

BEN KEATINGE

TODOR, TITO, AND THE HAIRDRESSER

For Todor Gajdov

At closing time, one more *rakija*
with Todor in Skopje's Yugo bar,
pictures of Marshal Tito on the wall.

Todor repeats how Tito, wily Croat,
died as royalty, not as Josip Broz
leaving discord and disunity, my friend.

Sure, I say, thinking of my barber's
steel scissors, his lab technician's coat,
a medallioned Marshal on the wall,

his honest salon, time-warped and true
with towel flourishes and talc for wounds,
water to rinse with, and Tito's canny smile.

THE FALL OF RANKOVIĆ

Aleksandar Ranković fell from grace in July 1966 after serving as Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of the former Yugoslavia

The word was out, he'd overstepped his brief
his spider-work, his toil, his stubborn guile
he'd bugged a phone belonging to the Chief.

He never rested, he still lived by his belief
in progress, he'd surveyed a thousand files,
but this was different, quite outside his brief.

Yet fearlessness had gained a soldier's sheaf
of medals, Tito had led those trials,
so why did he now spy upon the Chief?

Some respite for the comrades, some relief
from prying eyes, yes, they may well smile,
because this final reckoning will be brief.

It was an insult when a common type of thief
later took all his medallions, a miserable
heist, an aftermath unfitted to the Chief.

They buried him in summer, in the heat
of Belgrade, chanting *Leka* all the while
and even though his funeral was brief
he lingered, as a shadow, like the Chief.

NICOLAE CEAUȘESCU FLEES BUCHAREST

Nicolae Ceaușescu was general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party from 1965 to 1989 and served as President of the Republic from 1974 until his overthrow in December 1989.

The people run like wolves
and tear up Timișoara
the news has spread, no one listens
. . . my palaces! . . . are they safe?

But I *must* speak:
“Romania is great again!”
now as before,
. . . the banners . . . the chanting,

and yet, they are restless . . .
my bodyguard! . . . are we leaving?
. . . my helicopter! . . . my trusted pilot!
. . . he ditches us at Găești.

We hijack a car,
a doctor drives . . . an emergency!
. . . the radio news . . .
a roadblock! . . . is nowhere safe?

THE DEATH OF THE POET KOČO RACIN

Kičevo, June 13, 1943

A mountain and a mountain shack,
a labouring step, a shout,
a further step, then *crack*
the bullets flew, he fell;
a flare lit up the dead man's face,
a poet, one whose look they knew.

A mountain and a mountain shack,
a labouring step, a shout,
a further step, then *crack*
the aim was true, he fell;
they had drawn the dead man's fate,
a poet, one whose songs they knew.

THE LAKE PRESPA HISTORY SONG

This man was jabbering in Greek
or Turkish, irascible, denying
he'd seen anyone set fire to the burning
reed beds. Then a muezzin called,
hollering over the lake, over the border
that we'd seen was very close

to the village, although it was closed
and barred, abandoned just before Greece.
Lake Prespa is nothing but borders
that no one can cross, a lake of denials
where grebes are stalking or calling
or fleeing from fires that are burning

their nests, like those villages burned
and razed when the roads were closed
in spite of the uproar, the calls
for calm that were made to Turkey or Greece
whose ambassadors tried to deny
these incidents inside their borders

reckoning new maps and new borders
de facto based on the burning
facts on the ground, which they denied.
No wonder they kept themselves close,
the Slavs, and never gave way to Greece
or the Ottomans, in spite of the calls

to capitulate, and frantic calls
from refugees to open the border
when Greeks were fighting with Greeks
and all Macedonia burning or burned.
So, the roads were closed
entry was blocked and denied.

The lake does not warm, it *still* denies.
From the watchtower we follow calling
birds. A black stubble closes
round us, scorched to the lake border,
but the pelicans tire of these burning
sedges and rise up, flying towards Greece.

Now the border reopens with many denials
and calls, many burning questions
which are not closed, nor could be.