword     Saint Peter’s key
Saint Thomas’s spear   Saint Matthew’s axe
Saint Juda Tadeus’s book Saint John’s snake
Saint Simon’s saw      Saint Andrew’s cross
Saint Bartholomew’s book Saint Phillip’s cross
Saint Barnabas’s papyrus Saint Jacob’s tool for working flax

I watch the Apostles circle as Heydrich steps from his car.
The golden rooster crows at his one-armed salute.
The tower bell chimes the hour when he addresses the German troops.
The clock hands march forward.
Almost Winter

How slender the yellow sky how bony the tree branches across the light.

Starlings thick as hornets scatter black promises like archbishops.

See the empty tower empty bridge Alžbeta’s leather glove left on the empty park bench.

The transport inhales while everyone waits for snow.
Reconnaissance

I am a voyeur  loitering inside Heydrich’s favorite
Prague café.  This is where he always brings his lovers.

Tonight   a new woman bends to his ravenous hunger
breasts pressed against silk   fingers twisted to braids.

He extends his right hand   coils a strand of hair
between index finger and thumb   draws her in.

She grips the table edge   resisting then surrendering
to his mouth on her neck   his white fingers pressed

into her shoulder.  He rises.  Armed bodyguards push back
from nearby tables   he steers her away.  The room shifts

vertically as I clutch cutlery intended for my untouched
meal. Night thins to day   I am consumed by my desire to kill.
Assassination Preparations

I slip underground
Smuggle Nazi uniforms to Kateřina
    She rips out seams
    Turns cuffs and collars
    Alters the fit

I mail home poems and letters
Garments from the dead
    She sews on braiding
    Patches tell-tale holes
    Replaces lost buttons

I track Heydrich’s shadow
Learn his habits
    She snips off loose threads
    Lengthens the sleeves
    Shortens the hems

I wear wolf’s clothing
Prowl close to the den
    She reinforces darts
    Stitches new inseams
    Repairs worn elbows

I return to the safe house
Wrap new parcels with paper and twine
    She darns thinning fabric
    Mends the pockets
    Alters the fit
Imagined Murder in Wallenstein Palace

Candlelight spangles the chandeliers vaults toward swan and peacock constellations anticipates Reichsprotektor Heydrich. I imagine him passing so close I could pluck his sleeve. At my touch, he pauses impales me with those light blue eyes.

The corridor falls silent save gasps at my bold approach. He breathes heat on my face. My hand fills with Dědeček’s hunting knife leather handle familiar in weight and balance.

I grip his right arm above the elbow guide the knife to his lower belly lean in until the tip pierces fabric. Then skin. Muscle. Intestines. Drive the blade to the hilt. Twist. His mouth drops open as flesh parts.

I rasp: For my brothers in the resistance

The room crackles to life my left hand releases his arm circles his back in a carress. We slip to our knees. Lower. All the way down. His last liquid breath spurts through slack lips as SS men tangle against me. Separate us.

He saunters into the palace lobby boots spit-shined and turbulent to the concert hall while candle wax slides down prisms and drops in thickening circles on the floor. Opening bars to Wagner’s Rhine Gold fill my head.
1942 - 1943
Winter

settles a barbed
hook deep into the mouth
of Prague gaff
ready while
the whole world
even stars even planets
avert their troubled
eyes. Nothing
is as it appears.
On the Bones of Reinhard Heydrich

Today we eat heart. 
We crack breastbone in half 
with our fists and split skin 
down the middle. 
We reach in with bared hands 
past muscles and tendons 
and scoop it out like warm dough 
from the kneading bowl. 
We sink teeth deep 
into his brackish heart. Rip out 
chunks of meat and chew 
slowly, passing it from hand 
to hand and savoring 
every morsel. It is delicious 
and there is enough 
for everyone. When our hunger 
is slaked, we feed 
sweetbreads to the children.
In the Church of St. Cyril and Methodius

I do not believe our Czech partisans held hands with God while rainbows arced through the sanctuary. They did not knuckle away tears as they fell back through doors leading to the underbelly of St. Cyril and Methodius. They did not pray for more time as they knelt in the catacombs, reloading their guns. They spoke no words of contrition nor did they repent as compatriots were slaughtered and stockpiles dwindled. Even betrayal from their fellow partisan provoked no desire for retribution at the end. They had already won. The jammed machine gun and bomb lobbed short had not foiled the plan to assassinate Heydrich. The exposed safe houses and smoldering ruins of Lidice could not force his clotted blood to flow again. Their last two bullets already had their targets.
Elegy for Lidice, Czechoslovakia

Tonight
I swallow the waning
moon where it unspools
in my belly like a

white ribbon
lettered with Lidice’s fate.
Every bended knee

broken
every tongue extracted every
outstretched hand severed

at the wrist.
Plundered cemeteries and burned-out buildings tilled under.

Mothers
and children sent into shadow
and all the men opened like flowers.
Victory

over Heydrich does not taste sweet, as we thought it would. It is a fist rammed all the way down the throat. It is a small flame coaxed into an inferno that burns alive the old man who tends the hearth. It is a spring rain become a torrent that overflows banks and propels debris through front doors. It drowns the strongest swimmer, stitches shut the mouth of the seamstress, and amputates the musician’s arms. The sky weeps drops of blood and the sound of hell reverberates through the city. Victory rages and is unstoppable.
Someone. Please. Turn back the clock. Stop the rooster from marking the hour. Close the eyes of the living and rock our babies back to sleep.
The Sentinel

I remember life before the war, on nights at home when supper dishes were cupboarded and my family gathered in the small room at the front of our house.

Where are they now, I wonder. Do they think of me? Do Dědeček and Babička half-doze in their chairs while burning logs launch orange confetti sparks up the chimney? Has Father consulted his watch yet, chain dangling, before tucking it back in his pocket? Does Jiří still pretend to study his books while thinking of taking the dogs on the hunt? By now, our cat is rubbing her head along Mother’s calf before leaping into her lap, front paws kneading. Mother taps her fingers while Kateřina plays. Of course it is Chopin. Of course, a nocturne.

But now I am alone, save the memory of the piano’s voice as it pushes past open casements and into the square where Tábor’s clock tower stands sentinel.
The Decision

The partisan fills the doorway with a smile that stretches like a river, wide from end to end. He captivates even Babička, who almost laughs. Just like the old days, Mother serves soup. We blow across the lip of our spoons before tasting. The partisan extends his bowl for more, then turns the talk to war. The decision to hide his daughter settles hard across his shoulders. His mouth empties of laughter.
Yellow Star Girl

Onto the cloth sling spread out on the kitchen table she lays her sleeping daughter. She slides dark pants and coat over slack limbs, then hides the curls and fists under cap and mittens knitted from the same yellow-flecked blue yarn that matches her own sweater. I offer a necklace, gold cross dangling, and she fastens it around the unresisting neck. The face is beautiful in repose. Brows as fine as sunrise. Lashes so thick they cast shadows. The partisan presses into my hand a handkerchief knotted on one end with coins. Safe passage for their only child. Together, we lift the ends of the sling and secure it across my back, small girl cradled on my chest. The night air is chill; moon obscured by clouds. A thin sound attaches itself to me as I walk away.
Below Tábor
in interconnected tunnels
hand-chiseled three centuries ago by men
such as ourselves Jiří and I huddle peer
at dog-eared instructions scrawled
on margins in a thin volume of verse
Midnight.
Alžběta’s name day.
Žižka Square.

Jiří shakes his head fear rising like an evening star
face scored with lines of gray
cinders fallen from the sky
The earth-packed warren swallows
his whisper V noci každá kočka černá.
Every cat is black at night.

I tug open my satchel extract flour sacking wrapped
around apples and yesterday’s bread incline
my head toward stone steps leading to a rough-hewn
door secret entrance to the home
we can no longer occupy
From Babička.

Jiří snatches the bundle
hands quivering
wrists protruding from threadbare
cuffs desperate to cram dry bread
into his mouth My words make him stop
The sky heaves with bones and blood.
My Brother’s Coat

Mismatched buttons hang
their small bone heads like drunken
Germans tilted over empty shot glasses
    They barely hold on    I barely
hold onto lapels    sink my face into cloth
redolent with earth    pine    sweat.

Two years    only two    since the bolt of wool
tumbled across our kitchen table    paper pattern
affixed to fabric    shears carving shapes
    needle drawing in    dragging out    our mother
smoothing red-knuckled hands
across his shoulders to inspect the fit.

She knelt    straight pins protruding from pursed
lips    to measure the length of the hem    fish soup
simmered on the stove    steam gathered
on window panes    and my brother    reckless
with the limited beats remaining in his heart
    tossed back his head    and laughed.
Pope Pius XII Prepares

Before delivering his Christmas Eve message over Vatican Radio, did the Pope enjoy his dinner? I imagine it was Spartan, as I suspect is his preference. And served on a clean white plate. I almost see him push back from table with one-fourth of the meal remaining, as is his custom. He is gentle as he pats his lips with white damask before folding the napkin in half and half again. He places it precisely below his drained wine glass.

With heavy eyes lidded behind owlish spectacles, he steeples his fingers and taps the soft pads together, pondering the epistle he prepared earlier this week and considering the tone he will establish. He will be measured. And reasonable. He separates his hands and immerses them in bowls of rosewater provided by silent servers. The skin on his face stretches like a fitted sheet over a mattress. Or a lampshade.
My Brother Describes His Death

I tell you it was not so bad.
Not as bad as you imagine.
I was in a stand of pines near
Terezín, crouched over
coals to roast the rabbit we snared

that morning. It was bitter cold
but embers warmed my face. Then I
felt something like a bee stinging
the back of my neck. Just a sting.
Nothing more.

Not even shouts or barking sounds
of guns. No. None of that. Only
a sting and slight tug. Like
pulling off a shoe. Like diving
into water only

up. I saw frayed thread tattered from
seams in my coat. A stain spreading
all the way down the back. Then I
became blue. As blue as the lake
behind our house.
Last Day in Tábor

I walk past the fountain on Zizka Square, angle toward the church and slow at the open door through which a chorus of voices spills. Late afternoon sun brightens cobblestones and red tiles on circling roofs. The narrow street in front of me leads to a park and low stone wall. A white-haired woman appears and says, You are ended. Tomorrow I leave again. I know my family hopes for a swift resolution. They would lose heart if they knew the road is nearly impassable.
Rise Up: For My Brothers and Sisters of the Resistance

Where are your high-minded principles now you fearless daughters you hotheaded sons? Where is your courage in the face of the faceless? Our peaceful days have slipped away. All that snap and bravado those high-heeled shoes open-mouthed kisses in the shadow of the Astronomical Clock battle cries thick as cream. That time is gone. We stand now beneath an ashen sky.

Tell me this: Did you tremble as the four horsemen put pen to paper? Did the sun halt its cartwheeling across that swatch of blue?

When we gasp our final breaths will the Vltava weep as it passes our broken bones? Or will our only legacy be cradles lined with shorn curls?
1944 – 1945
Spring
  stumbles across
the square
like an open umbrella
  silver spines
flashing with each
bend and swoop
  and halted by a bicycle
whose spokes are ribboned
with sprigs of lilac
The Unborn

Rain smacking past leaves reminds me of clapping hands. It is my country’s unborn children, who will never hear this applause. They will never lift their faces into falling snow or admire the sinking sun as she drags her pinks and purples west before the escaping into darkness. My fingers open and shut like windows, closing around air before releasing it. I am undone.
When I Die

let it be not
in winter when frigid
bones quiver like baby
rattles in empty rooms.
Nor during the red-leafed
harvest or in the spring,
when fractured river ice
shakes out her hair
under the bridges of Prague.

let it be in summer
at the end of the longest day
under a sliver moon.
Let it be not fast but slow
like honey in overfull
hives. Warm like strawberries
in the mouth. Beautiful
like black hair sprouting
from knuckles holding the axe.
Occupation

The skin of the plum,
so purple it is near black,
splits when I press
in my thumbnail and run it
down the rounded cheek.
Bright yellow flesh breaks
through like lamplight inside
the house at night. My feet
sink into moist dirt, freshly
weeded for the wealth
of blooms planted
by strangers. I lean
toward the glass; look inside
at the home that is no longer
our home. Dědeček’s chair,
positioned in its usual place,
is occupied by another. It is
another’s cat next to the hearth
and another foot starts
upstairs, the third step
still loose at the lip.
The picture frame, once
holding familiar
faces, shows two blond
strangers. He is dressed in short
pants with suspenders; she
holds her kitten with fierce
concentration as it squirms
for freedom. An embroidered
shroud drapes the piano, a length
of linen I remember Mother
stitching one winter night
before the war. The plum
grows soft in my bruising hands.
Its flesh releases
the wild scent of summer.
Are You Going With Me?

I dream of the Old Jewish Cemetery.
A stranger bends, puzzles
his fingers into Hebrew
letters faintly etched
in the stone. The gash
that is his mouth crawls
with white lily anthers.
He begins to sob
as tombs shimmy close,
pebbles shaking off their tops.
Snails and moss
slither up the sides.
Snowflakes twist, watery
yellow, under streetlights and

I am in Prague
again on Charles Bridge. Jackboots
spark on the cobbled roadway,
witnessed by dark gray saints who fling
aside halos, crowns, and gilded
staffs before vaulting
into the path on jagged
stumps, feet still attached
to plinths. A child presses
against my side, coat blistered
with a patch on the yoke.
It is Alžbeta.

I grip her hand
hard and we teeter
atop the wall then leap. My coat
flaps into wings, beating
like an artery while the slick
water of the Vlatava
dwindles with every pulse.
Alžbeta slips away
until we are connected
only by fingertips. Long
moments pass, then our connection
snaps and she pinwheels
into a porcelain doll,
arms and legs X’ing
through the air, the patch
blurred and indistinct.
Her dress billows
into a bell that cannot ring
but before she hits
ground, the Golem
rises from the muddy bank, arms
extended to catch her. I try
to slow my wings. Alter my course
back to her. But my trajectory
is fixed and unstoppable.
I hurtle toward streetlights,
sparking boots, discarded halos
and stone saints staring
with eyes void of pupils.
Light punctures my face.
It is the sun, waking me
into chilled October.
My clothes are brittle with hoarfrost.
Grabbing the Beast by the Throat

Before Alžbeta was taken  Jiří cut down  Tomáš
Elena  all the other partisans.  Before books
fell in heaps on soiled stone tiles in the gymnasium.
Before the beast  the garnet glass eyes  hooked
cross.  Before we fell from the edge of the world.
We linked arms  danced along crooked
cobbled streets.  Our little rose bloomed still.
Trains leaving the station returned as promised.
But we never thought of tending our gardens
or grabbing the beast by the throat.
Dědeček’s Spirit Guides My Hand

I press against a tree as the Nazi passes
heart thumping
I step out clamp a hand over his mouth snap back
bile rising
his head knife to neck. Before I open his throat
breathing in
I think of deer hunting with Dědeček birds fog
eyes squeezed shut
wet leaves damp earth. The German sags
I ease him down.
Afterword
If you are reading this

I am
gone from this place
I am running
in the rain
   standing
next to the sun and moon
   I am
part of the river
the snow
the tree outside your window
There is no leaving
that which
we love  There is only
absence
a thinning
of time
   I am
winding my watch
watching the wind
waiting
for you
Do not come away
with me
   let yellow flowers
blazing in fields
bind you to earth
From the Other Side

Down burns the candle,
warming the frosty haze
that paints inside the window.
I see a corner of the empty
street below. It is a limited
then limitless view.
Voices of those who disappeared
murmur. I pass my hand
back and forth through the flame,
effecting scorch marks,
but my flesh is unscathed and oblivious.
Baking Bread

As if I were really present, I see Kateřina
crack two eggs and pour water
into the flour mound on the table.
She pushes fingers through yolks
then pinches her hands into fists.
I read the printed notice flattened
on the clean side of her worktable:

  Pavel Svoboda born 15 July 1919.
  Preceded in death by father
  Václav Svoboda, mother
  Natálie Svobodová, and brother
  Jiří. Survived by sister
  Kateřina Svobodová.

She kneads until blisters form on the doughy
surface. Rolls out two loaves, slashes ravines
across raw skins, and bakes until they sound
hollow when tapped with a bare knuckle.
As she carves a still-hot slice and slathers it
with butter, she offers a prayer for her dead.
I loop my arm around her shoulders.
Fox Hole

This, then, is death. The ability to see everything: swatches of forest interrupted by farmland and houses speckled here and there. Soldiers like these three, none of whom appears older than twenty. They are loose in the joints; shoulders slack and careless. Even the one scooping dirt with an iron helmet moves like liquid. He cries vertical lines. His blond hair slicks to his head and sweat stains his uniform. The others smoke, laugh, eat half-melted chocolate bars as the fox hole grows deep to the waist. Deeper. Dark soil piles high toward the front. And my untethered self moves on.
Alžbeta Returned

It is as if I stepped into a darkened glass room void of windows, doors, and seams. From this place of witness, I observe without being observed. People pass, each dragging a history that is utterly known to me.

From here I see Alžbeta, returned to the city that lost her name. Lines stitched with broken threads score her face; her hair is cut to her skull. Her splintered mind opens and I observe her family home on Kolínská Street.

There is her mirrored dresser, scattered with brush, comb, tangled necklaces, perfume bottles. She begins to fill a satchel with handkerchiefs, framed photographs, a favorite blue dress. Nothing useful. A knife would have been useful.

She shoehorns into a cattle car whose stuttered start clacks into rhythm. As she crosses Terezín’s gate, I am with her. As she tends vegetables grown for Nazi captors, I watch. When her hunger cannot be denied, I see the stick strike. Tilled dirt is fragrant on her face.

She learns that quotas must be satisfied. Quota. The word fills her mouth like meringue. Each day, more quotas; fewer people. At the end, burning typhus. One way or another, she was bound to burn. Her hold on life slips before she finds her way back.

Now she slumps against Prague’s Powder Gate. I see her fold pieces of her mind into tiny parcels, suppressing every memory except our last day in Český Krumlov. The yellow fields. The bright blue sky. The Vlatava, glittering like loose diamonds scattered across the landscape.
Liberation

This I now know: All Czechs believe liberation is unstoppable. They imagine morning light slammed through smudged panes and reddened fingertips forced from barren branches.

They picture themselves breaking down doors that held them captive, then striding outside to greet neighbors, who emerge as if from graves, making gestures of goodwill and forgiveness.

When tall, bearded men from the east offer freedom on silver-edged trays, they will eat before asking the price. They will not realize their shackles have passed to another.
Appendix I

Notes

Before the Munich Agreement—September 1938—British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, French Premier Eduard Daladier, Italian Dictator Benito Mussolini, and German Dictator Adolf Hitler sign the Munich Agreement, permitting Nazi Germany to annex Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland.

Last Train—Český Krumlov is a small city in the South Bohemian Region of the Czech Republic.

The Legend of the Bubaki—The Czech boogeyman is a faceless man who rides in a cart drawn by cats. He hides by riverbanks, luring unwary children by making sounds like a baby, for the purpose of stealing their souls.

The Czech Army Stands Down—March 1939—The battle-ready Czech military, stationed at the Czech Sudetenland bordered by Germany, is ordered to disband; shortly thereafter, Nazi troops march into Czechoslovakia. Many of these Czech soldiers join the French army, establishing the 1st Infantry Battalion of France’s Czecho-Slovak Armed Forces, which ultimately expands into a full division.

The Day Prague Fell—October 1939—On Wenceslas Square, one of the main city squares in Prague’s New Town, university students and other Czechs demonstrate against German occupation. One student is fatally wounded.

Tonight We Grieve—November 1939—The funeral of the student protestor in October sparks another demonstration in Prague. In retribution, nine students and intellectuals are executed, more than twelve hundred students are sent to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp near Berlin, and all Czech universities are closed for the remainder of the war.

Into Terezin—June 1940—Gestapo establish a concentration camp in the Czech city of Terezín (aka Theresienstadt), which becomes a transit camp to Auschwitz. Housed at Terezín are many famous German and Czech Jews, including artists, musicians, composers, and other intellectuals.
**Gypsy Music**—July 1940—The first Romani (Gypsy) from Czechoslovakia are interred in the Protectorate’s Lety Concentration Camp. By the end of the war, more than 3,500 Romani had been interred in the camp; none are known to have survived.

**The Reichsprotektor Arrives in Old Town Square**—September 1941—Nazi Reinhard Heydrich becomes German Reichsprotektor in charge of occupied Czechoslovakia; he is considered to be the architect of the Final Solution. Jan Hus (1369-1415) was a Czech priest, philosopher, reformer, and master at Charles University in Prague. He was burned at the stake for heresy against the doctrines of the Catholic Church; his statue stands in Prague’s Old Town Square.

**Almost Winter**—November 1941—Deportations begin to the Jewish ghetto in Terezín (Theresienstadt Concentration Camp). Ultimately, Terezín houses nearly 89,000 Jewish prisoners; fewer than 3,100 survive the war, including fewer than 200 children interred.

**On the Bones of Reinhard Heydrich**—June 1942—Reichsprotektor Heydrich dies of wounds sustained in an assassination attempt carried out by Czech resistance fighters Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš in a mission known as “Operation Anthropoid.”

**In the Church of St. Cyril & Methodius**—June 1942—Czech partisans Kubiš and Gabčík take refuge in several safe houses after Operation Anthropoid. They are betrayed by fellow partisan Karel Curda, retreat to the Church of St. Cyril and Methodius, engage in a several-hour gunfight against the Nazis, and ultimately take their own lives.

**Elegy for Lidice, Czechoslovakia**—June 1942—Following direct orders from Hitler, German forces retaliate against Heydrich’s assassination by destroying Czech villages Lidice and Ležáky. All men aged sixteen and older are immediately executed; remaining villagers are sent to Nazi concentration camps, where most perish. The towns are burned, cemeteries are plundered then destroyed, and all remaining building parts are razed.

**Below Tábor**—Žižka Square is the main square/gathering place in Tábor.

**Pope Pius XII Prepares**—December 1942—At the urging of senior members of the Roman curia and a number of high-ranking officials from other countries and after years of silence about the Jewish atrocities, Pope Pius XII delivers a Christmas Eve message in which he acknowledges “those hundreds of thousands who…sometimes only by reason of their nationality or race, are marked down for death or progressive extinction.”

**Rise Up: For My Brothers and Sisters of the Resistance**—The Astronomical clock is Prague’s landmark clock tower, installed in 1410, located in Old Town Square, and featuring the 12 Apostles.

**Are You Going With Me?**—According to Jewish folklore, 16th century chief Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel created the Golem of Prague out of clay scooped from the banks
of the Vltava River; it is said to be hidden in Prague. The legend also proclaims that, one
day, the Golem will return to life to rescue Prague Jews during a time of great need.

**If You Are Reading This**—This poem and all others in the “Afterword” section are
written by Svoboda after his death.

**Liberation**—May 1945—The Russian Red Army fights and wins the Battle for Prague;
after the war, Russians occupy Czechoslovakia until 1989.
Appendix II

Author’s Note

The foundation of these poems is historical events that took place and figures who lived in Czechoslovakia from 1938 until 1945. Most of the poems are written in the first person by imagined Czech poet and resistance fighter Pavel Svoboda, whose biographical sketch follows, and they are meant to be read in sequence. Except for historically documented figures and events depicted in the poems, all other characters and their actions are products of the author’s imagination; any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, is entirely coincidental.

This manuscript of poems began as a creative writing exercise assigned in a class I took as part of my Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts Program. The class—Reading in Translation—was taught by Drs. Carol Maier and R. Kelly Washbourne; the assignment was based on The Imaginary Poets, edited by Alan Michael Parker. In this exercise, I invented a Czechoslovakian poet during World War II, wrote his biography, and “translated” three of “his” poems into English. It was an exploration of a style of writing invented by Portuguese writer and poet Fernando Pessoa—the heteronym—in which an invented character writes in his or her own style.

The process released my writing in a way I never before experienced, and I found myself immersed in the historical events that took place in Czechoslovakia at that time as well as in the life of a young man—Pavel Svoboda—who was completely changed by uncontrollable events. I wrote as Svoboda during his most life-altering events, and I wrote as Svoboda after his death.

This process released my writing in two additional ways. It expanded my idea of the persona poem. Rather than simply writing from the perspective of another person or thing, I became that person and wrote every poem as if I actually were experiencing, dreaming, or imagining the events described. It allowed me to write without dipping into nostalgia and also gave me the freedom to fully explore the darkest and most brutal moments of wishing to murder another person. As Svoboda, I did not soften his anger, and I was unconcerned about what people would think if they knew his thoughts.

The process also introduced me to documentary poetics. The poems in this manuscript present and introduce historically accurate facts, events, and figures, but they also incorporate Svoboda’s vehement desire to change and/or improve the situation. I
believe this collection adds an important dimension to the overall picture of World War II’s European front. Ultimately, I wrote what I believe to be an historical novel in poems.

Throughout the manuscript, Svoboda writes in the first person, giving immediacy to events taking place around him while he is alive and after his death. Since he was young when he began to write and was a college student initially studying medicine, his poems were originally journal entries. Only after Czech universities were closed did he fashion journal entries into finished poems. Thus, his use of free verse and lack of rhymes or traditional poetic structures.

In the first section (1938), nostalgia and hope for a better future led him to describe his childhood and home life. The next sections are un-self-censored political poems that he thought would inspire his fellow partisans to take action against the German occupation of their country. In only one poem does he use dashes; the raw emotion of the experience was so significant that his journal entry showed stabbing dashes that mimicked sword attacks. In an effort to gain some self-control over his emotions, many of his poems are divided into stanzas of equal line breaks. After Svoboda dies, his poems take an omniscient point of view that remains fully aware of who he was when alive. After his death, he abandons the caesura—used in earlier poems as rhythmic pauses that heightened tension and/or created dramatic effect.