

Marko Sosič: *Bread, Dust*

an excerpt from the novel

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

11 May 2010

A TIME OF CLOSENESS

Fragments of faces fall into my consciousness and slide beyond the limits of the fragile sleep being thrust about by the train journey.

H. and Maša, sitting on the bed next to each other, in love, Saša, looking at his child through the camera, snippets of faces somewhere between being awake and being asleep, flakes of the frescoes my gaze had lingered on yesterday. Frayed images brush against my perception like spring snow that instantly melts away, the blueness of the sky, the shards of living faces before my eyes, a forehead, a chunk of a chin, an eye, Giotto's magnificent rendering of the Paduan chapel of human Vices and Virtues. Inscribed among them a pair of names I have been uttering in my mind for years without knowing the faces they belong to, without knowing the truth about their destinies that have become the compelling subject of my quest.

Rozalija and Franc.

I do not know what their faces look like, or their eyes, their hands, their home, I know not what they can see from their window, whether they see fields, the river, branches of trees or just the bullet-damaged wall of the house next door.

Nearby, not far from them in my consciousness, a man who has been huddling in there for years and who constantly keeps recalling into my memory an account I had once read in a newspaper.

Place: somewhere in Italy.

Year: 1993.

The text in that newspaper I keep reading over and over in my memory:

With assistance in mediation from a kind of agency, people are leaving for the battlefield to participate in the adrenalin experience of killing someone. For this experience they pay a sniper an agreed amount.

Standing out in my mind is a man, one single, imaginary man, with a smooth face and blue eyes, whom I have carried around ever since I first read in the newspaper how people in the early 1990s would visit Bosnian battlefields in order to kill someone. This is also why I have to meet Rozalija and Franc, see their faces, see whether they still bear the scars.

I open my eyes and look straight out of the window.

The train speeds along.

Through the ploughed fields, their furrows freely moving around like large plates of inseminated earth, the remnants of the man's smooth face and blue eyes are caught in my consciousness at the last moment. Next to him a woman, two children, his lips telling them he is off on a business trip this weekend, the back of his wife's neck, her head lowered between her shoulders as she looks out of the window, smoking, not asking him where to, as if his words are nothing to do with her, as if she has long known his course.

The train speeds along, fields fly past my eyes, among them still the remnants of blueness from the Paduan frescos, then a plantation of poplars, and more ploughed fields, wide and empty, sown with cereals, germinating under the surface.

Reflected in the windowpane a woman's face.

She is sitting opposite me. Glancing at me briefly, as if to check whether I was still awake, she then looks towards the door to our compartment, and out of the window again, briefly covering her eyes with her hand, as if wanting to hide her face from someone. There is a certain unease in her, a dark shadow around her bright eyes, slightly sagging eyebrows, black, shoulder-length hair, a necklace, a long, loose T-shirt, crumpled trousers, trainers, and next to her a plastic bag that appears to have nothing inside. She looks out across the landscape that the railway line runs through. The sun shines through the glass, illuminating her face in intervals, the reflection suddenly brighter. A moment later a cloud covers the sun again, returning her face to the shadows, until all trace of light on it disappears, as if it had never been there at all.

She reminds me of Kathryn B., although she looks nothing like her, perhaps it was her hands that remind me of her, perhaps her elongated face. Kathryn B., sitting opposite me not so long ago over dinner, with other people around, I listen to her talking, telling me how she runs an organisation that uses DNA to identify people, telling me how they use objects to find the name and surname of their owner, so that their relatives know that those bones really are the right bones, and that that shirt did indeed belong to the one they were looking for.

The train speeds along.

Fields rush past my eyes, thoughts are acquiring a voice, I must find Rozalija and Franc who have lived within me without a face or voice for too long, I must find them, relatives I had only ever seen once in the past, still a child. I must find these people who have clung to my thoughts all these years, the thoughts into which all these faces of those close to me are seeping from all over the place, from the soil and from the sky, from walls

and trees, as if urging me to consider their lives, to think about myself and my writing about them.

They simply enter my thoughts, unexpectedly, without any warning, in the middle of the day, in the middle of the night.

Like now.

Across the surface of the ploughed fields, the fixed image of which remains in my thoughts like a painting, I sense a pair of eyes penetrating the soil, slowly emerging towards the surface, I see a forehead, the furrows on it, the cheekbones, short grey hair, the human face I am seeing is slowly pushing through the earth, remnants of soil linger momentarily on the forehead before quickly sliding across the cheeks, past the mouth, and in my mind his face is finally clear.

Father.

Boškooo, I can hear Mother's voice calling out in my thoughts, though he cannot hear her.

He stands at the edge of a deep pit as he stood by the hole above which once stood the house he was born in - his sisters had sold it to people who demolished it in order to build a new one, and there was nothing left of the old house at all, not the grey stone, not the yellow paint washed pale by the rain, not the slightest trace of the people who used to live in it.

A few days ago, before I set off, I saw him, I spotted him through the sparse shrubbery, walked alongside the field to reach him, and together we stared at the deep foundations that the builders had dug out for the new house, we stood next to each other as if gazing into a time when the old building that had vanished into the chasm was still there, as if in our minds we were leaning over the edge of the trenches in order to retrieve from their darkness the fragments of lives that exist somewhere between memory and reality, between closeness and distance.

It is as if I am still there now, standing by his side, hearing Mother call him,

Boškooo!

The train speeds along. A small, grey-haired man stops at the door to the compartment. He peers inside, his eyes watery and quizzing, a sad veil descended over them, then he lowers his gaze, possibly as if he were ashamed of something, and continues down the passageway. His shoes strike hard against the floor, as if the soles are worn thin and the heads of the cobbler's tacks have pierced through.

The train speeds along.

More fields with deep furrows, broad and generous.

Mother.

Veeraaaa! I can hear Father's voice, calling out to her.

With its softness Mother's face smoothes out the deep furrows and in my mind eclipses the thought of Father standing above the abyss.

Her face with its brooding eyebrows, as she has just noticed me somewhere by the kitchen door at her home and senses how I will at any moment and without any sensitivity begin pestering her with questions that will upset her, which was my purpose in order to alert her to her responsibilities. I am sorry to push her with these questions now, but I cannot help it. How are things with our folk? I hear my own voice inquiring fifteen years ago about our distant relatives who had asked us during the war whether we might take them in to look after their children. Julijan, my mother's cousin's husband, told them that there was no space for them. They're alive, they're alive, I can still hear Mother's voice replying.

Her green eyes, capped by her eyebrows like tiles mounting a roof. Her face, older and simultaneously youthful, here in the middle of the ploughed fields that move in front of my eyes as I look across them from the train. In among their furrows, Mother returns the glance and her image sinks into the dark earth, sown in my mind with buckwheat, buckwheat that would grow and spread across her face, fresh and soft, when its time comes.

I must visit Rozalija and Franc. I must see their faces, understand what images found shelter in their eyes to help them survive the war. I need to hurry also because of the smooth-faced man who always appears somewhere close by them in my thoughts.

Will they want to meet up with me?

I must understand whether it really was Julijan's refusal of help that was the reason they were unable to weigh their anchor from the place where they were born, whether the anchor really was too heavy for them to raise from the slimy pit of the carnage of war, compelling them to stay at home amidst the Bosnian mountains and forests, the dwelling place of my unutterable sense of shame, lingering incessantly round the tree trunks, sliding above cliffs and crevices, fuelling up on river banks and rambling from house to house, from tree to tree, from stream to river.

The sun once again penetrates through the clouds.

The reflection of the woman in the glass implies that a sense of peace has settled upon her.

Beyond it tall poplars, a stream, a bird that has just landed on a branch, a beautiful, dark grey and white one, and I stretch my neck to watch it for a moment longer.

Then it is gone.

Once more just fields, lumpy soil, suddenly becoming brighter as the face that has for years accompanied me in moments of silent shame begins to seep through to the surface.

Safet.

In my mind I keep seeing him as I once spotted him leaning over the canvas he had placed on the table, almost as if embracing it.

Now I see his stooping figure in my mind, the back of his neck, then his face, filled with a silent restlessness and a dignified silence, his voice telling me he has left his homeland and found refuge in Italy, as he straightens up and allows me a glimpse into his artistic world.

I would so like to stand by his side right now, as his face seeps into my mind through the translucent earth of the fields, as I had previously stood by my father and we gazed into the abyss of memories. Serious and soft.

In my mind I am looking through the catalogue of his exhibition in Venice.

Blossoming wild chestnut trees.

Green Bosnian landscapes.

Wooden fences covered in ivy.

Windows with pots of flowers.

Men's shirts, just removed and placed on the chair.

Men's shirts on a human body that has no face.

Beds with a blood stain on the sheets, perhaps from love making, perhaps from death.

Loaves of bread, painted by someone who seemed to wait for the right light to shine through the wooden slit in the roof, piercing the darkness to illuminate them.

In my mind I browse through the catalogue, page by page, that now open across his face in the middle of the ploughed fields.

The wooden fence covered in ivy is replacing a patch of earth.

A green landscape with a village with a beam of light falling upon it.

What will Rozalija's voice be like? What will Franc's voice sound like?

Will it be as strident as his steps along the dusty path, will it resonate and echo as it might in the abandoned quarry? Will it rustle like the dry grass?

The train speeds along.

Safet slips into the furrows as if they had suddenly swallowed him up.

I focus my gaze on the glass, and the reflection of the woman, now gazing into her own lap.

I look at her. Her head slightly lowered, she is looking for something in the plastic bag spread out on her knees, she pulls out some bread, breaks off a piece and takes a bite. She looks at me and smiles, words stuck to her lips, then she looks back out of the window, the bread still in her mouth. I stare at the roundness of her knee resting under the fabric of her

trousers. She then looks the other way, suddenly stands up and steps to the door. She is slim. She looks out into the passage, then returns to her seat, looking reassured. Her phone rings. A message. She reaches with her hand into the plastic bag, looks at it, smiles, briefly types in some letters. I imagine her writing I love U. She must be a little over thirty.

All of a sudden there are voices out in the passageway. We both simultaneously turn towards them. Two young men walk past. The woman puts her phone back in the bag, breaks off a second piece of bread and looks out of the window. Two young Italians, their voices close by at first, then further and further away, vestiges of their words: how there are still many grenades in former war zones around the world, hidden in the grass, how they are trying to join a unit that helps clear such areas. Their voices eventually disappear down the carriage. Suddenly all bright before my eyes, translucent in my thoughts, the woman holds a piece of bread right in front of her lips, as if she has forgotten about it. She looks towards the door.

The small, white-haired man is once again standing there, his eyes searching the floor, as if looking for something he had previously lost. There is nothing there. Then he looks up and glances into the compartment. It seems almost as if he does not see the woman or me. I have a feeling he smiles slightly and continues down the carriage in the same direction as the voices of the two Italians.

I turn a page in the painter's catalogue that once again opens up across the ploughed fields until it covers them entirely.

Three windows with pots of flowers. Drypoint, watercolour.

In my mind I open those windows, look into the house, inside it a kitchen, empty and white, a pantry, empty and white, cool, a hallway with a washbasin, a staircase leading to the upper level with two bedrooms. Father's house. Then outlines of people, I cannot see their faces, I sense they are our distant relatives, gazing at me from the Bosnian forests, through the picture and Father's house, as if I am reading the same story over and over again. A story that does not want to end and keeps urging me to start all over again, to comprehend it, to check upon them, perhaps to say goodbye and start looking at the world with different eyes, without pain and memory, without shame, so I can write about those who keep hounding me with their absence.

I must ask Mother for Julijan's phone number. Julijan is bound to have theirs. I will call Franc and Rozalija, Rozalija who, frightened and out of breath, shouts out from my memory.

Where's your mother, boy, we've had a traffic accident... she says loudly into my face. I am still a boy and don't understand her, she approaches me, moving closer and closer, her face looming towards me, large, round, red lips, I can feel the strength in her body, pushing her towards me, until her red lips kiss me on the mouth. I can see tears in her eyes as breathless words clamber from those red lips. *I am Rozalija*, she says, holding back her tears. Out on the road are also Franc and his children, Emir and Mirjana, *where's your mother, boy, we've had a traffic accident...* she says again when she recognises me and kisses me on the lips; the woman who knows my name, who knows my parents, my mother who is her cousin, telling me that they have been involved in an accident with their car.

The train speeds along.

I move away from the rooms in Father's house that lies beyond the painter's windows and through the window pane once again see the empty fields before me, poplars in the distance, clouds across the sky, the sound of the wheels of the train, every time they slide across a joint in the track, tu-tum, tu-tum, as if all that is left now is the sound.

There is a sense of unease within me.

It seems to be coming from beyond the edges of the vast fields, intangible and at the same time so real, paving its way with a terrible force, in order to open in me the door through which I might see at least a droplet of truth, through which I might at least step closer to comprehending my origin, and understand what about it makes someone resist the needs of others, makes them afraid of the proximity of others. The unease touches the core of my internal defence, softening it, I can feel how it slowly and persistently makes its way into my thoughts with images of people and their lives, both from the past and the present, offering me their faces so that through them I might more easily understand the secret of human existence. The living and the dead, friends, acquaintances, those closest to me, appear from the plantation of flowering poplars on the horizon of the ploughed fields, shooting past my eyes, all the way into my consciousness, the living and the dead, lined up like a large armada of guards of memory, scattered at first, like patches of light residue, like large flakes of snow, then in their entirety, with their bodies and faces. They crawl from the dust of memory, step out of the blossoming poplar grove in a niveous haze, across the ploughed field, joining me on the train, feeding me with their scent, like the smell of bread, and now, as I set off on my journey, when I need to recognize as soon as possible the faces of those of whom all that remains here are their shadows, they silently step through me, as if they have sensed my vulnerable time and are migrating from the fringes of consciousness into its centre.

A CHILD'S EYES, LOVE AND EMPTINESS

The train speeds along.

The woman opposite closes her eyes. Her face looks calm, as if it has shaken off all fear.

Outside there are still fields and plantations of poplar.

My thoughts focus on individual people, stepping into me from memory and the poplar groves, from the ploughed earth and walls. Thoughts about them inside me criss-cross in time and space between the past and the present, woven from a desire and a need to visit Rozalija and Franc as soon as possible.

Saša and his father D., who had been in a concentration camp and has the number 36882 tattooed on his arm. Saša guards his memory when he calls in on him if he is not away travelling for the job he has at the TV station, and this is the second time today he is visiting my consciousness.

I too relive the fates of people marked by war, ever since Mother and her sister, Aunt Sofija, verbalised them, their tales filled with open-mouthed corpses with gold teeth, that they saw as girls, lying on the road in the middle of the village. I have been reliving their fates ever since, still a boy I befriended Saša and saw the number his father has on his arm, and heard him say how there had been nothing left of him, just skin and bones, and how lucky he had been that the Russians spotted him, and then the Americans came, one of the soldiers, a black man, lifting him up and tucking under his arm like a plank of wood, that's how light he had been, that's how terribly light he had been.

Mother.

Her face slips across the fields into my memory, draws closer towards my eyes. And then her body. Still in the kitchen, she turns towards me as I stand not far away from her, asking her how it was possible that we did not take them in, that we did not help them. And I see two grey shadows standing by her and hear my own voice, sharp, trembling with anger, asking her during the war about our relatives in Bosnia, about Rozalija and Franc, my thoughts at the time wandering away, discovering the evil in humans, discovering myself, helpless and weak, and not doing anything for them.

Mother's face is suddenly broad and bright, now that I see it among the trees.

I need to go to her, I tell myself and my inner eyes gaze into the flash of memory that illuminates Mother's cousin Zorica's husband, Julijan, tall and lanky.

He cries, quietly mourning his wife Zorica who died of cancer, thinking about why she had never loved him even though she had three children with him. He stands in the yard in

front of the house, looking at the persimmon tree, thinking about her. He sees her weakened face everywhere, even in the persimmon, among the yellow fruit that she will now no longer pick. He remembers her face, her tiny, nicely-shaped nose and her eyes that lacked any light in them.

Perhaps her eyes were switched off and dry because she did not love him, I think as I see Julijan in my mind, standing in his yard that time, thinking about his wife Zorica until the sun sets and all that I can see of him is the outline of his body, caressed by the evening breeze.

Zorica, his dead wife.

Beautiful and tall, quiet and sad in her final years, as if there was a deep gap within that she is unable to fill.

Like Aunt Sofija, I hear adults whispering, giving each other looks, and, still a little boy, I watch Aunt Sofija being sad, thinking to myself how she cannot love Uncle Albert whom she married, because she loves someone else who is not close by. Perhaps that is why her eyes are still today so dry and grey, like Aunt Zorica's were then.

Then as an older boy I listen to Father talking to me in the evening as we sit at the table, my sister playing with a train that runs around in circles, a bright light shining on her from the ceiling.

Uncle Albert was a partisan, Father tells me that day, he's been through a great deal, doesn't want to talk about how scared he was and how brave, he was very young and when the war ended he fell in love with Aunt Sofija. We used to hang around with them quite a lot when you were a child, when you went off to summer camp up in the mountains where your cousin Ignac also used to go. Once when we came to visit you, Uncle Albert started shouting *Achtung partizanen*, *Achtung partizanen*, in the middle of the night because some drunken German tourists on the lower floor of the hut where we were staying wouldn't let him sleep. They were drinking down at the bar and making a lot of noise. *Achtung Partizanen*, he shouted frantically, poor man, Father says, and I can hear Mother's voice reaching me from somewhere, poor Albert...

Sometimes I am awoken by Uncle Albert's face, I see him in my dreams, droplets of sweat creeping across his darkish skin, I see him, getting out of bed, half-naked, Aunt Sofija staring at him, begging him not to create a scandal but he still steps to the closed bedroom door, and he opens his mouth to shout as loudly as he can so his voice in desperation and dismay, would penetrate the surface of the door. It is then that I see his beautiful white teeth.

Uncle Albert does not want to talk about the war, says Father at the table while my sister is still mesmerised by the train running round and round, unable to understand why that train no longer interests me. Alma, bedtime, I can hear Mother's voice telling her.

Alma, did you hear me?

Albert never wants to talk about whether he killed anyone, he cannot, he does not want to speak about how frightened he was, Father continues after Mother has taken Alma to bed. People sometimes stupidly bug him with questions about it, but he sharply refuses to answer them, says Father, I was too young to have fought but I'm proud that Uncle Albert is my friend, I know what it is that is so painful to him, I understand him, Father concludes in a quieter voice, more or less in passing, as if he was slightly ashamed that Uncle Albert's pain also gives meaning to his own early youth.

At the time I did not know the nature of Uncle Albert's pain.

The train speeds along.

Perhaps what made Uncle Albert ill were the images from the war that returned to him in the night, perhaps it was his fear that he might lose Aunt Sofija, who eased his pain even though he sensed that she did not love him.

A drawn out blast from its horn and the train speeds on.

In my mind I turn a page in the painter's catalogue.

Unmade bed, oil on canvas.

As if someone has slept in it, a bloodstain on the sheets. Unclear whether from lovemaking or from death.

I look up.

A bird shoots past the window as if the wind that has touched my thoughts has suddenly thrust it towards the train and at the last minute it flapped its wings in order not to crash into the glass.

I turn to the woman sitting opposite me, her eyes still closed. All of a sudden she looks like a little girl, perhaps because of the dreams that are sailing through her brain.

I look out of the window.

The smooth-faced, blue-eyed man suddenly awakes in my consciousness. I spot him in his kitchen, having breakfast, the table full of food, as he smiles at his wife, strokes his

children, a boy and a girl dunking biscuits in their tea, with tea dripping down their chins, I can see him in my mind as he once more looks at his wife who is staring out of the window, smoking, and as he leans towards her, presses his smooth face against her cheek, kisses it, as she still looks out of the window, smoking. She knows where her husband is going.

The image of the man suddenly disappears from my thoughts. It will be back, I know. His wife and their children also disappear with him. They are gone. It is always like that, they visit me and they disappear. When they return, both the man and the woman will be alone, the man will be approaching the battlefield, led to a sniper, who will allow him to kill a human being in return for payment, the wife will stay at home, looking through the window and smoking, waiting for the kids to return from school. She will be staring at a corner of the garden, at some flowers she has planted that are about to bloom. But for now they disappear, all four of them.

As they vanish, Mother's face pushes through into my thoughts, as if still wanting to protect me from the evil of the world and reveal to me the beauty of cosmic creation.

A TIME OF FAREWELL

Višegrad.

The stone bridge on the River Drina.

The edges of the stones shimmer in the remnants of the light, soft and translucent.

Thinking once more about those massacred, people who were not Serbs.

I step onto the bridge.

It feels as if I am barely touching it and at the same time sinking into it.

All is silent around me, I see no one, I only hear the rush of the Drina, swollen by the recent rain. Glistening willows on its banks creep towards the water, as if wanting to join the current, but their roots will not allow them to tear away from the edge, as if they are clinging onto corpses lying under the surface.

The stone on which I stand glistens in the vestiges of light, as if smoothed by the thousands of tongues that have bitten away at each other and made love upon it over the years. I stand on the middle section of the bridge. There is a slight breeze from the nearby forests, carrying with it the distant chirping of birds getting ready to rest. I lean over the side of the bridge and look down.

The Drina, dark green, a wide carpet moving into the distance.

Good evening, Sir.

I flinch.

Standing behind me is a tall man with a crumpled hat on his head.

Are you looking at the river? Can you imagine that it was once so full that it almost flooded the bridge!? he speaks to me in his own language that I translate in my mind.

I look again at the Drina, wide and dark green.

May I tell you the history of the bridge? Have you read *The Bridge on the Drina* by our great writer Ivo Andrić? He spent his childhood here, went to school here, did you know?

I nod.

He came here because his mother couldn't look after him and his sister Ana took him in, did you know that?

I nod.

And where are you from?

Trieste, I tell him.

Ah, Italy, a beautiful country.

For a little money I can tell you the history of the bridge, he says.

There's no need, I reply.

But the man continues his tale, he talks and walks on the bridge in long strides, some kind of knight, smiling, his face glowing with the loving words he is devoting to the stone bridge. There in front of us we were almost witnessing the simultaneous birth of the evening and a new dawn.

People.

All of a sudden it seems that they shine upon me, from both thoughts and reality.

Approaching the bridge, there are dogs coming along with them, people and dogs from the distant past, so real, moving towards the bridge, towards me, they approach me calmly and with dignity, people, dogs.

Where are you from? an older man coming from the other end of the bridge asks.

The gentleman is from Italy, the tall man with the hat explains, briefly interrupting his loving eulogy to the stone bridge.

Suddenly there are more and more people around me, men, women and children, among them a number of tame and gentle dogs, lying along the bridge like some line-up of guards.

I step along, the people follow me.

Sir, do you know why there are so many dogs here, Sir, do you know why our bridge has so many dogs? I can tell you why there are so many, says a middle-aged man, looking like some sort of official from a nearby office.

I know what he is going to tell me. I know the story about the wild dogs.

They are the dogs of those dogs, born in the forest, he says and stares at me. During the war, when their owners were killed, the dogs ran into the forest and stayed there, in the forest where they mated, and now their descendants are slowly returning to the valley. They

come to the bridge because that's where people come and occasionally throw them something to eat, but, you won't believe it, they're mainly here because of the proximity to humans, you see? he concludes and looks at the sky that is getting darker.

I look at the dogs, lying on the worn stones on the bridge, and they do look as if they have true joy in their eyes. The man with the hat continues to talk about the bridge, more to himself now, as if he knows that every time he must give meaning to his past, his present. He lifts up his hat, waves it about, the wind ruffles his hair. Inside me the hum of voices that have flooded the bridge to tell me their stories, to try and scrounge some money.

They are joined by a new voice that mingles with them, I can clearly hear its words, don't believe them, they've made it all up, there was no war, they've made it all up, don't believe that anyone came to any harm here, they made up the victims, the corpses, you think that they were real, no way, it was all just a lie, a great big lie, it says, pushing through the others to reach me, then it pauses and allows the others to go in front. I can see him. He stays behind, smiling, as if he is checking whether his truth has taken hold with any of us.

I want to get away from this person, I turn in the opposite direction, into the crowd of people, I make my way through them, getting away, I can hear my own steps on the stone surface. A little girl runs after me, singing a song about the Drina, the river running below the bridge, green and calm, she sings of a boy who fell in love with it and was lost in its waters, I push some money into her tiny hand, then I look back, the people have stayed in the middle of the bridge, further and further away from my eyes and closer and closer in my thoughts, as if from a new era and a new day, with the last remnants of light all the others shine with them, my people, as if they are being born over and over again from the stones of that bridge, with the dogs, calm and silent, mute guards of memories and oblivion:

Father and Mother,
Boško and Vera,
my sister Alma,
Grandma Katerina,
Aunt Sofija and Uncle Albert,
Sonja and Ignac,
Julijan and Zorica,
Saša,
H. and Maša,
Safet,
Grandma Ivanka, Grandpa Angelo,
Marica,
Srečko and Vito,
Josipina and Giovanni,

Uncle Feliks and Ida,
Great-grandma Pia,
Aunt Benjamina,
Remo,
the white-haired man and his wife Judit.
Lina, her husband Franck, and her brother Johnny.
Girl B.
Kathryn B.

And finally Rozalija, Franc, Emir and Mirjana. In my mind I have given Mirjana the face of the woman on the train. As if she has just come running from the nearest bus stop, Mirjana, who ran away from the hospital, Franc thinking that she has found her home, Mirjana in an oversized T-shirt, crumpled trousers, trainers, a plastic bag in her hand that seems to be empty, slightly sagging eyebrows, bright eyes, dark, shoulder-length hair, a smile on her face. With ever greater speed she approaches me, smiling, the dogs turn to look at her with their soft eyes, birds fly above the Drina as evening descends upon it, as if they had been following her steps, and then suddenly, from nowhere, from thin air, from the earth, from the water, from the snow-capped peaks, a young man shoots past me, as if he has just arrived from the nearby forests that are sinking into darkness, and he runs towards her, tall, graceful, I do not see his face, and she too runs towards him, faster and faster they hurry towards each other, joyous that they will together step into happier times.

Embrace, tempera on paper and canvas.

Two bodies in an embrace, his hand around her waist, her hands around his neck, their clothes wrapping together, tiny traces of colour on them.

People and dogs stare at Mirjana and the young man embracing. All is silent and calm. Calm on people's faces, as if they are all suddenly at rest in the evening light. All until the man who had until now been explaining the history of the bridge pushes his way through them, all until he grabs his hat, crumpled by time and loneliness, all until he waves with it and throws it up in the air, high up in the air, so high it seems as if it will never again drop from the sky.

Ooooooh! cries out the girl singing about the boy and the river. Ooooooh, all the others cry out.

Then all is quiet.