

For the Living

Selected Writings 1: Longer Poems 1965–2000

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.

Also by Richard Berengarten

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- Vol. 1 *For the Living: Selected Longer Poems, 1965–2000*
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For the Living

SELECTED WRITINGS

Volume 1

LONGER POEMS 1965–2000

RICHARD BERENGARTEN



CAMBRIDGE

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To Melanie

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Editorial Note

For the Living is the first volume in the ongoing Salt series of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings*. It consists of longer poems and poem-sequences written between 1965 and 2000, in Greece, Italy, England and former Yugoslavia. By and large, contents appear in order of composition, though with several minor departures from chronology. Expanded notes at the end of this edition provide dedications, dates and places of composition, some contexts and references, and details of changes in the choice of poems since the first edition (Salt, 2004). That edition was published under the name Richard Burns. For this edition, the poet repossesses his ancestral name.

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RB

CAMBRIDGE, JULY 2008

The Easter Rising 1967

I

I am sick of the twittering of swallows' voices,
My Lord, I have come down from the North
To find only You, but sitting by the well
I was assaulted by perfumes
And the babbling of a thousand animals
Performing the rites of Spring. I am sick to death
Of them all, My Lord,
You do not walk among them.



II

The army has taken over the state
Lord I am sick
Citizens are forbidden
To gather in groups of more than five
For the safety of all citizens
The king is chewing his nails in the palace
His signature has been faked
Tanks patrol the city streets
And half the people's ministers are in prison
Including three past premiers
Citizens are forbidden
To walk outside their houses
The constitution has been suspended
By the order of the army and the police
Civil crimes will be judged under martial law
For the safety of all citizens
Newspaper radio telephone telegraph
And all forms of transport and communication
Have been suspended
No one shall enter or leave the country
Any citizen seen on the streets after dusk
Will be shot on sight
For the safety of all citizens
We shall discover a communist plot tomorrow
And concoct a suitable scapegoat
Citizens are forbidden
To criticise the regime
By the order of the army and the police
Lord I am sick

For the safety of all citizens
Citizens are forbidden
Citizens have been suspended



III

The green corn grows but the poppies grow higher
And other red memories spatter the fields
The shepherds are bringing their flocks from the hills
Down into town for the Easter slaughter
The women have painted the house fronts white
The peasants wade knee deep in green corn
But the blood of the poppy covers the land
A shepherd who had not heard the news
Came down into town after dusk and was shot
The lambs are brought down for the Easter slaughter
And my firstborn son is a conscript now
The blood of the poppy covers the land
Other red memories spatter the fields
Must I live through them all over again
Lord I have been drunk all day
But I am sick to death of it all



IV

In martial formation the swallows returned
They came with the tourists all twittering
But they have brought us no news
They sing for themselves and hear no one else
They are afraid for their lives
They chatter in high pitched foreign dialects
And I cannot understand a word that they say
Lord all our newspapers are ten days old
The neighbours have told the police
That my cousin is a guest in my house
Lord they have confiscated my rifle and his
We shall hunt no more the hares on the hills this year
Lord I hear the summer flies buzzing
They interfere with every other sound
Lord the shit in the shithouse is piled up to the ceiling
And no one so strong as to clear it away
All the radio stations screech in foreign languages
I have twiddled the knobs all day
My friends are all afraid to speak to me
To whom shall I turn
Lord I do not know what is happening
Lord I am sick
These foreigners these barbarian swallows
How cruel is their oblivious song
They are speaking about us I know
But I am not immune like them
Lord I am sick
Help me



V

Theodorakis

Who composed the beautiful dances and songs

Papandreou

Who fought for a vote for each man

Unrigged elections

Pensions and better education

Kanellopoulos

Who led the last government

Glezos

Who won a prize for peace

And so the story goes (apocryphal or not)

Climbed the Acropolis

To plant the Greek flag instead of the Swastika

While the Nazis murdered our women and children

And the S.S. sprawled in Merlin Street

An idiotic schoolboy gesture

That gave our hearts fresh blood

Spyridoula

Who has a shop in the high street

Which sells stoves and cylinders of calor gas

Sotiriou

Who lost an arm in the war at the age of seventeen

Pappageorgiou

Who drives a lorry

Whose son is my son's friend

Ploumbis

Who played backgammon with me last week

Where are they now?
Where are they now?

Neigh for them
Till the cows come home

Are we
Or they
Imprisoned?



VI

And I am sick of the song of the military
The captains who strut like pigeons down the street
Having just been promoted
And the raucous laughter of beardless conscripts
Parading in the market place
 With wolf whistles and dirty jokes
 And swearwords cram-full of innocence
 And tanks outside the post office
 And tommy-guns outside the electricity board
 And bayonets fixed outside the telephone exchange
 Stopping the traffic on the highways
 Arresting people in their homes
 Publicly picking up whores below the Acropolis

They do not understand
I am sick of people who do not understand
Because they are innocent
I am sick of innocence

And I am sick of the smiles of friendly policemen
Whose eyes betray their fear of being removed
From their meagre wages and wives and mothers
They too are innocent

And I am sick of the cowed silence of peasants and shopkeepers
Who want peace and quiet at any price
I am sick of them because they are right as usual
I am sick of watching their foreheads furrowed by worry
The complaints of their whispering women
The puzzled uncertain eyes of their children
The silence punctuated by forced laughter in the coffee houses

And bars and taverns where men cannot talk as they please
Lord I am sick of the rich
Washing their cheeks and turning the other hand
Of dowagers with face-lifts learning peasant dances
Surrounded by troupes of performing lesbians and ponces
Concerned with their make-up and sun-tan on the beaches
Who own smoky factories in Eleusis
Who have never been to Eleusis

They are all innocent
But I am sick of innocence
Lord I have lost my delight
In the cherry tree in the garden
I am sick of the apricot and almond and artichoke
And the smell of the lilac has turned to shit in my nostrils
And yellow sweet retsina tastes like urine
Oh God I am sick of the conversation of all my friends



VII

For six nights on end I have been stinking drunk
On ouzo beer and wine in every bar in town
And I have not found one man to whom I could open my heart
Lord I have no newspapers
The state has cut out my eyes
Lord the radio tells lies
Between all my favourite songs
My ears are filled with cement
Lord my friends are afraid to talk to me
The police have sold my tongue in the market for dog food

Where there is language
There is no exile

Lord I am exiled
In my own land



VIII

Announcement

It is forbidden

For more than five fleas to congregate together after dusk

It is forbidden

For more than three chairs one cigarette stub and two beer mugs

To be found loitering together

It is forbidden

For women to fuck more than five men in one evening

Except officers

Who do not count

Who cannot count

It is forbidden

For officers' wives to menstruate

Because it is a semi-barbarous custom

It is forbidden

For virgins under the age of sixty-nine

To wear skirts more than one millimetre above the knee

It is forbidden

For men to have hair

And all schoolchildren will shave their heads like convicts

It is forbidden

To look in another man's eyes

Except with the aid of a powerful electric torch

It is forbidden

To use swearwords like Liberty

It is forbidden

To dream



IX

I have dyed two dozen eggs for Easter
Blood red My Lord blood red
I have bought a white fleeced lamb in the market
Weighing fourteen kilos
The prettiest creature ever born for sacrifice
And I have carried it home over my shoulders
And now I hear it bleating
Tomorrow it will be slaughtered
Lord I pray do not pass over my house
I am ready for you when you come
Lord I am sick of the blood of the lambs
Redder than cochineal

Do not pass over my house
Lord I am ready

Actaeon

No fanciful townwit can

Tell in skilled story

The truth of my longing

Famous in legend

I sang like the cuckoo

The maidens turned round

Come away Come away

In pools I saw your image

Lissome white lady

You haunted my haleness

With dream delirium

Pockmarked my young face

Everywhere I saw you

But in the city

Measure my mettle

My keenness of bow thrust

Actaeon my name

When I rode on the fields

My voice made men jealous

When I laughed at the peasants

Bright were my eyes

Lithe fallow deer

Shadow, bright butterfly

You harrowed my hunter pride

Shuttered my sight

With the blindspot of venery

Nightlight and daylight

Where most I sought you

I set out to seek you

By brackish waters

Grazed you in fern fronds

And air pawing blind, held

Only the valley lily

I turned at your shadow

Below the tree shadow

Fine was the forest dare

Dispelling the dark fear

Which haunted my hunting

Dizzy as wine draughts

My flesh knew the tree bark

The hornsong borne hollow

And angry birds wheeling

I brushed you in bracken

With red wounds bruised black

Finding never

Your scent in my nostrils

Blown by the breezes

But saw my own shadow

In terror I shot it

Hunting your music

Of dream delirium

The hunt was my music

Sweeter than evensong

My ear heard the hounds bark

In the echoing valley

At the perilous kill

In the horn you called me
From the flesh of women
Come away Come away
To the flashing of livery
Between the green trees
Come away Come away
To the great deer's antlers

*Come away Come away
Far from the city
You sang in the wine flask
Redder than blood
To the streaming manes
To the doe's red blood
Come away Come away*

My sterling companions
The saddle and bridle
Leather I loved
In the darkest forest
Black stag and hind
And roebuck and mottleback
Till I saw the white lady

*The basset and bloodhound
And the bow I swore by
Swift were my arrows
I hunted the hart
Those fleeing animals
Haunted my dreams
Lost in the city*

In the heart of the city

I heard great bells ring

Darker than evensong

Come away Come away

From the cavernous forest

Of basset and bloodhound

For the last time

I saw the lithe fallow deer

Clearer than judgement

She called me by name

But I heard my own echo

Sing in the wine flask

I raised my bow

I slew the white lady

Go village bred minstrel

Sing on your harp

With harvest wine flask

Where the wind whispers

Spanning the valley

Yearning to hunt me

In the bracken bound forest

Tell peasant women

Around warm fires

How I who am dumb

Lost my high laughter

To the doe in the city

But hear their black laughter

Where I walk in tree shadow