

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Vasko Popa**  
**- poems -**

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## 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 Bekekerk (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 Knjizevne 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 Neпоin-polje (Field of No Rest, 1956), Sporedno nebo (Secondary Heaven, 1968), Uspravna zemlja (Earth Erect, 1972), Vuolja 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 lišće (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 Radišević. In the year 1957 Popa received another award for poetry, Zmaj's Award (Zmajeva nagrada), which honours the poet Jovan Jovanović Zmaj. In 1965 Popa received the Austrian state award for European literature. In 1976 he received the Branko Miljković poetry award, in 1978 the Yugoslav state AVNOJ Award, and in 1983 the literary award Skender Kulenović.

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 crumpled 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