Vasko Popa (1922 - 1991)

Popa was born in the village of Grebenac, Vojvodina, Serbia. After finishing high school, he enrolled as a student of the Faculty of Philosophy at the Belgrade University. He continued his studies at the University of Bucharest and in Vienna. During World War II, he fought as a partisan and was imprisoned in a German concentration camp in Bečkerek (today Zrenjanin, Serbia).

After the war, in 1949, Popa graduated from the Romanic group of the Faculty of Philosophy at Belgrade University. He published his first poems in the magazines Književne novine (Literary Magazine) and the daily Borba (Struggle).

From 1954 until 1979 he was the editor of the publishing house Nolit. In 1953 he published his first major verse collection, Kora (Bark). His other important work included Nepo&269;in-polje (Field of No Rest, 1956), Sporedno nebo (Secondary Heaven, 1968), Uspravna zemlja (Earth Erect, 1972), Vu&269;ja so (Wolf's Salt. 1975), and Od zlata jabuka (The Golden Apple, 1978), an anthology of Serbian folk literature. His Collected Poems, 1943–76, a compilation in English translation, appeared in 1978, with an introduction by the British poet Ted Hughes.

On May 29, 1972 Vasko Popa founded "The Literary Municipality Vršac" and originated a library of postcards, called Slobodno liš&e (Free Leaves). In the same year, he was elected to become a member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Vasko Popa is one of the founders of Vojvodina Academy of Sciences and Arts, established on December 14, 1979 in Novi Sad. He is the first laureate of the Branko’s award (Brankova nagrada) for poetry, established in honour of the poet Branko Radi&269;evi&263;. In the year 1957 Popa received another award for poetry, Zmaj’s Award (Zmajeva nagrada), which honours the poet Jovan Jovanovi&263; Zmaj. In 1965 Popa received the Austrian state award for European literature. In 1976 he received the Branko Miljkovi&263; poetry award, in 1978 the Yugoslav state AVNOJ Award, and in 1983 the literary award Skender Kulenovi&263;.

In 1995, the town of Vršac established a poetry award named after Vasko Popa. It is awarded annually for the best book of poetry published in Serbian language. The award ceremony is held on the day of Popa’s birthday, 29 June.

Vasko Popa died on January 5, 1991 in Belgrade and is buried in the Aisle of the
Deserving Citizens in Belgrade’s New Cemetery.
A Conceited Mistake

Once upon a time there was a mistake
So silly so small
That no one would even have noticed it

It couldn't bear
To see itself to hear of itself

It invented all manner of things
Just to prove
that it didn't really exist

It invented space
To put its proofs in
And time to keep its proofs
And the world to see its proofs

All it invented
Was not so silly
Nor so small
But was of course mistaken

Could it have been otherwise

Trans. Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
A Forgetful Number

Once upon a time there was a number
Pure and round like the sun
But alone very much alone

It began to reckon with itself

It divided multiplied itself
It subtracted added itself
And remained always alone

It stopped reckoning with itself
And shut itself up in its round
And sunny purity

Outside were left the fiery
Traces of its reckoning

They began to chase each other through the dark
To divide when they should have multiplied themselves
To subtract when they should have added themselves

That's what happens in the dark

And there was no one to ask it
To stop the traces
And to rub them out.

Trans. Anne Pennington

Vasko Popa
Anne Pennington

Until her last breath she enlarges
Her Oxford house
Built in Slavonic
Vowels and consonants

She polishes the corner-stones
Until their Anglo-Saxon shine
Begins to sing

Her death is like a short breath-stop
Under the distant limetrees of her friends

Trans. by Peter Jay, Anthony Rudolf, and Daniel Weissbort

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Before The Game

Shut one eye then the other
Peek into every corner of yourself
See that there are no nails no thieves
See that there are no cuckoo's eggs

Shut then the other eye
Squat and jump
Jump high high high
On top of yourself

Fall then with all your weight
Fall for days on end deep deep deep
To the bottom of your abyss

Who doesn't break into pieces
Who remains whole gets up whole
Plays

Vasko Popa
Between Games

Nobody rests

This one constantly shifts his eyes
Hangs them on his head
And whether he wants it or not starts walking backwards
He puts them on the soles of his feet
And whether he wants it or not returns walking on his head

This one turns into an ear
He hears all that won't let itself be heard
But he grows bored
Yearns to turn again into himself
But without eyes he can't see how

That one bares all his faces
One after the other he throws them over the roof
The last one he throws under his feet
And sinks his head into his hands

This one stretches his sight
Stretches it from thumb to thumb
Walks over it walks
First slow then fast
Then faster and faster

That one plays with his head
Juggles it in the air
Meets it with his index finger
Or doesn't meet it at all

Nobody rests

Vasko Popa
Far Within Us #1

We raise our arms
The street climbs into the sky
We lower our eyes
The roofs go down into the earth

From every pain
We do not mention
Grows a chestnut tree
That stays mysterious behind us

From every hope
We cherish
Sprouts a star
That moves unreachable before us

Can you hear a bullet
Flying about our heads
Can you hear a bullet
Waiting to ambush our kiss

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Far Within Us #2

Look here's that uninvited
Alien presence look it's here

A shudder on the ocean of tea in the cup
Rust taking hold
On the edges of our laughter
A snake coiled in the depths of the mirror

Will I be able to hide you
From your face in mine

Look it's the third shadow
On our imagined walk
Unexpected abyss
Between our words
Hoofs clattering
Below the vaults of our palates

Will I be able
On this unrest-field
To raise you a tent of my hands

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Far Within Us #3

Unquiet you walk
Along the rims of my eyes

On the invisible grating
Before your lips
My naked words shiver

We steal moments
From the unheeding iron saws

Your hands sadly
Flow into mine
The air is impassable

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Far Within Us #4

Green gloves rustle
On the avenue's branches

The evening carries us under its arm
By a path which leaves no trace

The rain falls on its knees
Before the fugitive windows

The yards come out of their gates
And stand looking after us

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Far Within Us #5

The nights are running out of darkness

Steel branches grasp
The arms of passers-by

Only anonymour chimneys
Are free to walk the streets
Which slice across our sleeplessness

In the gutters our stars decay

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Far Within Us #6

From the wrinkle between my brows
You watch till day breaks
On my face

The waxen night
Is beginning to singe
The fingers of dawn

Black bricks
Have already tiled
The whole dome of the sky

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Far Within Us #7

Toothed eyes fly
Over still waters

Around us purple lips
Flutter from branches

Screams hit the blue
And fall onto pillows

Our homes hide
Behind narrow backs

Hands clutch at
Flimsy clouds

Our veins roll turbid
Bed and tables

Of shattered bones
Noon has fallen into our hands

And turned all gloomy

An open grave on the face of the earth
On your face on my face

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Give Me Back My Rags

Just come to my mind
My thoughts will scratch out your face

Just come into my sight
My eyes will start snarling at you

Just open your mouth
My silence will smash your jaws

Just remind me of you
My remembering will paw up the ground under your feet

That's what it's come to between us

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Give Me Back My Rags #1

Give me back my rags

My rags of pure dreaming
Of silk smiling of striped foreboding
Of my cloth of lace

My rags of spotted hope
Of burnished desire of chequered glances
Of skin from my face

Give me back my rags
Give me when I ask you nicely

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Give Me Back My Rags #11

I've wiped your face off my face
Ripped your shadow off my shadow

Leveled the hills in you
Turned your plains into hills

Set your seasons quarreling
Turned all the ends of the world from you

Wrapped the path of my life around you
My impenetrable my impossible path

Just try to meet me now

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Give Me Back My Rags #12

Enough chattering violets enough sweet trash
I won't hear anything know anything
Enough enough of all

I'll say the last enough
Fill my mouth with earth
Grit my teeth

To break off you skull guzzler
To break off once for all

I'll just be what I am
Without root without branch without crown
I'll lean on myself
On my own bumps and bruises

I'll be the hawthorn stake through you
That's all I can be in you
In you spoilsport in you muddlehead

Get lost

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Give Me Back My Rags #4

Get out of my walled infinity
Of the star circle round my heart
Of my mouthful of sun

Get out of the comic sea of my blood
Of my flow of my ebb
Get out of my stranded silence

Get out I said get out

Get out of my living abyss
Of the bare father-tree within me

Get out how long must I cry get out

Get out of my bursting head
Get out just get out

Trans. by Anne Pennington

Anonymous submission.

Vasko Popa
Hide-And-Seek

Someone hides from someone else
Hides under his tongue
The other looks for him under the earth

He hides on his forehead
The other looks for him in the sky

He hides inside his forgetfulness
The other looks for him in the grass

Looks for him looks
There's no place he doesn't look
And looking he loses himself

Vasko Popa
In The Village Of My Ancestors

Someone embraces me
Someone looks at me with the eyes of a wolf
Someone takes off his hat
So I can see him better

Everyone asks me
Do you know how I'm related to you

Unknown old men and women
Appropriate the names
Of young men and women from my memory

I ask one of them
Tell me for God's sake
Is George the Wolf still living

That's me he answers
With a voice from the next world

I touch his cheek with my hand
And beg him with my eyes
To tell me if I'm living too

Vasko Popa
Last News About The Little Box

The little box which contains the world
Fell in love with herself
And conceived
Still another little box

The little box of the little box
Also fell in love with herself
And conceived
Still another little box

And so it went on forever

The world from the little box
Ought to be inside
The last offspring of the little box

But not one of the little boxes
Inside the little box in love with herself
Is the last one

Let's see you find the world now

Vasko Popa
Race

Some bite from the others
A leg an arm or whatever

Take it between their teeth
Run out as fast as they can
Cover it up with earth

The others scatter everywhere
Sniff look sniff look
Dig up the whole earth

If they are lucky and find an arm
Or leg or whatever
It's their turn to bite

The game continues at a lively pace

As long as there are arms
As long as there are legs
As long as there is anything

Vasko Popa
The Admirers Of The Little Box

Sing little box

Don't let sleep overtake you
The world's awake within you

In your four-sided emptiness
We turn distance into nearness
Forgetfulness into memory

Don't let your nails come loose

For the very first time
We watch sights beyond this world
Through your keyhole

Turn your key in our mouths
Swallow words and numbers
Out of your song

Don't let your lid fly open
Your bottom drop

Sing little box

Vasko Popa
The Benefactors Of The Little Box

We'll return the little box
Into the arms
Of her inconspicuously honest properties

We won't do anything
Against her will
We'll simply take her apart

We'll crucify her
On her own cross

Piece her bloated emptiness
And let ooze
All the blue cosmic blood she gathered

We'll sweet her clean of stars
And anti-stars
And everything else that rots inside her

We won't make her suffer
We'll simply put her together again

We'll give back to the little box
Her pure inconspicuousness

Vasko Popa
The Craftsmen Of The Little Box

Don't open the little box
Heaven's hat will fall out of her

Don't close her for any reason
She'll bite the trouser-leg of eternity

Don't drop her on the earth
The sun's eggs will break inside her

Don't throw her in the air
Earth's bones will break inside her

Don't hold her in your hands
The dough of the stars will go sour inside her

What are you doing for God's sake
Don't let her get out of your sight

Vasko Popa
The Enemies Of The Little Box

Don't box down to the little box
Which supposedly contains everything
Your star and all other stars

Empty yourself
In her emptiness

Take two nails out of her
And give them to the owners
To eat

Make a hold in her middle
And stick on your clapper

Fill her with blueprints
And the skin of her craftsmen
And trample on her with both feet

Tie her to a cat's tail
And chase the cat

Don't bow down to the little box
If you do
You'll never straighten yourself out again

Vasko Popa
The Judges Of The Little Box

to Karl Max Ostojic

Why do you stare at the little box
That in her emptiness
Holds the whole world

If the little box holds
The world in her emptiness
Then the antiworld
Holds the little box in its antihand

Who'll bite off the antiworld's antihand
And on that hand
Five hundred antifingers

Do you believe
You'll bite it off
With your thirty-two teeth

Or are you waiting
For the little box
To fly into your mouth

Is this why you are staring

Vasko Popa
The Little Box

The little box gets her first teeth
And her little length
Little width little emptiness
And all the rest she has

The little box continues growing
The cupboard that she was inside
Is now inside her

And she grows bigger bigger bigger
Now the room is inside her
And the house and the city and the earth
And the world she was in before

The little box remembers her childhood
And by a great longing
She becomes a little box again

Now in the little box
You have the whole world in miniature
You can easily put in a pocket
Easily steal it lose it

Take care of the little box

Vasko Popa
The Owners Of The Little Box

Line the inside of the little box
With your precious skin
And make yourself cozy
Just as you would in your own home

Make space voyages inside her
Gather stars make time squirt its milk
And sleep in the clouds

Just don't go around pretending
You're more important than her length
And wiser than her width

If you do we'll sell her for a song
Your box and everything inside her
To the first fleecer to the wind

We don't care about profit
And we don't keep spoiled goods

So don't keep saying
It's we who told you this
From inside the little box

Vasko Popa
The Prisoners Of The Little Box

Open little box

We kiss your bottom and cover
Keyhole and key

The whole world lies crumpted in you
It resembles everything
Except itself

Not even your clear-sky mother
Would recognize it anymore

The rust will eat your key
Our world and us there inside
And finally you too

We kiss your four sides
And four corners
And twenty-four nails
And anything else you have

Open little box

Vasko Popa
The Tenants Of The Little Box

Throw into the little box
A stone
You'll take out a bird

Throw in your shadow
You'll take out the shirt of happiness

Throw in your father's root
You'll take out the axle of the universe

The little box works for you

Throw into the little box
A mouse
You'll take out a quaking hill

Throw in your head
You'll take out two

The little box works for you

Vasko Popa
The Victims Of The Little Box

Not even in a dream
Should you have anything to do
With the little box

If you saw her full of stars once
You'd wake up
Without heart or soul in your chest

If you slid your tongue
Into her keyhole once
You'd wake up with a hole in your forehead

If you ground her to bits once
Between your teeth
You'd get up with a square head

If you ever saw her empty
You'd wake up
With a belly full of mice and nails

If in a dream you had anything to do
With the little box
You'd be better off never waking up again

Vasko Popa
Wedding

Each strips his own skin  
Each bares his own constellation  
Which has never seen the night

Each fills his skin with rocks  
And plays with it  
Lit by his own stars

Who doesn't stop till dawn  
Who doesn't bat an eyelid or fall  
Earns his own skin

(This game is rarely played)

Vasko Popa