

In a Time of Drought

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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In a Time of Drought

SELECTED WRITINGS

Volume 4

The Balkan Trilogy : Part 2

RICHARD BERENGARTEN



CAMBRIDGE

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*For Arijana
and to all my friends
throughout and out of Yugoslavia*

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Epigraph

Dodole, f. pl. several girls who, in the summer, when there is a drought, go through the village from house to house, and sing and call on rain to fall. One of the girls gets completely undressed and, thus naked, lines and ties herself up in various grasses and flowers so that not a single part of her skin can be seen, and she is called *dodola* ('She has turned herself into a *dodola*'—is said of a girl or a woman who has adorned herself right up to her head): then they go around from house to house. When they arrive in front of a house, then the *dodola* dances alone, while the other girls stand in a row and sing various songs; after which the housewife, or some other member of the household, takes a bucket or a pitcher of water and pours it over the *dodola*, and she meanwhile dances, all the while turning around. In the *dodolske pesme* ('rain-maiden's songs'—tr.), at the end of every verse they sing a refrain which goes something like this: *oy dodo! oy dodole*, e.g.

Our *doda* prays to God, *oy dodo! oy dodole!*
To pour down dewy rain, *oy dodo! oy dodole!*

The *dodolas* dance nowadays throughout nearly all of Serbia from Valjevo down to Timok. Around Srem, Bačka and Banat they used to dance until quite recently, but the new priests have forbidden and uprooted the custom.

VUK STEFANOVIĆ KARADŽIĆ
Serbian Dictionary,
First Edition, Vienna, 1815
Translated, RB

Of outsiders' views on Balkan problems we are, most of us, tired.

EDITH MARY DURHAM
High Albania
1909

I had not before shown any great curiosity as to what we were to see that evening, for the reason that I had always found it a waste of time to try to imagine beforehand anything that Yugoslavia was going to offer me.

REBECCA WEST
Black Lamb and Grey Falcon
1940

Editorial Note

In a Time of Drought is the fourth volume in the ongoing Salt series of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings* and the second part of his Balkan Trilogy. For more than twenty five years, the author has maintained a close involvement with the life, culture and politics of the Balkans. He lived and worked in former Yugoslavia at a crucial time, between 1987 and 1991, immediately before the wars that broke the country apart. Out of this have come his three Balkan collections, including this single book-length poem in seven sections.

In a Time of Drought is based on the pan-Balkan rainmaking ceremonies, which survived into the last quarter of the twentieth century. Their key figure is the Balkan rainmaiden, who goes by many names but is best known as *Dodola* or *Peperuda*. The book includes a postscript, with a copious glossary and notes that explore the background of the rainmaking customs. The first publication of this book in Serbian (RAD, Belgrade, 2004) was awarded the international Morava Charter Poetry Prize in 2005. The first English edition appeared in 2006, under the name Richard Burns. For this edition, the poet repossesses his ancestral name.

1 For Dodola (I)

In Memory of Desanka Maksimovi

I

Who on the Spring Lord's holiday
Shall be called out as Queen of the May

Who shall be stripped and dressed in green
The fairest young woman that ever was seen

Who shall wear shoots of grasses and corn
The fairest young woman that ever was born

And who shall wear spring flowers in her hair
The fairest young woman anywhere?

*Hey Dodie fetch her away
Peperuda Perperuna
Hey Dodie Dodie Day*

II

Who shall be chosen as our Dodolka
Who shall be chosen as our rain maiden

Who shall be this year's Ladaritsa
Guardian of cornfields and growing gardens

And who Perperuna the butterfly
Fluttering around iris blooms

Attendant on Perun Lord of Rain
Festooned in purple and white lilac?

*Hey Dodie fetch her away
Peperuda Perperuna
Hey Dodie Dodie Day*

III

Who fairest young woman ever born
Shall wear pear blossom and sprig of hawthorn

Who shall be taught the secret speech
Of myrtle and poplar birch oak beech

And who blessed by lark and honey bee
Shall be revealed as woman and tree

And who'll bring back our golden time
Adorned in leaves of maple and lime?

*Hey Dodie fetch her away
Peperuda Perperuna
Hey Dodie Dodie Day*

IV

And who shall be our rainbow shaper
Gathering foxgloves from the hedgerows

Windflowers and bluebells from the spinney
Bending and twisting off fronds of willow

Evergreen laurel by the wayside
Sprays of black and white cherry in blossom

For garlands to bind into her hair
Wreaths to scatter onto the stream?

*Hey Dodie fetch her away
Peperuda Perperuna
Hey Dodie Dodie Day*

V

Who'll sway on a swing all night through
And at daybreak wash her face in the dew

Then with more daughters in her train
Dance for the clouds to send down rain

On thirsty fields and now and ever
Bless our work and hard endeavour

To bring in golden summer treasure
And count for us and weigh the measure?

*Hey Dodie fetch her away
Peperuda Perperuna
Hey Dodie Dodie Day*

VI

And who'll sew kingcups onto our river
Death-cleanser and life-giver

Who'll thread lilies into our stream
For the souls we'd recall if we could and redeem

Who'll braid peonies into our brook
One for each soul Death took

And with their petals embroider the water
Whose daughter whose daughter?

*Hey Dodie fetch her away
Peperuda Perperuna
Hey Dodie Dodie Day*

VII

And who'll drape lilac over our gate
To tell Death to hide and wait

Who'll toss marigolds onto our roof
To offer life our living proof

And who will take a cross from the grave
Of a pauper a beggar or a slave

And dip it in clean running water
Whose daughter whose daughter?

*Hey Dodie fetch her away
Peperuda Perperuna
Hey Dodie Dodie Day*

2 For the Green Rider

In memory of Vasko Popa

I

Who will lead out the plough of dawn
To clear our soil of thistle and thorn

Who will harness the cart of day
To drag our nightmares' marks away

Who will command the sun's chariot
To divide what is from what is not

Who'll drive us onward a little higher
If not quite as high as our hearts' desire

*A rider went out with his hounds
Went out among the fields
He has saddled his horse Zelenko*

II

Who will break up our earth with a spade
Break up all the blunders we've ever made

Loosen stones weeds scrub with his fork
Pick out our failures from clay loam and chalk

Split and divide with a long-handled hoe
The roots of our errors made long ago

Smooth and level our land with a rake
Prepared for the new ones we're bound to make?

*A rider went out with his hounds
Went out among the fields
He has saddled his horse Zelenk*

III

And who will sharpen our blunt ploughshare
Keep yoke and iron in good repair

Slice the stubborn clods from our field
Harrow its topsoil to loosen and yield

Grow healthy grain from reliable seed
Separate good crop from weed

Sift on the threshing floor next to our mill
Mistakes we won't make from those we will?

*A rider went out with his hounds
Went out among the fields
He has saddled his horse Zelenk*

IV

And who will hew down our trees with an axe
Build us new houses safe from attacks

Trim old trunks with hatchet and saw
Measure good planks for rafter and floor

Break up rocks with hammer and wedge
Chisel the lintel and window ledge

Raise again from rubble and ash
Homes no fires or bombs will trash?

*A rider went out with his hounds
Went out among the fields
He has saddled his horse Zelenk*

V

And who will shift the last harvest the mines
Planted in paths between orchards and vines

Who'll wash away from ditches and holes
Toxins that gnaw into bodies and souls

Who'll flush long-lingering poisons out
Make waters safe for carp and trout

Who'll kill the invisible Death that clings
To fragments of bombs in wells and springs?

*A rider went out with his hounds
Went out among the fields
He has saddled his horse Zelenk*

VI

And where is the doctor trained or inclined
To cut out the cancers that rot the mind

Who by his science or by his arts
Can drain the venom from our hearts

Prescribe for grief in gut and belly
His cure of honey or royal jelly

And by clear vision or clear hindsight
Stitch us our centuries back on right?

*A rider went out with his hounds
Went out among the fields
He has saddled his horse Zelenk*

VII

Harvests get gathered and unloaded
Borders shored up breached eroded

Bridges knocked down then rebuilt
Estuaries fill with silt

Towers tumble cities grow
Peace and war come go

What antidote or remedy
Cures or comes from history?

*A rider went out with his hounds
Went out among the fields
He has saddled his horse Zelenk*

