

## The Blue Butterfly

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# The Blue Butterfly



*The blue butterfly*  
*Šumarice, May 25, 1985*

# The Blue Butterfly

SELECTED WRITINGS

Volume 3

*The Balkan Trilogy : Part 1*

RICHARD BERENGARTEN



CAMBRIDGE

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*For the living*

This story is not being told in order to describe massacres.

PRIMO LEVI

*If Not Now When?*

'In Yugoslavia,' suggested my husband smiling, 'everybody is happy.' 'No, no,' I said, 'not at all, but.' The thing I wanted to tell him could not be told, however, because it was manifold and nothing like what one is accustomed to communicate by words. I stumbled on. 'Really, we are not as rich in the West as we think we are. Or, rather, there is as much we have not got which the people in the Balkans have got in quantity. To look at them you would think they had got nothing at all. But if these imbeciles here had not spoiled this embroidery you would see that whoever did it had more than we have.'

REBECCA WEST

*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*

Once I dreamed I was a butterfly. Fluttering around, I was completely involved in being a butterfly and was unaware of being a man. Then, suddenly, I woke up and found myself myself again. Now I don't know whether I was a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I'm a butterfly dreaming I'm a man.

ZHUANG ZHOU

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## Editorial Note

*The Blue Butterfly* is the third of five volumes published in 2008 in the ongoing Salt series of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings*. It is also the first part of his *Balkan Trilogy*, followed by *In a Time of Drought* and *Under Balkan Light*. The book's twin points of departure are a massacre that took place in Šumarice, outside the town of Kragujevac in October 1941, and an encounter with a blue butterfly at the same location in May 1985. The poems are laced into their contexts by documents, photographs, a postscript, and end-notes which provide references and dates and places of composition. In October 2007, the author received a special honour at the annual commemoration of the Kragujevac massacre, when *The Blue Butterfly* provided the theme for the oratorio at the open-air memorial event for the victims. The first Salt publication of this book appeared in 2006 under the name Richard Burns. For this revised second edition, the poet now repossesses his ancestral name.



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All interpretations and opinions expressed in this book are, of course, my own.

RB  
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*Added for the 2nd edition*

Staniša Brkić's monograph, entitled *Ime i broj: Kragujevačka tragedija 1941* [*Number and name: the Kragujevac Tragedy 1941*] was published in 2007 by Spomen-Park Kragujevački octobar [*The Kragujevac October Memorial Park*], Kragujevac.

RB  
CAMBRIDGE  
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# 1 The blue butterfly



## Stagnation

Skies slept, or looked  
the other way.  
Exonerate nobody.

The eye-of-heaven's  
retina detached.  
Justice cataracted.

On earth, men  
slaughtered, fell  
and rotted.

And the dead  
and living dead  
sank deeper in decay.

Darkness flowered  
in cruelty. Gracelessness  
numbed hope.

Heaven there, world  
here, and their only  
meeting place, death.

## Two documents

### *Standing orders, 1941*

In Serbia, due to the Balkan mentality, widespread communism, and patriotically camouflaged uprisings it is necessary that the orders of the High Command be carried out with extreme severity. The quick and ruthless suppression of the Serbian uprising

represents a considerable gain towards the final German Victory, which must not be underestimated. In the event of loss of German soldiers' lives or the lives of the Volksdeutschers, the Local Commanders and, ultimately, the Regimental Commanders

will order immediate executions of the enemy according to the following guidelines: a) for each murdered German soldier or Volksdeutscher (man, woman or child) 100 prisoners or hostages; b) for each wounded German soldier or Volksdeutscher

50 prisoners or hostages. All of Serbia must become a terrifying example which will strike at the hearts of the people. Each man who behaves kindly sins against his dead friends and regardless of rank will be held responsible before the Court Martial.

*Report, October 30, 1941*

The severe attacks by the Wehrmacht, especially the ruthlessly executed reprisal measures seemed to have led to a sobering up of at least part of the Serbian population by the end of October. According to a report of 30.10.41 of the Plenipotentiary Commanding General in Serbia, a total of 3,843 Serbs were arrested. In Belgrade 405 hostages were shot (until now a total of 4,750), 90 Communists in Šabac, 2,300 hostages in Kragujevac, and 1,700 in Kraljevo. The prison camp at Šabac on October 15 contained 19,545 Serbs. Bands also had to be driven from their hide-outs in the mountains and woods south of Kragujevac.

## Don't send bread tomorrow

*October 21, 1941–May 25, 1985*

Marched out of town, herded in huts and barracks,  
from workshops, factories, offices, prisons,  
classrooms, living rooms, and off the city's streets,  
they heard shots outside, knew their own deaths near,  
and on scraps of paper emptied from pockets  
scribbled quick messages to loved ones.

*Dad—me and Miša are in the old barracks  
Bring us lunch, my jumper too and a rug  
Bring jam in a small jar  
Dad see the Headmaster if it's worth it  
I'm OK how are things at the mill  
As for that raki great you've sent it*

Carpenter, tavern keeper, cobbler, clerk,  
locksmith, gunsmith, foundry worker, priest,  
the teacher who refused a collaborator's rescue  
but chose instead to step out to his death  
with the schoolboys he taught, calling  
*Go ahead. Shoot. I am giving my lesson. Now.*

*Tell the comrades to fight till they crush the enemy  
I'm done for but let them wipe out the vermin  
My darling wife maybe we shall never meet again  
Write to my mother tell her everything  
For the sake of whatever's dearest to you revenge me  
Children revenge your father Stevan*

And forty four years later, a young father carries  
his toddler on his shoulders, chubby arms waving,  
carefully around a flower bed, hoists the child  
to perch astride their grave, while he crouches,  
hidden behind a slab, and calls to his friend,  
*Go ahead. Shoot. Take a photograph. Now.*

*Tsveta goodbye take care of our children  
Mira kiss the children for me children listen to mum  
My dear sweet children your dad sends you his last words  
Goodbye I'm going to death may God protect you  
Forgive me if I offended anybody in my life  
Don't send bread tomorrow*

## 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.*

## 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 drilled 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.

*Second attempt*

Nobody could stay unmoved in this place,  
not blench at all, not flinch with at least some  
tightening of skin, muscles of throat and face  
or watering of eyes. *We who live on*  
*might have been them.* There's no prerogative on  
pain. Cruelty's commonness makes us all dumb.

Numb silence, though, is no answer to evil.  
To remain tacit, to call up no speech on its  
repeated occurrences, is to grovel  
before it, as to some pre-ordained essence  
demanding just as complete acquiescence  
as the rotations of seasons and planets,

and that won't do. Fail or not, I must try  
this telling: like a treadmill, mangle, wringer,  
or spinning drum squeezing spongy death dry,  
let me crush thought, sacrifice-soaked, to drain  
oil from slaughter, juice from the fruit of pain  
into my blood, along my writing finger,

channelled in flight by you, fully fledged nymph,  
that their heroisms might dizzy my head,  
their red corpuscles flow through my lymph  
and their strength fill me, as wind fills a sail—  
if only for once, words, words would not fail  
ever to reach the dumb mouths of the dead—

to carry a cargo of such immense weight  
of souls from the hold of their burying ground,  
seal pain, refine death, transubstantiate  
blood, to wine, to spirit. This, blue fritillary,  
flight filtered fine in a poem's distillery,  
is how I would ring their memorial sound.

*Third attempt*

Is it *language itself* won't do here? When time flows  
into itself, and space is so transparent  
there's no gap between the knower who knows  
and the knowing, what sounding images break  
more than faintest echoes, or scratches opaque  
as mist shadows etched against the apparent?

Can one tell, or even utter, what was utterly  
simple, wonderful, terrifying, total  
and wordless? I want to tell—an errant blue butterfly  
sat on my finger and weightlessly pressed  
two thousand eight hundred souls laid to rest  
in one thrust through me, and that wound was fatal.

I want to tell—there can never be going  
back, failing, fading away or withdrawal  
from that moment's blessing, which goes on flowing  
in its entirety, wave on wave, through  
and through me. I, as human, poet, Jew,  
am held responsible for its renewal

here, in each line I trace. Ah, but plausible  
though it may be to trust most of the time  
in language, in telling, in the passable  
undistorted transparencies of the word,  
how shall miracle, resistant, absurd,  
ring clean through the slickened varnish of rhyme?

If the complex sheen on those blue wing scales,  
polarising light, could move one single voice  
here, besides mine, who would mourn language fails  
always to tell the hope needed to live,  
to remind, to recall, to forgive and to give  
revenge its new orders, grace to rejoice?