

Stjepan Čuić

## Crosses

There was an artist from Duvno called Tadija who had for years carved great light crosses from the limestone that stretched across and whitened the mountains all around, right above the city, crosses that stretched, reared and clambered to the very peaks, to the sky. For days Tadija would roam the valleys and would sometimes even go down into Herzegovina, looking for the right kind of stone for his crosses. All the while explaining to everyone that a cross couldn't come to anything if someone else had seen the stone before him, for the stone had to have spent its whole life alone, far from human eyes; when it was seen, when it encountered the eye, the stone would change, would shed its purity for ever. "The eye denudes the beauty, gentlemen," Tadija would say, but no one listened to him, just as no one paid attention to him carving his crosses till late into the night, sometimes without a candle, for he always thought that they were all keeping an eye on him, peering at him, bending over him, over his chisel. In truth, Tadija didn't need any light, because the stone shone and illuminated his workshop, full of crosses. Apart from that, Tadija had all his crosses in his head, knew how each one stood, how it lay upon the hill; they simply dropped out of his head and ran down

his chisel into the stone. And, when he imparted some more brilliant and better shape to a cross, then he would see the more clearly how it stood and shone in the night, in a field, on a hill, in some far off region. For days, Tadija would walk the fields, drop out of sight, well nigh vanish, especially in spring when the wheat would suddenly spring high and heavy. On these walks, Tadija would always devise new crosses, and when he came back he carved them. Year by year, Tadija carved his crosses faster and better, and it didn't at all disturb him that when the new government came in many avoided the cemetery and stopped buying his work. Tadija simply arranged the crosses round the house, put them up in the attic, and then started stacking them, laying them out in the yard, alongside the fence, which was old and wooden and gave way under the weight of the stone crosses. In a short time the whole of the yard was so evidently and mightily white that it was visible from afar. Tadija didn't bother at all that his crosses weren't being bought; he simply thought that everyone who was destined to die had done so in the war and that now one had to wait a few years, and then, as in earlier years, people would suddenly start dying again in droves and he wouldn't be able to cope with the demand for crosses. He thought about getting old and being unable to carve and finding it difficult to climb up the craggy heights. And so he worked faster than before, and as he hurried, drove himself, thought up new forms for the crosses and new bands on them, so still new ones rose up in his head, and he could simply not keep up with them. Apart from that Tadija was afraid that a new cross

might perhaps be just a new version of one he had already carved. And this a trouble to him. He was afraid of repeating some cross, because there were by now many he could no longer remember, and news came to him that there were those, especially near the sea, that had been ruined by the winds, or knocked down by the army, the insolent lads not wanting to lift them up again; some of them he had himself obstructed with the others that he stacked there day after day; grass had sprung up, and grown high, and various weeds woven themselves around the crosses, and he found snakes coiling around them. The years went by, and the people in power forgot about Tadija, and the people in the city, no longer watching what he was doing, put it about that Tadija wouldn't last long and would die. Thieves soon showed up and stole his crosses, and no one stopped them doing it or apprehended them. And Tadija himself, during his frequent excursions, on the path to Kolo that leads through the dark and over the hills, came upon smashed crosses; clearly straight from his hands, the traces of blisters could be made out. This bothered him and frightened him and he began to think about himself drawing close to death faster than many whose crosses he still had to carve. And then something occurred to him that gave him new vigour: many people had vanished into the earth without a cross, without anything marking the place and the time of their interment, without that final farewell to the living. "That, I have to put a stop to," thought Tadija. Suddenly he started bringing out his remaining crosses and taking them out around the hills, and in the city it began to

be said that Tadija had gone strange, that he wasn't everything he ought to be, that people were afraid for him. "The authorities ought to look after him," said many. But Tadija didn't pay any attention to these alarms; he set up his crosses in the city cemetery first, and then in the cemetery in Bukovice, where many people had been buried with neither cross nor priest, especially the Anić and Zrinušić families, of whom all trace had been lost within a year, and all had been forgotten, apart from Ivan, who had gone mad and cursed before his death, and many had panicked and fled, scattering over the cemetery and the field it was in. Later they said that he hadn't died but simply gone into the ground and just vanished. "Ivan is growing," said Ante Petrović, for the tree over his grave suddenly branched out, sprouted out, pulled its roots out of the swollen land, thrust up and out and changed from day to day, and then, all at once, in front of the eyes of Ivan Bočankić, who later talked wildly about it, reared out of the earth, tearing up its roots. The tree crashed down, the earth closed to like a wound, and everything was flattened. After that, no one passed by there for a long time. Tadija put up a cross, and the best he had, one which he had made in his youth and kept for his father; his father who had promised to come back from abroad and die in Duvno, on the mountain above the city, from which everything could be seen, the plain itself, and the regions down to the sea, all the way to Sinj and Posušje. His father didn't return, and Tadija reckoned that all trace of him had been lost. In the city they marvelled that Tadija had given up waiting, when earlier, in easier times, peo-

ple had come back late and unexpectedly, when according to our calculations they should have long ago been in the ground, and some said that Tadija had had the kind of news about his father that makes any further hope impossible. They even said that the news hurt Tadija and that he was angry with his father. And so his father's cross gleamed out over the grave of the most hated man in Duvno, but no one complained, just said maliciously that Tadija had too many crosses and didn't know what to do with them. But when he put the first cross outside the cemetery, where the nameless and the unbaptised were buried, people rebelled; there were those who had forgotten that they had known Tadija for a long time, and they said astonishing things and showered him with insults. First of all they turned on the cross he had put up for the child of Marija, the one she had killed in the attic as soon as he was born; then she had leaped from the Iron Bridge with him in her arms; they struck it and ripped it up and spat at Tadija, who said nothing the whole while. "Cross can't just be stuck in anywhere someone feels like," said Šelo. "That's what I think, too," agreed Blaž Anić. "There are certain holy places for crosses," explained the priest. The priest had run up frightened and exhausted, and needed a long time to be able to talk. "Tadija ought to be locked up," urged Ivan Kelava, who had got his appointment that year. After that, as if in defiance, he had started to put in crosses all over the hills. When he was a boy, he had heard many times about those who had met with misfortune along the road and died, who had been murdered by robbers or fallen in the wars in these

mountains. For a long time now no one had had any inkling of where they were, and no one was very interested in finding out. The old people knew a bit about it but were unwilling to talk, though Ivan Bagarić would a bit, to the city authorities, who came by for that very reason, and noted down what he told them, but the old people who knew more, who must have known everything, had been gone a long time. The further we get from them, the more time moves us apart, coming more and more surely between us, the more afraid we are to talk about it, speculate about it; and then too we just forget. And we forget too because of the earth moving, changing, cracking; the rocks we used to look at, which always pulled our eyes in the same direction, crumble and fall and everything cracks; in some places the grass withers, and then in another place everything is overgrown with grass, everything's covered with greenery, and no one dares even to guess. It's true, Tadija had once before wanted to find Ivan's grave and dig him up, dig up his body, but he didn't manage it; the deeper he dug, the more the slab at which he was striking sank down and down; and when his head was below the level of the ground, he got frightened and jumped out. The hole later collapsed by itself, got filled in, the ground settled and slumped. He would only say that he had opened the grave to find the others. Maybe this encouraged Tadija, perhaps it gave him strength and convinced him that there were graves elsewhere, in the wasteland, in the stony ground, high up under the sun. He even said that there were most of them in the valleys where no one had been for years, because

they were afraid there were outlaws there, and according to the stories of the old people, they hadn't gone there much before either. Or they had perhaps, out of the sorrow that clutches the mountains, simply passed away, died out, and then there were the more graves. And if there weren't any graves, *they* were here nevertheless; and even if they had rotted, if they had disappeared into the ground, there still had to be some trace of them left. On the whole, his crosses, one right behind the other, stretched, extended out from the graveyard; they climbed up the slopes, started up like young firs, and everything was white and shining. There was no such thing as night, the crosses wiped it out, first on the hills above the villages, and then in the valleys that pulled darkling out of it and disappeared towards the sea. First, Tadija took his crosses up to the hill tops, and then strung them, crowned them in chains on all sides. Every day, the people would tell themselves yet again that Tadija was just being cussed, a bit too sure of himself as he put this plan of his into practice, and they were cross, they were angry, they rebelled against it. No one could get through, and the grass disappeared. Tadija had hidden it all, covered it with his crosses, that grew up in the grass. In truth, some of the crosses collapsed, but this didn't faze Tadija; he moved them to other places, and then they would be still. And stay. On many of them, Tadija marked a name and a year, on some of them carved portraits, though there were but few of these. At the beginning everything was quiet, but then the crosses began to fidget, shift, move, it was simply weird to see them swarming, shifting and crawling on all sides, switching, stretch-

ing out, mingling and changing places, as if they were alive. Those that didn't bear the years grew them, while dates simply slid off others, portraits grew upon those that hadn't had them, while they disappeared from others, quite simply went out. Now the people began to be agitated, started complaining and cursing. They began to deny what they had cheered him on with before, and in their wonder began to say that some long since dead were not there at all, on this or that mountain, that some had names, some other surnames, and some years. Some were buried with their wives or children, some hadn't died but been killed, and some had simply disappeared without a trace and in all likelihood hadn't ended up there on the mountains at all. Tadija didn't put up any resistance. People began to move his crosses, started to pull them up, send them back. "This is a distant cousin of mine. He deserves a better cross." "This was a layabout and a no-good, he didn't deserve to rest in these mountains, let alone to have such a fancy cross." "This one burned down a village!"

But nothing frightened Tadija. He placed his crosses right next to each other, just knocked them in, they shouted after him, explaining that there hadn't been so many dead people since the earth and the world began, but he made no reply and no defence, as if he were deaf. He stopped watching how they knocked them down and mixed them up, how they wrote other names and fames for others; the mountains stretched out before him, the sides sagged, you could practically see them drooping under the weight of so many crosses all the way to the city. He went

down to the bottom of the mountain, descended with his grid of crosses, into the gardens and orchards, sowed crosses, it was no longer possible for the eye to see where he was bringing them from, as if he were thinking them up on the spot, and he had no chisel or mallet in his hand, and there was no rock in the vicinity. In fact they almost didn't see him, they were puzzled, they ran here and there, stumbling against the crosses, and fell, and some gave up, and some, the stubborn ones, raced along shouting and making sure that Tadija didn't disappear from their sight for ever. In front of his house, where he had got to with his crosses, on the fence, under the arch of eyes of his pursuers, his arms dropped and stopped and Tadija turned into a cross. He cooled and cooled, paled and paled, hardened, hardened and stiffened, crawled inside himself, and then was still. They followed him long, dull and dumb, and then scattered in fear. And they paled, but not like Tadija, more slowly, and they felt it, and they felt sick. Then, panting and flustered, up came the priest, who somehow got straight through to the fence at a run, and stopped in front of Tadija's body, which was so little different from the crosses that the priest didn't even spot him at once. He needed a long time to pull himself together, and then saw that underneath Tadija's body, which was now hard and white, the numbers 1953 had appeared.