

#### 4.8 Serbian Times (for Radoje) – 2006

My old Serbian friend!  
you had too much youth in you  
to leave us yet.  
I had not the wit or grace to sense  
that you were on your way:  
two whole long months or more you stayed  
among that multitude before the gate -  
you fought no doubt, but then  
slipped through upon the tide.

In truth, I know it was not thus.  
I later learned you would not tolerate  
a slow decline: the sharp incursions,  
all the fuss, the loss of pride  
were all too much to bear. I sense  
the dull conviction slowly grown in you  
that this was not the way - and then  
the overwhelming surge, the reckless steps  
along the corridor, the open window, end  
of body, flight of soul. How else?

Iconic in your way, old friend,  
should I allow your image to corrode,  
to coruscate beneath  
the tongues of your inheritors?  
to be betrayed by men  
less civilised than you by far?  
Especially I think of what  
you shared with them,  
the substance written in your people's genes,  
the Slavic words, Cyrillic script, the pride  
which has withstood the desecrations,  
not from alien faiths, but from those  
jealous siblings of the one true line  
of Macedonian warriors and wide Byzantine eyes,  
of  
frescoes and basilicas, and fortresses  
astride the mighty confluence you lived upon.

I miss – will never compensate, -  
the quickness of your laugh, your  
moments of abandon, casting plates  
at our Ionian feast long  
after time had disallowed them.  
My grief is guilt – how could I think  
despite the sickness in your blood  
that somehow you'd be always there,  
that faintly wicked, winning smile of yours  
could always stay alight,  
that easy walk and talk could come again?

But actually, they do, and that is you -  
at leisure on the shore  
a year or two ago, at Heaven's City,  
in transit to the Holy Mount  
you knew at last you would not climb again.  
Beside the glimmering north Aegean sea,  
quiet talk of earlier times  
as the sun slipped down the sky,  
the quiet lapping of translucent waves,  
then sudden steep descent to blessed depths ...  
They all conspired to leave with me  
a fixed, unchanging image to reflect upon.

But still, my friend, I cannot reach you now  
and you had too much youth in you  
to leave us yet.

Thameside - December 2006.