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Early Poems (1953–1961)
Ivan V. Lalić

Translated By Francis Jones

CATHEDRALS

And the world felt this: stone stopped
Wanting to be stone, as heavy as sea is blue.
Made lighter for darkness’s sake, for love
Of a bird-filled heaven lying just above the woods,
Stone foamed into the lace of buildings, storming
Space and seizing it from the bewildered birds.
This is how miracles came about – bright, uncertain,
Dipped into pure blue whirlpools of wind.

But the stone stayed stone.
As the blunted chisels know, and the birds.

It was naïve, with hindsight, to invite
A triple god to take up lodging in these tenements
With their flimsy, ornately shored-up walls:
Since when did gods live in affordable miracles?
But this stone miracle became overgrown
With a world, with leaves, with unyielding forms
Which all the winds have learned by rote, wearing their fingers
To the bone. And the sun is forced to smile each time
It wants to pass through multi-coloured glass
Into a space where every sound is peeled to the core.

Stone rose into the wind, like a wave of foam.
But the stone stayed stone.

We ought to ask the dead masons if they believed
In stone blossoming weightless in the sun
Like a chestnut tree, and growing into
The yielding sky, and all this having no end;
Or if they knew that in an instant,
Mid-way, stone would dimly wish
To be stone again, as heavy as sea is blue.
Because miracles happened, bright and uncertain,
As incomplete as spring, as a tree.

With a bird-filled heaven close enough to touch.

YOUNG LOVE

She’ll fall asleep, a shoal of goldfish between
Her lashes now combing the dark. She’ll fall asleep,
A touch of tiredness deep in her rounded joints:
Sleep, her tiny earwig, waits on her pillow.

She’ll fall asleep to the dark furniture cracking,
Beneath the shadows of leaves flitting across
The pane, her hands left slightly at a loss
By all she has touched, open and still half-awake.

She’ll spin a spider’s-web of breath about her;
And a cat will cross the room more quietly than
Itself. A sharp moon will run its inquisitive
Birchtwig fingers across her already-warm bed.

She’ll fall asleep. The tick of the clock, like a mouse,
Is nibbling the silence. She’ll dream she’s up and running
On tiptoe down the wind-blue street, chasing
The day which long since slipped away from the house.
THERE SHOULD BE GARDENS HERE

There should be gardens here, green gardens,
Unremembered in these sleepers’ dreams. Gardens
With monuments to tenderness under leafy nets,
With wet gravel, with girls’ gestures arrested
Long ago in dark bronze and roseblood.
Gardens, winking playgrounds of light,
Resting-places of lisping rains, red fish
In the smiles of ponds overgrown with sky.

There should be wind here, stripped to the leaves
Like a swimmer, and plenty of unfrightened birds
On the shoulders of silence, in the eyes of light,
So everyone can vanish sleepwards in the grass
And return the richer by a dream about themselves,
As if from a voyage, as if with a golden fleece,
But not the way these sleepers return,
These dirty angels, out of a leafless tunnel.

There should be gardens here, not a passageway
With the grey echo of someone pacing, of someone
Stalking his face in broken windows, behind which
There is night, a plain, a sooty dandelion
And a wind garrotted with rusty wire.

WALKING TOWARDS THE SEA

Albania 1915

1

Hearts beat inside us and hills are all around us,
Hills dressed for a terrible white ceremony,
The biting ceremony of snow. And now
Time has stayed behind in the echoing valley
To search for us among the dead, beside the roads.
Meanwhile we climb and hills are all around us,
Cold, immobile, painful to the eyes. We slide
Our footprints forward in a hungry weaponed file,
Everyone listening to the snow and the heart before us.
By day we call out to one another. By night
We light fires, puny red fires under dead spruce.
Whoever lags behind will stay small between the hills.

Whose weeping is borne on the wind, heavy with frozen birds,
Which overtakes us every night? We walk on,
Our rifle barrels filled with wind. We walk on,
Dreaming of eyes and milk, of moon and strawberries,
Half-blind, dusted white with the flour of death.
Who is counting us now? Earth burns behind us
And we are retreating, terribly undefeated.

2

Somewhere over there’s the sea, thick with the salt
Honey of sun, fleecy with warm blue winds,
Teaching figs the art of ripeness since time out of mind.
Somewhere over there’s the sea, the foot of the sky,
And the vine’s tamed flame, and birds, wonderful toys
Of light, and silence, fish shivering in a net of cicadas.
O dense blue inside the gentle rooms of sight,
Coast, biggest and finest frontier,
Freedom whose name is sea, you open your clear eyes
And smile at the sight of people: they’re coming back.

_Between white rocks stand towns of sun_
_With lips of sea in each stone face_
_And swifts beneath the houses’ brows._
_And ships, the talk of yellow ports –_
Ships which the sea has long let be,
For they look with the sea's blue eye.

Somewhere over there’s the sea, shattered without fear,
Open and older than this eternity of ours.
And we are retreating seawards, bitterly undefeated.

3

Earth burns behind us and hills are all around us.
Our footsteps bite the hills beneath the heart;
When we call to one another, the echo travels and shivers
Like an arrow in the body of the wind. Let time try
To find us in trenches past and trenches still to come,
Between the steel, between the bees and the poppies.

Whose are the tears that freeze in our rifle barrels?
Who has the courage to count us now, before we return?
It’s a long, long way to the sea, but my heart’s right there.
 Whoever lags behind will stay big in death’s white mouth,
Big in flowers, small between the hills.

UNKILLED, ONE SPRING AFTERNOON

Jajinci²

Give me words to wake their hearing,
Their heavy hearing eroded by the sweet rust of time
In the black earth’s silence, give me words
To prise the hearing open of those who sang
Before the shattered mouths of walls,
To prise their hearing open like a black iron door
On tear-rusted hinges, riddled with evil.
Give me words to forge a knocker
So I can hammer on that door.
Give me words to put under the tongue of grass,
The guiltless, touchingly indifferent grass,
(Night, shattered mouths of walls)
Give me words to put under the tongue of grass,
So grass can speak out in its blood-smeared tongue.

The thousands under the grass cannot hear.

My senses tell me I’m lying in grass, bewitched
All the same, bewitched with existence like a bird,
That a spring day is piercing me gently
And waking the small pink fossils of ordinary joys
In memory’s strata. An ordinary spring day.

The thousands under the grass cannot see.

Let me drive my fingers into the grass, to understand,
If I can, how evil is nameless and death has riddled
Their sight, yet the red of my blood is their wealth,
Though they did not know me when they sang their last,
At night, before the shattered mouths of walls.

I’m lying in grass, my head eroded with flowers,
And they are under the grass. That much is clear.

Give me words to prise their dark hearing open,
Their slow hearing eroded by the sweet rust of time,
The black iron hearing of murdered love, in earth
Which is my earth.

SONNETS FROM MELISSA

SPRING I
Spring’s starting its dance again as pure as pain,  
Where the dark earth’s breath meets air that is now bright,  
Where light comes into being between the trees,  
Where memories don disguises and suddenly sway

In a miniature skirling reel, then pulse their way  
Inside through walls grown paper-thin, like light  
Through membranes, and pierce the wings of young bees,  
Like sound through veins of metal. It’s danced to the law

That things must start again when the snowdrifts thaw.  
O dance as pure as pain, time is rolled  
Away in the warm winds, as the flowers unfold;

But stage-fright hobbles the dancers, the dance is cut short,  
A word shines in the rain, then fades to naught,  
The wind drops, and time stands tall again.

MIRRORS

Mirrors keep shifting, as if they can find no rest  
In the hard frames bedding the world they reflect. Of course,  
We can’t trust them. For who has put them to the test  
By squeezing behind the image and seeking the source

Of the shift by feel, as when Orpheus walked his allotted  
Path beneath bare roots, lord of his troubled  
Heart and bitter mouth, without skirting round  
The secret? Eyes whose alien light never sleeps,

Transparent branches of some bloodstream clotted  
To cold, live pools in whose unfathomed deeps  
There’s a silver-black voice propelled by a force your hand
Can’t strike. At the surface of the inside-out land
Your way’s barred by a near-stranger, your double,
Like a harbour blockaded by a ship run aground.

MINER

I descend into age-old sleep, an abandoned pit
Where a miner feels his way downward. Things glow
With no light of their own, but only when caught by his lamp;
Its flame is weak, so when the dead-end will hit

Remains unknown. It’s a dirty game, the slow
Tap-tap of the miner’s fingers on the damp
Ribs of dark as he waits, slightly crazed, for the flare
Of forgotten crystals to blossom plant-like there

In the clotted blood of earth, in the rough-hacked wall
Of a worked-out seam, his fingers scraped to the bone,
Bloody from trying to help his exhausted sight

When all around him was grimy, hard stone.
But he’ll still play on, though he knows the map can’t be right,
And he’ll roam the mine, half-blind, till the pit-props fall.

THREE SQUALLS OF RAIN

Time between lovers cannot be repeated,
Like the ratio of rain to sun in the flesh of this fruit:
Think of this while the rising bora, still an innocuous
Breeze, basks like lichen on the warm skin of the sea,
For the year is piercing itself with the sting of autumn,
Emperor scorpion in the blazing ring of its own dimensions.
In the first squall of rain you’ll recognise my voice;
In the second, you’ll recognise your tears,
And the vine-seed of a stronger wind.

Time between you and me cannot be repeated,
And this night as it passes, shattered into Istrian stars
And bitter with summer’s defeat, can no more be repeated
Than the motion of the flame imprinted lightly into the mirror:
Think of this, marooned in rooms of blood
Whose doors are slamming in an unknown wind.

In the first squall of rain a bird will still be singing;
In the second, the overgrown orchards
Fringing your sleep will burst into flame.

Hands are turned towards you, like gardens towards the south,
Stamped with a map of memory: this is the line of the summer,
And this the star of the sea; this is the print of the eye
I press to the keyhole of your sleep
To spy on myself, to see myself smile
Strangled by the bitter vine sprouting from your lap.

In the first squall of rain this sea will grow dark;
In the second, you’ll know your tears
At your loneliness’s peak.

Who else but lovers, fused in a movement of defence,
Clasped together like a shell about a core
Incandescent with the bloody glow of a moment’s sun,
Can plunge into a sea of death disguised as time
Only to surface the stronger, drenched in the sense of their blood,
And find eternity’s seed when they open their embrace, like a fruit?

In the first squall of rain you’ll recognise my voice;
In the second, you’ll recognise your years
In the blazing ring of your own dimensions.

And this night which divides us cannot be repeated
In all the scenarios we write, with the pride of love,
With the fiery pencil of fear and desire,
Across the walls, across the bare water, across the years:
This night is growing into a horseman and galloping past us,
Time between lovers cannot be repeated.

In the first squall of rain a bird will still be singing;
In the second, you’ll recognise your tears;
We may not hear the third.

ATLANTIS

“West of the Pillars of Hercules, an island bigger than Libya and Asia”, the Egyptian slowly told the astonished Solon, “but it vanished in fire and water, in one night”.

1
EYE-WITNESS REPORT

This rock is no rock, it’s a hill of memory
Slowly shifting in its bed and starting
To fall apart, the shape of ash eroded by rains
In which feral metal nightingales with broken wheels
Sing without sense or respite; a shifting hill
Filled with severed roots, like a dead man
Drowned in a pool of last year’s reasons;
The shape of ash from the burning of years
Once thought to be fireproof. This hill of memory, ash,
This rock, slowly shifting in its bed, is disappearing.

And was it memory, or just the brutal beauty of a time
Stronger than us in every second? On the sunbaked ridges,
Woods without leaves or bark: a skeleton, picked clean
By insects and wind, is all that’s left of that pure summer
In reach of our ancestors’ dream, our dream.
On the beach, the sea dissolves into vowels, free,
Unrelated to our meanings. We cannot trust the sea.
Some fishermen set out, only to return burnt,
With no skin, no blood, no memory. The sea is not safe.
This sea, its wounds sutured with the thread of stars.

Already, ships are flying off the rim of a doubtful horizon
Into the void. Landslides tip gentle orchards
Down cracked slopes. Thin black swallows
With broken compass needles quivering in them
Circle brown oceans of sand until they vanish
Into the cruel air, like a meteor shower.
Water won’t slake this thirst. On the table
Glasses shatter, caught by a stray tracer bullet of fear.
Was it memory that led us, or the brutal beauty
Of a time stronger than us, whose centre is giving way?

We have lit fires in the plains, and posted
Our keenest-sighted archers on the forward shores.
High in the night, under the leprous face of the moon,
Rockets hum beyond the range of our age-old dream
That space can be tamed. But the archers are carefully taking aim
At your golden shadows, unborn inheritors of the earth.
At night, wet greylag geese loudly bypass our towns,
Frightened by the smell of our fear. The sea is rising.
This rock is no rock, it’s a hill of memory
Slowly shifting in the pulp of the sea, and disappearing.

2
LOVE: A FRAGMENT

Love still lives on;
Beyond the drumskin of blood stretched on a shell of fear,
Beyond the nights encircled by the razor wire of sleeplessness,
Beyond the dry rivers, beyond the dust,
This rain, for instance, still lives on,
With the brief freshness of a fruit-filled year;
Love still lives on, proud and blind like an ancient bard,
Unfurled like a flag in the colour of a summer dress
Memorised on the floor between the afternoon shadows.
Transparent ships still leave the jetties of breathless rooms
For the open sea of a sleep awash with fertility.
Mothers still bear children on a smiling wave
Of pain, heedless of the consequences.

And children grow up on fractured coasts:
Inheritors of the earth, inheritors of water,
Inheritors of fire and air.

Yet the sea might still be rising faster
Than the tender luminous seed inside them.

3
LULLABY FOR THE UNBORN

A time of giant springs will come, bitter sugar in the stems
Of deep, transparent years, and the foam of wild orchards
On southerly winds across the sea, whose skin will be tattooed
With unknown constellations; and the silence of snows
Lost beneath the smoking pitheads of flowers.

Sleep, unborn witnesses, sleep
Covered with the callous sand of unknowing.

Along the ebb tide’s blade, dismembered cities will rise
With our shadows carved on their walls,
With roses of petrified fire in their deep cracks,
And the skeletons of birds startled by the cry
Of demented light at the instant when absurdity struck.

*Sleep, unborn witnesses, sleep*
*Overgrown with wind, with minerals, with emptiness.*

The sea will cast our shredded voices ashore
Jumbled with foam, with the gold and ash
Of incinerated annals, and the glittering arrows
With which we gouged out wounds in our tender flesh
And pinned you into the cruel air of absence.

*Sleep, unborn witnesses to a purged world,*
*Sleep curled inside our last dreams*
*In a night of pulled levers,*
*Curled inside our last night, where this blood*
*Is dissolving, this rock, this hill of memory.*

**NOTES**

1 *Translator’s note:* In World War I, Serbia held out against Austro-Hungarian forces until October 1915, when the Central Powers launched a fresh offensive to open up supply lines with Turkey. Outnumbered and outgunned, the Serbian armies collapsed. They retreated seawards through the Albanian mountains at the onset of a bitter winter, along with thousands of civilians. The survivors of hunger, disease and skirmishing were picked up by Allied ships and taken to Greece – after which they fought on, on various fronts. A well-known song from that time, *Tamo daleko* (‘Far away’), refers to this experience of exile. Its words are close enough to *It’s a long way to Tipperary* for me to echo the latter in my translation.

2 *Translator’s note:* During the Nazi occupation of Belgrade, the former army exercise ground in the suburb of Jajinci was used as a killing field, where German Nazis and their Serbian henchmen shot many thousands of Jewish, communist and Roma men. It was also the burial site of Belgrade’s Jewish women and children, who were interned and then murdered in Judenlager Semlin across the Sava. A park of remembrance lies in Jajinci now.