

Under Balkan Light

Selected Writings 5: Part 3, The Balkan Trilogy

RICHARD BERENGARTEN was born in London in 1943, into a family of musicians. He has lived in Italy, Greece, the USA and former Yugoslavia. His perspectives as a poet combine English, French, Mediterranean, Jewish, Slavic, American and Oriental influences.

Under the name RICHARD BURNS, he has published more than 25 books. In the 1970s, he founded and ran the international Cambridge Poetry Festival. He has received the Eric Gregory Award, the Wingate-Jewish Quarterly Award for Poetry, the Keats Poetry Prize, the Yeats Club Prize, the international Morava Charter Poetry Prize and the Great Lesson Award (Serbia). He has been Writer-in-Residence at the international Eliot-Dante Colloquium in Florence, Arts Council Writer-in-Residence at the Victoria Centre in Gravesend, Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge, and a Royal Literary Fund Project Fellow. He has been Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Notre Dame and British Council Lecturer in Belgrade, first at the Centre for Foreign Languages and then at the Philological Faculty. He is currently a Bye-Fellow at Downing College, Cambridge and Preceptor at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. His poems have been translated into 22 languages.

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Under Balkan Light

SELECTED WRITINGS

Volume 5

The Balkan Trilogy: Part 3

RICHARD BERENGARTEN



CAMBRIDGE

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In memory of Ivan V. Lalić

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Editorial Note

Under Balkan Light is the fifth volume published in 2008 in the ongoing Salt series of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings*. It is also the last part of his *Balkan Trilogy*, following *The Blue Butterfly* and *In a Time of Drought*. For more than twenty-five years, the author has maintained a close involvement with the life, culture and politics of the Balkans. Between 1987 and 1991, he spent three years living and working in Yugoslavia. This stay coincided with the years in which the Yugoslav Federation was beginning to break apart in a series of violent conflicts. The author lived in Croatia and Serbia, and travelled in Macedonia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Vojvodina and Kosovo. Since then he has repeatedly returned to Serbia and Slovenia.

Under Balkan Light collects the varied poems that Richard Berengarten has written out of this knot of experiences over a twenty-one year period between September 1987 and August 2008.

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The cover reproduces part of the fresco of the Angel at Christ's Tomb in Mileševa Monastery in southwest Serbia. The source for the photographs on pp. 19-26 and 44-45 is *The Crimes of the Fascist Occupants and their Collaborators Against Jews in Yugoslavia* (Federation of Jewish Communities of the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, 1957), pp. 225-245. The drawing of the Neretva Bridge at Mostar on p. 145 comes from Arthur Evans's *Through Bosnia and the Herzegovina on Foot During the Insurrection, August and September, 1873, with an Historical Review of Bosnia and a Glimpse of the Croats*,

Slavonians and the Ancient Republic of Ragusa (Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1876, p. 344

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RB
CAMBRIDGE
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1 Do vidjenja Danitsé

Goodbye Balkan Belle

Uvek si mi draga bila
(Always you have been dear to me)
YUGOSLAV SONG

And I will give him the morning star
REVELATIONS 2 : 28

Danitsé with your bitter black cherries and heavenly
 lilac abundant on hillsides and your nightingales
 VOŽDOVAC pouring song all spring long
 over sprawling city gardens
 through throats purged of every mortal impurity
 as if by the translucent flame of *rakija*, insidiously
 ZLATIBOR steeping unsuspecting hillsides
 in a longing for immortality;
 Danitsé with your autumns outdoing their damndest
 to imitate the gaudy gone sunsets of summertime
 by layering and crumbling all conceivable hues
 MRČAJEVCI of fire on your fields,
 villages, rocks, trees;
 Danitsé of willows and lindens, Danitsé of owls and swallows,
 Danitsé of oaks and birches, Danitsé of maze-making bees
 moaning, adrift and roving among flowers and corpses
 as if they could annul time with cool liquid gold; Danitsé
 among punch-drunk butterflies mating in the rubble
 SMEDEREVO of fortresses where ghosts
 of solitary sentinels
 tonight as forever will patrol their starry vigil, over
 moonbathed ramparts floodlit by rippling waters
 for distant Caesars, Pashas, Sultans, Czars, Führers,
 none of whom gives a damn for you now, nor ever did;
 Danitsé treading precarious foam-washed rocky promontories
 ZADAR, TROGIR bordering a blue more intense
 than cobalt glass, whose gulls wheel
 over white-stoned palaces tucked into curling bays and
 harbours decked out like watery gardens, blossoming
 OMIŠ, ŠIBENIK in sails and buzzing with
 ferries and fishing boats
 about to chug away to chattering clucking islands
 BRAČ, HVAR where mimosa blazes in
 January and swallows
 nest in eaves and swirl on summer air, as if reluctant

RAGUSA to abandon them, ever,
 for Africa; Danitsé of living
 merchant cities and jumbled neglected peripheries whose
 SALONAE remains of amphitheatres, clogged
 with ivy and bindweed,
 overlook straits once lorded by pirates,
 edge-dwellers, bandits, borderers, outsiders,
 SENJ corsairs, pounders, pouncers,
 Uskoks, Vlachs, Morlachs,
 where toppled pillars, overgrown with nettles,
 point towards rocky roads, that curl away up slopes
 KAŠTEL STARI for lambs and goats to graze
 on perfumed grass among
 vines and water melons, then teeter into mountains
 among whose rocks, in seams and fissures, cling
 villages peopled by shepherds, farmers, butchers,
 SINJ footballers, basketball champions,
 climbers, jousters, believers
 in pagan faith healings; my complex, wayward,
joyeuse-triste jolie-laide contradictory Danitsé,
 SARAJEVO with far too many cross-winds
 ruffling your hair for your own
 peace, comfort or security; moody Danitsé, wearing
 a thousand faces and expressions inside a minute;
 my tolerant spontaneous opinionated unpredictable
 Danitsé soaked in perfumes, rouge-caked, dancing,
 laughing fluently behind lip-paint and mascara; Danitsé
 in the park where children scream their prowess
 on tricycles to gaggles of adoring aunts and grannies
 KALEMEGDAN while grandads play chess,
 surrounded by gangs
 of neighbours, all commentating, analysing, cussing,
 all experts, all specialists, all Kasparovs, all Karpovs,
 as if again they were braggart-boys in playgrounds long

BEŽANIJA disappeared under tower blocks ;
 nose-held-high Danitsé, walking
 your thoroughbred, pestered by insistent mongrels
 at the confluence of rivers ;
 UŠČE nobody's and everybody's dangerous
 come-and-get-me-if-you-dare Danitsé sipping cocktails
 in the Star Bar in the new Hotel International and
 Hotel Global and Hotel Startime and Hotel Galactic
 where mobster bosses hung out, and one, biggest
 and ugliest of the big-time thugs, got gunned down
 with a henchman, and they never caught who did it ;
 Danitsé, not knowing who did it, but knowing for sure
 nobody-till-time-end will ever admit to knowing ; Danitsé
 spooning fish soup followed by forkfuls
 SMEDEREVO of fried squid, while a solo gypsy fiddler,
 in a provincial restaurant, floor sprinkled with sawdust,
 plays *Silken Thread* for workers on Friday evenings
 and *Stop Flowing River*
 PETROVARADIN and *It Ain't Worth Crying*
 and *My Sweet Little Marijana* and *I've Just One Wish*
 and *My Man Milan* and *Days*
 SKADARLIJA *When I Don't Know What I'll Do ;*
 gone seventeen year old Danitsé surveying the ravine
 from the prow of the world's most elegant river-bridge
 where daredevil boys once dive-
 MOSTAR bombed thirty metres into
 currents below ; petite student Danitsé, exuding
 gigantesque exuberance and vitality, sauntering
 homewards through alleyways at three-thirty a.m.
 stopping by a back door,
 NOVI PAZAR wide open, near the mosque,
 familiar since childhood, to chat to the moustachioed
 baker stoking his furnace, who once sat grinning
 in the row behind you in junior school, carving
 initials into his desktop, pulling your pigtails,

pinching you as far below your waist as he
 could safely reach, without teacher noticing,
 whispering your first swearwords; Danitsé-age-seven.
 pony-tailed, curly, beribboned, playing with imported
 Barbies, satchel on back, striving for five out of five
 for *Nature and Society* and *Artistic Culture*; Danitsé
 SKOPJE running errands to the market
 lined with coffee houses, scented
 with Turkish delight, chocolate, toffee, nougat;
 Danitsé buying corn-dolls, pistachio nuts, peanuts,
 BAŠČARŠIJA sunflower seeds, almonds
 and unchewable jelly babies
 in coils of coarse grey paper; Danitsé shelling chestnuts
 toasted on autumnal braziers, savouring the crisp
 VODNIK and soft white bits, spitting
 out the charred, into gutter
 wayside, flowerbed; Danitsé at the fairground,
 ZOOLOŠKI VRT first on the little Big Wheel,
 then on the dodgems;
 Danitsé at the hairdresser; Danitsé spending two days,
 morning till evening, preparing dishes for your Saint's
 Day, setting out the feast on lace-bordered tablecloths,
 PALILULA with matching serviettes and
 doilies tatted by Grandmother,
 lined in old tissue paper, sliding them out of
 their leather case with hardened corner pads;
 Danitsé, queenly, welcoming, accepting stiff
 DEDINJE bouquets of nostril-blocking
 waxen creamy yellow lilies;
 Danitsé washing and cleaning, after the party's end,
 emptying wine-flooded ashtrays, wiping down, polishing,
 ironing, starching, relining your whole trousseau in
 VOJVODE STEPE fresh tissue paper; Danitsé
 descending from seventh
 floor, ferrying knotted trash-filled plastic bags

to be chucked into wheely bins where the poor
 rummage for stale bread, newspapers, cardboard;
 Danitsé trudging cobbles; Danitsé screeching your
 midget car to a halt at traffic lights where crippled
SREMSKA gypsy children hawk newspapers
 packed with handfuls of wan roses
 and plead for the privilege of cleaning your dusty
 windscreen; Danitsé speeding past listing trucks
 with one light or no lights; Danitsé cursed and
NUŠIĆEVA cursing, when everything grinds
 to a halt, as it does frequently; dare-
 devil Danitsé, honking and gesticulating, overtaking
KNEZA MILOŠA on the inside, ready to fight
 your passage through everything
 and take on all-comers for your individual space
AUTOKOMANDA to edge forward
 on the unrepaired pitted
 motorway – southwards past Monument Hill
AVALA towards fields and forest –
 that might get resurfaced
 one day; Danitsé home in your ancestral village,
ŠUMADIJA, BANAT, VOJVODINA collecting eggs
 among barnyard-
 roaming hens; Danitsé churning sour cream to
 textures of precise perfection, preparing soft
 cheese, yoghurt, paper thin pastry, spinach-
ZELENI VENAC, BAJLONOVA filled pies to drive
 to market tomorrow
 where you'll hover all day behind a trestle table
KALENIĆ, DUŠANOVA along with other
 countrywomen wearing
 white smocks and overalls, each preoccupied
ZEMUN, DJERAM with milk, each offering
 forkfuls to tempt purchasing
 housewives; Danitsé caught unawares, overcome

by peacefulness, first peeling and tumbling, then
 stealing your spirit away, calling you into sleep
 followed by a wakefulness steeped in the
 MILEŠEVA, DEČANI perfume
 of privet scented gardens
 tucked among hills, protected
 by impoverished monasteries with peeling stucco walls,
 crumbling arched colonnades, and cool interiors blessed
 SOPOČANI, MORAČA by tall gazes of saints,
 presiding glances of angels,
 undamaged lords and ladies of distant imagined heavens
 watching down the centuries: eyes unbearably gentle
 and frankly unbewildered
 STUDENICA, ČUPRIJA as eyes of village children
 long before Giotto walked under the arcades of Padua
 and mixed their copied bluenesses into Italian plaster;
 Danitsé delivering your firstborn in the local maternity
 clinic, sworn at by underpaid sadists masquerading
 as uniformed midwives, possessed of the vilest and
 most colourful proficiency in the art of rhetorical
 abuse – *didn't you scream loud and long enough*
when he stuffed you senseless bitch so stuff
your moaning screaming whining bitching now;
 Danitsé greeting new year as one of 500 guests
 at the Mayor's reception for functionaries, among
 hectares of Russian salad, mountains of meatballs
 and 25 entire succulent spit-roasted suckling pigs
 bordered by pastries, light-winged as hummingbirds;
 KARABURMA Danitsé, wiping greasy fingers
 and mouths of adored children,
 nine years married, living with your mother-in-law
 and her affable, passive, indecisive son, who
 works harder than you but earns half as much,
 ZVEZDARA and two daughters by him
 in the two-roomed apartment

in a block where the lifts don't work, on the shabbier
 side of town at the end of the shambling tramline;
 Danitsé, arguing politics with brilliant impoverished
 internationally informed taxi-drivers who steer
SLAVIJA battered Fords and Mercedes in
 bedroom slippers, owing to gout
 or poverty or accident or God-Knows-What,
 who offer unpredictably original opinions and
STUDENSKI TRG have given up smoking
 unfiltered cigarettes and
 possess IQ's of one hundred and seventy or eighty
 and are local chess champions; Danitsé, preparing
 squid-flavoured risottos that blacken the tongue
 and oysters dressed in divine greenery for impromptu
SPLIT song festivals among
 Diocletian's palatial alleys;
 Danitsé selling off four-volume sets of etymological
 dictionaries that belonged to grandfather, browsing
KNEZ MIHAJLOVA in second hand platonic
 bookshops at the piazza-end
 for German nineteenth century philosophical tracts
 and English detective novels in Tauchnitz editions
 and French symbolist poets bound in disintegrating
KOD KONJA red leather, then eating ice cream by
 the fountain near the equestrian statue;
 Danitsé, knowing *not* to enquire but to keep very quiet
 indeed when neighbours disappeared unaccountably;
ŠABAC, KLENAK, SAJMIŠTE Danitsé whose three
 second cousins also
 smoothly vanished overnight, never to be heard of
 or mentioned again, not a peep; Danitsé finally
 yourself entirely falsely accused by some anonymous
 conniving swine of a two-faced lily-livered informer
 who'd have sold or bartered his own mother or sister's
 love-canal for the merest sniff of a sinecure or promotion,

the details of their charge of Jesus-Knows-What being entirely immaterial, simply because at some point they were bound to catch up with you on some trumped up charge anyway; Danitsé arrested, cool early morning, and taken off, quietly, in a canvas covered truck; Danitsé barely surviving winter on Savage Island

GOLI OTOK, SVETI GRGUR *aka Naked Island aka*
Barren Island, where

fellow prisoners perished for no reason or some mildly ironic quip or anecdote told to the wrong commissar; Danitsé not quite starving, skinny, toughened up, through-and-past despairing, more lightly moving, but always failing utterly to self-censor fantasy of memories – or memory of fantasies; Danitsé, divorced, returned, partly restored

POSTOJINSKA JAMA to favour and employment as
official tour-guide in ghostly

whispering grottoes, escorting randy ambassadors and distinguished foreign delegates on behalf of regional commissariat for brotherhood and unity;

POSLEDNJA ŠANSA Danitsé sipping coffee with
an ageing poet with cancer and

two months to live; Danitsé picking chrysanthemums; Danitsé pickling cabbage leaves; Danitsé recalling but trying *not* to recall the whole of your family feasting at

OHRID, ADA CIGANLIJA the autumn equinox on
pink-fleshed lake trout

or white-fleshed river trout, chilled with crisp white wine; Danitsé with a definite *tick*, even if barely discernible to those who never knew you, an involuntary minuscule squeezing at precisely each third blink, of muscles around both eyes; Danitsé quietened, inside and outside, talking about nothing, deliberate and clinical in dumbing-down awareness of clicks on the phone, as if nobody were listening,

as if you were still unwarily-unsuspecting-naive
innocuous-innocent-Danitsé-with-no-past-to-hide ;
Danitsé keeping strength up on water, bread and salt
throughout the hard times, rationing out shares
with the old man upstairs, toothless, incontinent,
who once fought as a partisan and, next door,
the twin boys with mother working as a char ;
Danitsé at the dentist, smoking, drinking coffee,
chatting to assistants and other queuing women

VRAČAR

waiting in turn to have

fillings crammed

with something like silver, something like gold ; fully
reinstated comrade Danitsé, one-time factory steward
whose younger comrades, taken on a decade later, have
managed to stand resolute before you in the everlasting

JURIJA GAGARINA

queue for a vacant eighth

floor shoe-box apartment,

unless you were most improbably to decide to sleep
with the supervisor – just once, well, maybe twice,
as your own small personal contribution towards
the onward ongoing social struggle for a better life,
and so engineer yourself a couple of places forward,
which, you, being a lady, as well as a model citizen,
indeed would never dream of ; more-than-ever
anxious Danitsé, muttering to yourself, *Look at you,
you scraggy old bag, he wouldn't want you anyway,*
now that you come to examine your defects, naked
in the mirror ; mature sensible policy-making Danitsé,
still relatively high-breasted and slim-waisted, unable
to afford more than a black coffee in the canteen before
entering and sitting, smiling, throughout the inane
yawnworthy-jargon-crammed lecture by the latest
bald perspiring liberal Visiting Professor of Sociology
From Ohio or Oklahoma or Kentucky or Kansas or
God-Knows-Where, pontificating to the natives on

of somewhere else, of someone else's aspirations,
somebody else's powers; good-neighbourly Danitsé
of inflated suspicions and conspiracy theories; flawless
perfectionist Danitsé of many faults, mostly blamed
on others, rarely on yourself; Danitsé believing or at
least prepared to believe, almost wholeheartedly, in
the refashioning of hope, refurbishment of the real,
furtherance of the possible, transparency of justice,
boundlessness of fortune, depthlessness of joy and
ineffable, unassailable dignity of wisdom and love;
Danitsé, proficient in two alphabets for one language;
TERAZIJE ageless Danitsé, demonstrating,
singing and laughing
nose-to-nose in the front line with students one third
your own age facing baton-and-water-cannon-bearing
SKUPŠTINA police backed by tanks and
tear gas beneath graceless
statues to moustachioed sabre-bearing heroes who
would rather die than surrender to any enemy, ever;
many-times betrayed Danitsé, whose own godforsaken
SREBRENICA sons have harried, hunted, rooted out,
incarcerated, tortured, crippled, mown
down and, in fields, lanes and woodland ditches left
grandparents, godparents – whole families – to rot;
Danitsé, ousted from your village, whose retaliating
KRAJINA grandsons, in spurious names
of necessity, revenge, honour,
have shot at, raided, pillaged and re-occupied the house
you were lucky to get away from, just in time; refugee
Danitsé, both adoring and hurtful to those who love you
but bitterest of all to those of your own blood; Danitsé
descended from lost tribes on plains and hills and by
rivers hollowed out of the bowl of God-Knows-Where
way back beyond the Carpathians and the Urals, now
dispersing to Australia, Argentina, Canada, California

and other maybe blander but even yet more faceless
God-Knows-Wheres, where still everything seems
possible or, rather *did* seem, at least from far-off,
before departure; Danitsé who, thanks to excellent
connections, did manage to find a job abroad, but
couldn't stick it, no way, and had to come back
home to a home no longer *home*; Danitsé stuck for
good among provincial snobs and backbiting gossips
including ancient spinsters who would drink pure acid
rather than reveal their own personal secrets to a single
stranger; Danitsé, menopausal, with incipient arthritis,
barren Danitsé, intent on mothering orphans;
Danitsé, cancer-ridden, still surviving somehow;
Danitsé, toothless concierge and sweeper of dust
from church floors, flattener and comber of sand-trays
for spindly yellow candles perched on wooden tripods, loyal
filler of holy oils in incense-burners that dangle from right
arms of forgotten forefather priests, swinging across
these present times, like pendula in slow motion;
Danitsé, with hope in your heart, even these days . . .

*while this spring's nightingales, as in every other,
are drowning out the hum of overhanging galaxies,
so stark in their radiance, and insufferably bright,
they appear about to fall, even though they're receding*

. . . these days – why is it you look and sound like
everybody else; or have you cloned, or disguised
yourself, or even taken vows, disappeared into
a convent that never grants visits, grows its own
carrots and lettuces, keeps goats, geese and chickens
fenced in by reedbeds and pollarded willows, on one
of those little islands on a backwater of the river
that scarcely anyone notices; or, Danitsé, have you
thumbed a lift from the long-striding captain of

