

Twelve Poems
by Tin Ujević

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Tin Ujević *Twelve Poems* (translated by Richard Berengarten
and Daša Marić)

Twelve Poems

Dvanaest pjesama

Tin Ujević

Translated from Croatian by
Richard Berengarten and Daša Marić

s hrvatskog preveli
Richard Berengarten i Daša Marić

introduction / uvod
Richard Berengarten

Shearsman Books

First published in English and Croatian
in the United Kingdom in 2013 by
Shearsman Books, 50 Westons Hill Drive, Emersons Green
BRISTOL BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-316-4

English translations ~ prijevod na engleski jezik
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Introduction ~ uvod © Richard Berengarten 2013
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Acknowledgements

Thanks to the editors of the following journals and websites, in/on which some of these translations have appeared: 'Listen how in this perfumed dark', *Celtic Dawn* (*Yeats Club Review*, "special distinction"), No. 5, 1990; 'Daily Lament', 'Frailty', 'Star on High', and *The Necklace* XXV, XXXI and XXXII, *North Dakota Quarterly* (*Out of Yugoslavia*, special issue), Winter 1993; 'Blessed morning' and 'Daily Lament', *Borut's Literature Collection*, http://www.borut.com/library/texts/tin/poetry_u.htm; 'Tonight my forehead gleams', <http://www.ezgeetacom/notturno.html>; *The Necklace* XI, XX, XXI ('Nocturne'), XXXII, 'Star on High' and 'Frailty', *Mediterranean Poetry*: <http://www.Mediterranean.nu/?p=1713>.

The present selection of translations was first published in the online journal [*sic*] (no. 3, yr. 2), 2011; and the introduction to this selection is extracted (and slightly adapted) from an essay which appeared in the same issue, entitled 'A Nimble Footing on the Coals, Tin Ujević, Lyricist: Some English Perspectives'. <http://www.sicjournal.org/en/contents>. Special thanks go to Tomislav Kuzmanović, the translation editor of [*sic*], for his valuable critical comments on that essay and for his support in the preparation of this book, and to Anne Stevenson, for an improvement in nuance to the translation of *The Necklace* XXI.

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Tin Ujević, Lyricist


The Croatian poet Augustin (Tin) Ujević (1891-1955) is one of the finest Southern Slav lyric poets and one of the great poets of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. While Tin Ujević's poems are hardly known in English, they are loved in his native Croatia and throughout former Yugoslavia. I say 'loved' advisedly. I don't mean just admired or respected. At least until the break-up of the Yugoslav Federation, many of Tin's lyrics were known by heart and quoted by people all over the country, even those who weren't particularly literary, in much the same way as some of W.B. Yeats's early poems, like 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' and 'Down by the Salley Gardens', are known and quoted all over Ireland and the UK. This is mainly because people brought up in the various Yugoslav republics learned some of Tin's poems at school. What is more, the sincerity of affection for him as a poet and as a man is evident even today in South-Slavic countries, especially in the tendency still to refer to him by his pet-name, Tin. And just as the topics of his poems are intimate, and his poetic personality comes across as endearing and sympathetic, so readers in his own language experience and share an intimate response to his poems and feel that they 'know' the 'real' Tin too.

When I first went to live in former Yugoslavia in 1987, the poems of Tin's that I first came across, as might be expected, were his most anthologised pieces. In Split, 1987, Daša Marić asked me to try translating some of these best-known poems, and because my Croatian at that time – or rather, my Serbo-Croat – was a beginner's, she helped me by making literal versions, which we worked from together. Later, in Belgrade and then in Cambridge, I became more or less proficient enough to translate several more poems alone.

Tin's art is delicate, highly crafted, akin to that of filigree. Translation of a poet as intricate as he is sometimes works, sometimes doesn't. You try things out, one after another, you

keep your head down, you follow your nose, you fool around, you suddenly wake up in the middle of the night with a better alternative for a phrase running through your head, you turn the light on and scribble it down for fear of forgetting it, you recheck it next morning, you revise, you polish – and sometimes, if you're lucky, one or two poems do come out right.

Of course, I felt it at all times necessary to transmute Tin's *form*, in both the narrow and broad senses. At the micro-level, his patterns of rhyme, rhythm, melopoeia and so on, and at the macro-level, his overall musicality and sense of number, measure and measurement, are integral to his poems and inseparable from their overall meaning – though number and measure of course come in at all other levels too. At any rate, without rendering all these elements, Tin's genius gets lost. 'Meaning' is in no way reducible to 'literal meaning'.



Born in 1891 in Vrgorac, a small town in the Dalmatian hinterland, Tin grew up in Imotski and Makarska, and attended the classical gymnasium in Split. His language and sensibility are indelibly marked by the rugged beauty of the Dalmatian littoral, that narrow, sunbaked, rocky coastline, backed by mountains, facing out over the Adriatic sea and the islands of Hvar, Brač and Korčula. So, for example, in 'Slaboća' ('Frailty'), he writes longingly of "našem plavom, plavom valu,/...našem bijelom, bijelom žalu" (translated as "the waves of our blue blue sea, / and white, white pebbles").

Although Tin's major achievement is as a lyricist, his *oeuvre* is much broader than lyric alone. He was a writer of profound and discerning intellect, broad and capacious interests, inquisitive appetite and eclectic range. His *Collected Works* number sixteen volumes, including poems in many forms, from free verse to the Whitmanesque *verset*, prose-poems, essays, criticism, aphorisms, a book of thoughts and jottings compiled into a personal 'encyclopedia', and translations of fiction, poems and plays by authors as various as Poe, Whitman, Verhaeren, Rimbaud, Gide, Conrad, Meredith and Benvenuto Cellini, among others.


Tin spent many years living in Zagreb, as well as periods in Split, Sarajevo, Mostar, and Belgrade. In his youth, his involvement in the Pan-Slav movement to establish a Yugoslav state earned him the disapprobation of the Austro-Hungarian authorities and the close attention of their police. From 1913 to 1919, he lived in exile in Paris (Montparnasse), where he mingled in the same milieu as other radical writers, artists and intellectuals from Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia, as well as such figures as Picasso, Modigliani, Cocteau, Ehrenburg, and d'Annunzio.

Throughout his life, he lived simply. Well-known as an anarchic bohemian, he was a frequenter of bars and cafés, and always poor. Typical photos show him wearing a battered and ramshackle trilby cocked at a lopsided angle. Affectionate anecdotes about him abound, whether true or apocryphal, like the one I heard about him from poet-friends in Kragujevac, Šumadija, the Serbian heartland. It goes like this: Tin is sitting in a bar with friends, blindfold, tasting wines from all over Yugoslavia and identifying them. He sips half a dozen samples in turn, swirls each one around his mouth, and names all of them in quick succession without a single mistake. Then someone thrusts a glass of water into his hands. He takes a slurp. "No, I don't recognize that one," he says. Other stories aren't so salubrious. There's one about him taking off his hat, picking two fleas out of his hair, and inviting his friends to place bets on a race between them across a café table. Apparently, he spent five years in the French Foreign Legion, though I haven't yet found out when or where he served.



Tin's most celebrated lyrics are those in the collection *Kolajna* [*The Necklace*] (1926), the *tour-de-force* 'Svakidašnja jadikovka' ('Daily Lament') as well as several other poems that first appeared with it in *Lelek sebra* [*Cry of a Slave*] (1920). The poems in this small introductory selection are taken from these two books. Tin's poems of the 1920s are immediately approachable in their

surface lucidity and simplicity. Every poem is interpretable as a formally composed container or vessel from which an interior feeling emerges. And if it is a truism that exploration and expression of subjectivity are part and parcel of all lyrical poetry, what particularly characterises Tin is that the feeling itself appears to be allowed 'out' and 'up' in the very instant of being felt; or, rather, it is released, simply and clearly, in the precise act of being apprehended. That is to say, it is expressed directly, with neither resistance nor hesitation, and certainly with no need of filtration through the kinds of self-irony, emotional reticence or linguistic gamesmanship that mark a good deal of modernist and post-modernist writing. There is artifice, to be sure, and it is of a high order: Tin is far too sophisticated a poet ever to be interpretable as a naïf. Once (or, rather, if) this point has been accepted, it then becomes evident that his artifice operates so unobtrusively that it *implies* an effortless spontaneity and sincerity. At this level of reading, then, if there is an impression of transparency in Tin's lyrics, this becomes convincing and genuine thanks to his artifice.



The crafted quality of Tin's lyrics is often flawless and their perfection of musicality is comparable, I think, to that of Verlaine. Among all the gems in his 'necklace' of poems, it is fitting, I think, to end these introductory notes by drawing particular attention to the first poem in this selection, 'Daily Lament' ('Svakidašnja jadikovka'). Unrhymed, but with an inescapable, incessant, pounding rhythm, it insists, with slow inevitability, on successive waves of feeling that tumble over one another in rapid succession, oscillating between unease, anxiety, angst, anger, anguish and despair. Here is a poem that, from the point of view of both subject matter and tone, takes every imaginable risk. It is, in all senses, on the edge. At the same time, in its modulation, pace and emphasis, the patterning is flawless. I don't believe there is a human being, however sanguine, who hasn't at some time felt something of what it expresses. What

is perhaps most astounding about it is the vitality, vigour and dignity that pulse through it: even in the fullness of its diatribe against life's pains and difficulties, in its beat, its breath, it is paradoxically most full of life. This poem is generally agreed to be Tin's lyrical masterpiece. It is universally powerful.

Richard Berengarten
Cambridge, July 2012

Lelek sebra – izbor (1920)

SVAKIDAŠNJA JADIKOVKA

Kako je teško biti slab,
kako je teško biti sam,
i biti star, a biti mlad!

i biti slab, i nemoćan,
i sam, bez igdje ikoga,
i nemiran, i oćajan.

I gaziti po cestama,
i biti gažen u blatu,
bez sjaja zvijezde na nebu.

Bez sjaja zvijezde udesa
što sijaše nad kolijevkom
sa dugama i varkama.

– O Bože, Bože, sjeti se
svih obećanja blistavih
što si ih meni zadao.

– O Bože, Bože, sjeti se
i ljubavi, i pobjede,
i lovora, i darova.

I znaj da Sin tvoj putuje
dolinom svijeta turobnom
po trnju i po kamenju,

od nemila do nedraga,
i noge su mu krvave,
i srce mu je ranjeno.

From *Cry of a Slave* (1920)

DAILY LAMENT

How hard it is not to be strong,
how hard it is to be alone,
and to be old, yet to be young!

and to be weak, and powerless,
alone, with no one anywhere,
dissatisfied, and desperate.

And trudge bleak highways endlessly,
and to be trampled in the mud,
with no star shining in the sky.

Without your star of destiny
to play its twinklings on your crib
with rainbows and false prophecies.

– Oh God, oh God, remember all
the glittering fair promises
with which you have afflicted me.

Oh God, oh God, remember all
the great loves, the great victories,
the wreaths of laurel and the gifts.

And know you have a son who walks
the weary valleys of the world
among sharp thorns, and rocks and stones,

through unkindness and unconcern,
with his feet bloodied under him,
and with his heart an open wound.

I kosti su mu umorne,
i duša mu je žalosna,
i on je sam i zapušten.

I nema sestre ni brata,
i nema oca ni majke,
i nema drage ni druga.

I nema nigdje nikoga
do igle drača u srcu
i plamena na rukama.

I sam i samcat putuje
pod zatvorenom plaveti,
pred zamračenom pučinom,

I komu da se potuži?
Ta njega nitko ne sluša,
ni braća koja lutaju.

O Bože, žeže tvoja riječ
i tijesno joj je u grlu,
i željna je da zapavi.

Ta besjeda je lomača
i dužan sam je viknuti,
ili ću glavnjom planuti.

Pa nek sam krijes na brdima,
pa nek sam dah u plamenu,
kad nisam krik sa krovova!

O Bože, tek da dovrši
pečalno ovo lutanje
pod svodom koji ne čuje.

His bones are full of weariness,
his soul is ill at ease and sad,
and he's neglected and alone,

and sisterless, and brotherless,
and fatherless, and motherless,
with no one dear, and no close friend,

and he has no-one anywhere
except thorn twigs to pierce his heart
and fire blazing from his palms.

Lonely and utterly alone
under the hemmed in vault of blue,
on dark horizons of high seas.

Who can he tell his troubles to
when no-one's there to hear his call,
not even brother wanderers?

Oh God, you sear your burning word
too hugely through this narrow throat
and throttle it inside my cry.

And utterance is a burning stake,
though I must yell it out, I must,
or, like a kindled log, burn out.

Just let me be a bonfire on
a hill, just one breath in the fire,
if not a scream hurled from the roofs.

Oh God, let it be over with,
this miserable wandering
under a vault as deaf as stone.

Jer meni treba moćna riječ,
jer meni treba odgovor,
i ljubav, ili sveta smrt.

Gorak je vijenac pelina,
mračan je kalež otrova,
ja vapim žarki ilinštak.

Jer mi je mučno biti slab,
jer mi je mučno biti sam
(kada bih mogao biti jak.

Kada bih mogao biti drag)
no mučno je, najmučnije
biti već star, a tako mlad!

Because I crave a powerful word,
because I crave an answering voice,
someone to love, or holy death.

For bitter is the wormwood wreath
and deadly dark the poison cup,
so burn me, blazing summer noon.

For I am sick of being weak,
and sick of being all alone
(seeing I could be hale and strong)

and seeing that I could be loved),
but I am sick, sickest of all
to be so old, yet still be young!