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 perciipient 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 shear 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.
The Blue Butterfly (French: Le papillon bleu) is a 2004 Canadian drama/adventure film, directed by Léa Pool, produced by Porchlight Entertainment and Alliance Atlantis, distributed by Monterey Media and starring Marc Donato as Pete Carlton, a boy terminally ill with cancer, whose final wish is to find the elusive blue morpho butterfly. William Hurt plays entomologist Alan Osborne, who takes him to the jungles of Costa Rica to find the insect.