



Richard Berengarten

Ten poems from

THE BLUE BUTTERFLY

PLAVI LEPTIR

and an accompanying prose piece

with translations by

Vera V. Radojević, Danilo Kiš and Ivan V. Lalić

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Two Photographs

“Look. Look, Quick. Take a photograph. Now!” I said. It was 25 May, ‘Youth Day’, a national holiday in former Yugoslavia. Lara, aged seventeen, was standing on my right, cradling camera and guidebook, her attention elsewhere. Two rapid looks swept across her face when I nudged her, First, a cocking of the head and raising of the left eyebrow, that long-suffering daughterly look that says, “What’s he on about *now*?” Then, as she turned and saw the butterfly preening itself on my finger, blue wings folded upright, completely unperturbed by the crowd milling, pressing around us, waiting to get into the jam-packed museum, her eyes widened and her jaw dropped, in a mirror of my own amazement. “But it’s too close,” she protested. “It won’t come out.” “Never mind,” I urged. “Try. Hurry. Before it flies away.” Then she moved fast. She unzipped her camera’s soft leather case, stepped back, focused, and clicked.

I moved my hand slowly towards my chest to examine the creature as carefully as possible without disturbing it. Dazzling patterned wings, black-speckled, leaf-veined. Scales’ iridescent blue tipped with filigree bandings of red and green. Firm-etched, sunlight-catching colours, changing at the slightest tremor. Then, a childhood association, from way back in my head. *Ladybird, Ladybird, Fly away home . . .* And I blew softly on the insect. But immediately, more thoughts crowded out this fantasy, coming so thick and fast they interrupted and cancelled one another, before any had time to settle. Not so much a short-circuiting of connections as an overloading of available lines.

One was laughter. *No common or garden ladybird, fool, but a butterfly. A miraculous butterfly. Of a kind I’ve never seen before.* And, more serious: *The butterfly symbolises the soul. Whose?* And more serious still: *The men and boys massacred here by the Nazis had their homes burned too. Parents lost children. Children lost parents.* And, with a kind of detached, musing curiosity, in an acute awareness of pain that, oddly, had no pain in it, but an unusual, calm, alert acceptance, almost an aloofness, it was so impersonal: *Is this some message from the souls of these*

dead? A request? A blessing? A command? A duty and an honour being conferred? And, more mundanely, What kind of butterfly? Male or female? Can it be fully grown, and still so small? And butterfly words, appearing out of memory's nowhere, wafted around my head: chrysalis, shard, larva, pupa, lepidoptera, fritillary, imago. And then a sense of space, transparency, combined with a quiet, rooted, conscious joy.

I blew on the small creature again, and waved my hand gently up and down. This time it responded, flittered away, performed a few, quick, seemingly random aerial twirls just in front of my face - and then resettled, as if quite purposefully, on the same finger it had just relinquished. Another fantasy, mingled with the others, still hovering: my mind flashed back to England, last winter, to my friend David, who had killed himself one icy February evening outside his snow-surrounded bungalow in the Cambridgeshire fens, by feeding the exhaust fumes from his stationary car back through its heating system, while he sat asphyxiating, strapped in the driver's seat, radio blaring, a half bottle of scotch on his lap and an open packet of Marlborough on the passenger seat beside him. I'd been his last close friend to see him alive, that morning, in London. *Can this be HIS soul, coming back here? In this place where death and life meet? To greet me on neutral ground? To connect with me again? To explain? To atone, perhaps, for that devouring need he'd had, for perfection?*

“Wind the spool on,” I said to Lara. “Quick, And give me the camera.” I stretched my left arm straight in front of me, and with my other hand clumsily focused the lens. (I’m left-handed.) My butterfly seemed just as unconcerned as before, almost as if it was posing - wanting, waiting to have its portrait taken. Perhaps it trusts me, I thought, almost flattered by its attentiveness. Or maybe it just likes my smell. I clicked. It rested another few seconds on my finger, then took off, hovered, flittered away. I felt a sudden momentary panic, as at an irretrievable loss. The keeper re-opened her glass doors and we trooped into the museum.

The blue butterfly

On my Jew's hand, born out of ghettos and shtetls,
raised from unmarked graves of my obliterated people
in Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia,

on my hand mothered by a refugee's daughter,
first opened in blitzed London, grown big
through post-war years safe in suburban England,

on my pink, educated, ironical left hand
of a parvenu not quite British pseudo gentleman
which first learned to scrawl its untutored messages

among Latin-reading rugby-playing militarists
in an élite boarding school on Sussex's green downs
and against the cloister walls of puritan Cambridge,

on my hand weakened by anomie, on my
writing hand, now of a sudden willingly
stretched before me in Serbian spring sunlight,

on my unique living hand, trembling and troubled
by this May visitation, like a virginal
leaf new sprung on the oldest oak in Europe,

on my proud firm hand, miraculously blessed
by the two thousand eight hundred martyred
men, women and children fallen at Kragujevac,

a blue butterfly simply fell out of the sky
and settled on the forefinger
of my international bloody human hand.

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Nada : hope or nothing

Like a windblown seed, not yet rooted
or petal from an impossible moonflower, shimmering,
unplucked, perfect, in a clear night sky,

like a rainbow without rain, like the invisible
hand of a god stretching out of nowhere
to shower joy brimful from Plenty's horn,

like a greeting from a child, unborn, unconceived,
like an angel, bearing a gift, a ring, a promise,
like a visitation from a twice redeemed soul,

like a silent song sung by the ghost of nobody
to an unknown, sweet and melodious instrument
buried ages in the deepest cave of being,

like a word only half heard, half remembered,
not yet fully learned, from a stranger's language,
the sad heart longs for, to unlock its deepest cells,

a blue butterfly takes my hand and writes

in invisible ink across its page of air

Nada, Elpidha, Nadezhda, Esperanza, Hoffnung.

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The death of children

It is the death of children most offends
nature and justice. No use asking why.
What justice is, nobody comprehends.

What punishment can ever make amends?
There's no pretext, excuse or alibi.
It is the death of children most offends.

Whoever offers arguments pretends
to read fate's lines. Although we must swear by
what justice is, nobody comprehends

how destiny or chance weaves. Who defends
their motives with fair reasons tells a lie.
It is the death of children most offends.

Death can't deserve to reap such dividends
from these, who scarcely lived, their parents cry.
What justice is, nobody comprehends.

Bring comfort then, and courage. Strangers, friends,
are we not all parents when children die?
What justice is, nobody comprehends.
It is the death of children most offends.

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When night covered Europe

Second Song of the Dead

You who pass this way
in European day
know who walked among
these hills and valleys
a man and a boy
with nothing to say
but half-remembered poems
carrying a machine gun
when night covered Europe

In a mountain village
a woman gave them porridge
and space by her fire
cornmeal and milk
crumbs rich as knowledge
kindness to mend courage
of a man and a boy
carrying a machine gun
when night covered Europe

From a hovel hidden

among rocks and boulders
a girl with smouldering eyes
ran after, calling
take me with you, soldiers
I can man a machine gun
I have two dead brothers
Now I have three others
when night covered Europe

Sleepless in bombed barns
they starved in the gloaming
but kicked over their embers
and left with no traces
to clamber higher spaces
where no armies trundle
and no dead comrades' faces
moan through broken dreaming
when night covered Europe

The shadow well

First song of the dead

Stand up, Soldier, ring the bell,
ring it for yourself as well.
Sentry, shut your telescope,
surrender your horizon's hope.

Climb up, Deacon, to the tower,
pull the rope and ring the bell.
The butterfly burns on its flower.
Gunner, you will die as well.

Ask the bloody Brigadier
why I shat myself in fear
but never emptied out the bucket
and just told him to go fuck it.

And ask the ribboned Generals
talking in luxurious halls
if they tremble where they sit
while I rot in a common pit.

Survivor, go ask Presidents

Does this sacrifice makes sense?

And will the international liars
negotiate to quench these fires?

Around this blaze, fierce shadows grope
inward to quench any hope.

Pull the rope, ring the bell

What else is there left to tell?

Pull the rope, ring the bell,

wind blows in an empty shell.

Like a flickering from hell

light flecks in the shadow well.

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Unmarked voices from a mass grave

Seventh song of the dead

You have come to a place, not a place, where time and space halt,
where the trees' topmost branches stop, and the last waves stop,
and roots can grow no longer, and rivers no longer flow,
and the last heard note grips silence and never reaches further,
like a photograph of an arrow that freezes it forever
suspended in its flight, trapped quivering on air
and the moth or fly is caught in a honeyball of amber.

You have come to a place, not a place, where no-one can remember
any words they may have heard, or ways out of the maze,
or steps once learned in dancing, or their subtle variations,
and time is a catacomb, a grove of bones, a permanence,
a station and a destiny, but not a destination,
where all contours of yesterdays are stratified in a fault
and tomorrow is an abyss, and the trains of space-time halt.

This country weighs so heavy

First statement of a survivor

This country weighs so heavy
sometimes I can't breathe
Under each rock, a skull
Under the plough, teeth
in every village graveyard
names of slaughtered brothers
who fell against each other
till fish in lakes and sea
grew fat on their corpses
and in every river, blood

How many more centuries
to ease the wails of mothers
scratched in walls of farms
and hanging from barn rafters
How long before revenge
dies in its own bath
before the clansmen forget
their enemies' grandchildren

and sharpening of knives
in long awaited ambush

And yet, hard, rugged land
merciless, wild, ravaged
you have showered beauty on me
to bandage my nightmares
nourished me, filled my palms
with your bread and salt
into my mouth poured
your wine and kisses
and, gazing through open eyes
taught me to fear nothing

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The untouchables

Second statement of a survivor

Most never returned. Of those who did
few talk. There are no words. No words.
What can they say to us, whose imaginations
belong only to this world, who have never been
pushed beyond the borders of the possible?

They seem, or wish to seem, unheroic,
ordinary, unmasterly, like us. And we,
who believe in words and slip on surfaces,
may never recognise behind their reticence
lie sentences so deep they are unsayable.

Noticing, we want to salute them as heroes,
but they won't have it. Rejecting eyes
behind their eyes say, No. Honours and praises
from us can never fit them. Our attention
like a uniform, makes them uncomfortable.

We are not fools. We are not especially evil.

We understand what they suffered, we think,
we care. *So tell us*, we begin . . . What stops us?
A silence behind the silence behind their silence
assuring us they know we are corruptible?

They are apart from us. It's not our fault
or theirs, we cannot reach them, that their vision
refuses more than a corner in our tomorrows,
that eyes behind their retinas make clear
questions that lie deepest are unanswerable.

It's clarity that veils them, though, not hope.
Chosen among the chosen, blessed or cursed
because they have survived the unimaginable,
as if twice born, among the living dead,
they move among us, quietly. Untouchable.

In silence : the mourner

Third statement of a survivor

On the outskirts of the city of permanent possibility,
near the fork of two rivers, where Islam and Europe cross,
a woman sits by her father's grave. She does not believe
in God, yet to the dead human, god-huge in her head,
she ferries wordless questions. On the grave, May flowers,
she has arranged carefully, a variegated bouquet
bought from the corner kiosk near her two roomed apartment
on the eighth floor of a block on the Street of National Heroes
where she lives with her daughter from a broken marriage
and a lover who does not love her. This woman has any age
but her time is just past beauty. Among graves and flowers
she sits to escape and find herself. And the dead man
she addresses, although she knows he is nowhere,
will send her clearer answers on sudden flights of images
than any plied by the living on versatile word currents
strung sparkling, multi-faceted along well-worn thought-strings,
till a thousand and one particulars, of injustices and joys,
unjumble their tangled threads, recover weight and balance,
lightborne, freed from desire, untrammelled from memory,
onto air, like dust. And even though nothing changes
everything is changed. She knows who she is, and to be,
and, silent, takes her tram home, a woman just past beauty,
gifted with the impossible in the city of possibility,
deepened, refreshed, calmed, from talking to the dead.

Clean out the house

Clean out the house for springtime. Sweep the floor
in patience and in conscientiousness.

Let in the wind that's hammering at the door.

Who knows, some day we'll hammer out a cure
for cruelty, corruption, cowardice,
clean out the house for springtime, sweep the floor.

Create a pattern, not caricature
of natural justice, without prejudice,
let in the wind that's hammering at the door.

But human suffering? Don't be so sure.

In practice every theory goes amiss.

Clean out the house for springtime. Sweep the floor.

We go the way the flies go. Dust, manure
or ashes will be all that's left of us.

Let in the wind that's hammering at the door.

We can trust nothing, nowhere rest secure

except in love, for love is limitless.

Clean out the house for springtime. Sweep the floor.

Let in the wind that's hammering at the door.



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Biographical Notes

Richard Berengarten

(previously known as Richard Burns) was born in London in 1943 into a family of musicians. He studied English at the University of Cambridge (1961-1964) and Linguistics at University College London (1977-78). In 1975, he founded the international Cambridge Poetry Festival, which ran until 1985. He has lived in Italy, Greece, Serbia, Croatia and the USA, and has also worked extensively in the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland and Russia. He first visited Yugoslavia as a lecturer for the British Council in the early 1980s, and that trip led to a lifelong involvement. Richard Berengarten lived in Yugoslavia between 1987 and 1991, first in Split then in Belgrade, where he taught at the Centre for Foreign Languages and later at the Philological Faculty. This experience coincided with a time of turmoil in former Yugoslavia which marked him profoundly. In response, he wrote his *Balkan Trilogy*, consisting of: *In a Time of Drought* (2006, 2008 & 2011); *The Blue Butterfly* (2006, 2008 & 2011); and *Under Balkan Light* (2008 & 2011). *The Blue Butterfly* provided the *Veliki školski čas* memorial-oratorio for Nazi massacre-victims in Kragujevac (Serbia, 2007).

Berengarten's poetry is multifaceted in scope and international in reach: his poetry integrates English, European, Slavic, Jewish, Mediterranean, Chinese, Japanese and American traditions. His books include: *Avebury* (1972); *Learning to Talk* (1980); *Roots/Routes* (1982); *Black Light: Poems in Memory of George Seferis* (1983, 1986 & 1995); *Against Perfection* (1999); *The Manager* (2001 & 2008); *Book With No Back Cover* (2003); *For the Living: Selected Longer Poems 1965-2000* (2003 & 2008); and the ongoing *Manual* chapbooks (2005-2009). Richard Berengarten's prose works include *Keys to Transformation: Ceri Richards and Dylan Thomas* (1981) and a variety of uncollected essays. He is currently working on a series of theoretical statements entitled *Imagems: Towards a Universalist Poetics*, and a series of poems based on *Yi Jing (I Ching)* entitled *Two to the Power of Six*. The *Critical Companion to Richard Berengarten*, edited by Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick and Catherine E. Byfield, has recently appeared (Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2011), containing thirty-four essays from contributors in eleven

countries, including four essays by Serbian writers, Svetozar Ignjačević, Aleksandar Petrov, Slobodan Rakitić and Andrija Matić.

Berengarten has translated poetry, fiction and criticism from Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Macedonian and Serbian. He is recipient of the Eric Gregory Award (1972), the Keats Memorial Prize (1974), the Duncan Lawrie Prize (1982), the Yeats Club Prize (1989), the Jewish Quarterly-Wingate Award for Poetry (1992), and the international Morava Charter Prize (2005). A former Arts Council of Great Britain Writer-in-Residence at the Victoria Adult Education Centre, Gravesend (1979-1981), Visiting Professor at the University of Notre Dame (1982), British Council Lector, Belgrade (1987-1990), Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge (2003-2005) and Project Fellow (2005-2006), he is currently a Praeceptor at Corpus Christi College and Bye-Fellow at Downing College. He also teaches at Christ's College, Pembroke College, Peterhouse and Wolfson College, Cambridge. He has three children and two grandchildren. He lives in Cambridge with his partner Melanie Rein, a Jungian psychotherapist.

Vera V. Radojević

has co-operated with Richard Berengarten in literary translation between Serbian and English since 1989. She has published her translations of the first two parts of Richard Berengarten's *Balkan Trilogy* in Serbian (*The Blue Butterfly* and *In a Time of Drought*); and she has recently finished working on the third part (*Under Balkan Light*). Her translation of *In a Time of Drought* (*U vreme suše*, RAD, Belgrade, 2004) was awarded the international *Morava Charter* prize at Mrčajevci in 2005. Her translation of *The Blue Butterfly* (*Plavi leptir*, Plava tačka, Belgrade, 2008) was the basis for the *Veliki školski čas* performance at Šumarice on October 21, 2008, in commemoration of victims of the 1941 Nazi massacre – the first time that the work of a poet from outside former Yugoslavia was ever used for the entire oratorio. With Richard Berengarten, Vera V. Radojević has also co-translated the following: a book of poems by Duška Vrhovac, *I Wear My Shadow Inside Me* (Forest Books, London, 1991); *May Peace be the Name of the Centuries* (*Mir neka je ime vekova*, three-language edition) by Slobodan Pavičević (Kragujevački oktobar, Kragujevac, 2010); and a collection of unpublished epigrams by Vito Marković.

Recently, she has also translated from Serbian into English three essays on Richard Berengarten's work by the leading Serbian writers Aleksandar Petrov, Slobodan Rakitić and Svetozar Ignjačević, all of which appear in *Richard Berengarten, a Critical Companion*, (ed. Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick and Catherine E. Byfield, Salt Publishing, Cambridge 2011). Born in Belgrade, Vera V. Radojević has lived and worked in London, the USA and France. She lives and works in Belgrade.



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