



Balkan Poems

BY SUSAN IOANNOU



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BALKAN POEMS

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Wordwrights Canada

www.wordwrights.ca

wordwrights@sympatico.ca

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For Larry

Balkan Winter

Ten years old,
inside the snow-cruled window, watching
over your neighbours' red-tiled roofs
you hear it
zing-zing
flashing in frost-bright air.

Beyond the emptied laneways, the mountain
rises, ice-hung vineyards thinning
higher and higher
—white quickens
black, as the slopes swarm.

Fleas could spring
and drop like that
except these specks
these echoing pops and cracks
dot the snow red.

Frozen into the window, watching
you will not flatten against the wall
but count the flashes of tracer fire
zing-zing
shattering tiles on your neighbours' roofs.

Srebrenica Suite

Bombed

In the blown-out wall
midnight's dragonflies

rise with sparks
to blacken the moon.

To a Bride of War

I lay the lilies of hate, my love,
along your bloodied hair.
From twisted foot and crumpled dress
the blue bruise crawling up your cheek
collapses a last breath.
May long white petals perfume your death.

Rubble is your marriage bed.
Blackened beams let in the sky.
Frost fills an emptied shoe.

Sleep quiet
though new thunder splits
this battered rock, and air bursts red.

I lay these lilies by your head
to wed you with old earth.

The Abandoned Hospital

Bone-withered,
their eyes are like peeled eggs
turning black, and back
inside half-emptied skulls.

Fingers, red lumps puffed with cold,
cannot hold even tatters
over transparent skin.

Pieces of selves, not people,
their fireworked nerves shudder.
Above, the fractured moon
dangles its sparking cord.

Survivor

Each night,
a black-scarved woman
squats by the riverbank.

Her small net
splashes and crawls
—a boot? a bone?

Behind,
barbed wire
catches the moon.

After the Raid

No clear deep pool
where pebbles shiver
but a looking glass steamed over

her face floats up nothing.

Torturer

We expect a face
that could splinter mirrors:
nose, a long interrogation point,
eyes, sharpened skewers,
mouth, a red sneer,

but after shrieks' steel in the bone,
not his casual turning away,
the half-hidden yawn.

Kosovo Suite

Pastime

An eye for an eye is claw justice
—but two from this shivering Muslim woman?

What triumph bleeds
from severing both her ears?

Hack off any thief's wrist,
but why, one by one, her innocent fingers?

Not even a trophy hunter
gouges out the nose.

Like meat unhooked,
roll her whimpering down the woods.

A day later, laugh at the shots
—war's lowest form of mercy.

Massacre

(Racak)

“It was staged,”
insist the officials
—at the back of each head, the bullet
that blew the faces off
grandpas, a woman, a boy of twelve,
or the barrels pressed into flesh
that splattered intestines across the trees.

Forty-five bodies strewn in a gully,
then laid into weeping-rows in the mosque
have been trucked away
for “forensic investigation”
to prove, no doubt,
how they further mutilated themselves
as a trick
to embarrass the police.

In the Hills

Brown hair careless across her shoulders,
she is eighteen and her flowered dress
wears the short sleeves of summer.

Beneath her, the valley sprawls quiet in the sun,
not even a chicken
pecks through the smudges of smoke.

But what can she hear, high in these trees,
hands emptied at her sides,
shoeless feet unswaying?

Leaving

Like rush-hour traffic,
cars lined the highway to the border,
white, blue, red as their drivers'
Adidas and Nike jackets.
“They’re going on a picnic,”
shrugged the official on T.V.

One morning the road was silent.
Cars braked into ditches,
hung askew on embankments.
All the windows were empty.

Between scattered stones and sky
for days no one appeared,
the only movement on the horizon
black smoke.

Along sharp mountain tracks
a slow caravan wound,
tractors, open wagons,
shelter a flapping plastic sheet.

Down from the distant trees
thousands more boots and shoes
shuffled day after day,
the grizzled held up by the armpits,
babies clutched like sacks,
everyone staring for fresh mines.

Today they barely stagger
leaning on, dragging, each other.
Faces are pinched and pointed
—“only twelve kilos thinner”.
Sunken-eyed children stay alive
by feeding on flowers and leaves.

How many more can stumble
before the last, sunk to their knees,
no longer are able to rise
from kissing their lost earth?

Tomorrow

This poem is only beginning.

Too many are caught in the hills
while diplomacy burns
and international will
bombs and bombs . . .

Before and After

In downtown Belgrade, at dusk
the square rocked to pop stars and waving fists
while silent, shore to shore over bridges,
lines of human bull's-eyes glared.

Weeks later, at the main crossings, the river
choked on shattered cement and stone.
Lights stayed off in the square.
In their hospital rooms at night,
more became "collateral damage"
—another laser bomb misfired.
Was anyone still counting?

The News

When missiles burst across the screen,
CNN and CBC *Newsworld*
broke to on-the-spot bulletins
from cell phones, satellite, up to the minute,
with twice a day, strategic briefings,
and every night, a politician,
retired general, *chargé d'affaires*
to comment, argue, predict.

On the ground, who owned the facts
on men and boys herded away?
Truth was amputated:
from 15,000 feet in the air
mass graves seemed no more
than photos' tiny black bands.
When bullets pocked a flaming wall,
the UNHCR took notes.
Each night "Official" video clips
bared more charred boots and arms.

Refugees, first filmed close up
weeping half-starved toward camps,
blurred to anonymous rows of tents.
Each threat: a border re-closed,

thousands of "squatters" to bus,
a waning water supply cut off
—less and less time on screen.

News has its own borders:
a story that drags on too long,
numbers too big to embrace,
fresh headlines fighting to air.
—That conflict no war can win.

Digging for Truth

Far back in a tunnel,
deep down a mine shaft,
darkness holds the secret.
Even in the light, the residues
in hydrochloric-acid vats,
a smelter's bubbling lava
whisper the organic
chemistry of crime.

In village after village
brittle black shards,
a half-melted necklace,
the rim from an old pocket watch
litter another burnt-out house,
as telling as the yard
red with bits of rotted cloth
and three stiff fingers reaching
up through fresh dirt.

Even without a shovel
truth tastes as foul
as water from the well
and rises from the swollen fields
everywhere, a sickly sweet stench.

Who Keeps the Peace

Who keeps the peace
if he cannot keep
his roof unpatched by sky,
his last cow
and his child's shoe
out of a minefield?

Who loves his neighbour
who never loved back,
who never squeezed
words enough
to wring out
the blood?

The battle has not been won.
The battle is always
about losing
pride so brittle, so old
it's quick to ignite
a lopsided justice:

picking off
this son, that brother
ruthless to uneven the score

because "God"
—no matter whose—
"must be on *Our* side".

Finders-keepers:
dug from the garden
a cocked revolver's
passion for death
is all they'll ever
fondle of love.

Slavic Dancers

(Toronto, 1999)

Pounding, pounding,
boots thunder open the darkness
as rifle-straight spines, heads high,
enter the shaking church-hall stage,
and young men lock arms along shoulders
to tighten their scarlet circle.

White sleeves are swinging round elbows,
every black jerkin is flapping,
open-necked muscles glisten,
till billowing trousers stamp!
Plunge, kick up, stamp!
Plunge, kick up—leap!

Aside, snake the notes from a lone *clarino*,
and tossing their flowered headbands,
tunics aflame with ribbons
like sunshine on pools of blood,
red-and-gold-skirted girls
skip in, cross-step, skip.

Behind them the boy with the big leather drum
heaves the heavy stick over his head.

Thump! Thump!

Harder and faster
THUMP!—and we old ones jump—
THUMP!—and we old ones tremble.

He's beating revenge on us
old ones the young had trusted
who sent them to fight with our guns.

Finish our feuds! we'd shrieked.
Honour our ancient pride.
Scorch our enemies!

Their boots are dancing on land mines,
arms flung open to missiles,
chins held high for bullets.
Behind every matching glance
fixed smiles harden to rage
at leaping from breath to death.
Their youth,
their fire
—Don't be deceived.
They hearken to our drum and piper
only to warn us old ones, like sparks:
Beware these pummelling heels!

Baba

Weeping buried with her husband's bones,
she wore her prayers to whispers long ago.
Sitting in the sun alone, she turns
sixty years through quiet, stubby hands.

Her first, the hardest birth, who bit her breast,
grew tough as olive pits and spat down priests
to slash his rebels through the mountain pass.
Now, outlaw for life, the last she heard
he's married, with a child she'll never see.

His brother, plump with pita, filled her lap
and counted saints upon her fingertips.
He's flown home only twice in thirty years.
Rings, moustache, expensive wife, and three
cars, houses, kids are his trinities.

Her third son huddled in her skirts when bombs
shook awake the nights, but would not stay
to work beside his father—jumped a train
five hours safe before the army draft.
He sends her cash each month from Canada,
writes "I love you," but has no address.

Four families more she sheltered with her own
clothes and food, once the mortars struck,
and took two orphans in her war-strong arms,
lit their faith with candles, daily kneeled
to her glowing icon blessed with bread.

Her longed-for daughter, born at forty-five,
though fully grown in body, needed still
Mama to help bathe her, comb her hair,
a child within a woman's dress. Now gone.
No buttons to fuss over any more.

Crosses were to bear, but paradise
on this earth was lost, except to sit
quiet in the sun, with stubby hands
turning sixty years of dreams alone.

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