

RICHARD BERENGARTEN

Three poems from

The Blue Butterfly

(Shearsman Books, 2011)



The blue butterfly

This unusual photo was taken by Richard Berengarten on May 25, 1984, outside the Šumarice memorial museum to the survivors of a Nazi massacre of nearly 3,000 civilians in October 1941 (Kragujevac, central Serbia). This extraordinary event inspired (triggered) Berengarten's prizewinning book of poems, *The Blue Butterfly* (Shearsman Books, 2011). The full background story is told in Berengarten's essay '[A Synchronistic Experience in Serbia](#)', and three poems from the book are published here, including the title-poem: 'The blue butterfly', 'Nada: hope or nothing', and 'The telling, first attempt'.

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.

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.

*Note: In Serbian, the word **nada** means 'hope'. In Spanish, it means 'nothing'.*

The telling (first attempt)

In that moment, I remembered nothing
but became memory. I *was* being.
And as for *before*? *Before* – a mouthing
of half-dumb shadows had been my hearing
and tunnels sculpted and bored through fearing
the whole bolstered scope of my seeing.

Now my ears awakened in an alert
attentive and percipient listening
to scoured shells of voices, wholly prised apart
from those dead mouths, pouring their testament
onto spring wind, stirred by the instrument
of the butterfly at rest on my finger, glistening.

And I saw the May morning sun shoot fire
on the hillsides, which still glowed green, intact,
and those massed children, I heard as a choir,
although still only schoolkids, who chattered.
Nothing was marred or maimed. Everything mattered.
Matter was miracle. Miracle was fact.

As though an index to the infinite
library of nature and history
had tumbled into me, and a fortunate
finding of buried keys, of forgotten
reference and disappeared quotation
had filled my sight, as gift, as mystery,

all was ordinary, still – and, yet, otherness
without seam. The world did not sheer away
but was its very self, no more nor less
than ever, but tuned now to its own being,
and the heard and seen *were* hearing, seeing,
spirit within spiral, wave within way.