

JUDITA ŠALGO
PAPER PICTURES

Translated by John K. Cox

AT DAYBREAK, trucks move along the main traffic arteries of the city, unwinding broad rolls of newsprint onto the roadway. The first pedestrians tread carefully: their tracks on the paper are proof that they are, literally, the first to enter the new day.

The imprints of soles, bare feet, automobile tires, dog paws and horse hooves, tears from high heels, moisture and skid marks, burns from cigarette butts, oil stains, dung, mud, and blood on the paper arouse suspicion, like over-realistic works of art. Pieces of this paper, however, are preserved for a day or two as newspapers, or they are pasted up on walls as posters.

When a broken window is papered over with newsprint, in the absence of glass, cardboard, or packing paper, it lasts that one day in that space—until the newspapers are replaced.

In areas of the country that are hard to reach, where newspapers arrive with a delay, people live ahead of their time. When Wednesday's paper reaches them on Saturday, they say: "We'll be alive for at least three more days."

The names of statesmen, political and economic leaders, public servants, outstanding artists, experts, scholars, athletes, model workers in industry and agriculture, self-sacrificing policemen, respected inventors, people with awards, people from questionnaires, plaintiffs, defendants, unsatisfied and grateful citizens, arrested or condemned criminals, those injured or killed in wrecks and other kinds of accidents, newborns, newlyweds, and the deceased and their bereaved relatives are switched out for the names of the members of their households, acquaintances, or people from their very own lives who were dear or hateful to them. To read the newspaper, then, is to call forth a feeling of joy, pride, compassion, anger, tenderness, suffering, responsibility, and trepidation.

In a daily chronicle, from midnight to midnight, facts and figures about the weather, political meetings, cultural and athletic events, the results of the Yugoslav lottery, crashes and mishaps, thefts, and people born and those just passed are lined up in strict chronological order with an annotation of the hour and minute when the thing took place. By respecting an exclusively chronological order, one avoids misconceptions about the mutual spatial compartmentalization of astronomy, geophysics, politics, work, culture, recreation, sports, crimes, births, and deaths.

Women wear dresses made of newspaper. The layers of paper, held together by safety pins, cover their breasts and backs and go all the way to the ground. In the game of love, the man slowly, loudly, and then ever faster and more softly reads out the headlines, excerpts from the articles, and the captions below the photos. Then he rips off page after page, the ones close at hand, more and more briskly, and finally his eyes are merely flying over them as he tears them like sheets from an old calendar and throws them on the floor. Through a whisper that sometimes still infiltrates the noisiest headlines, the man now transitions from the words to the body, and on a mat of newspapers he ascertains fully everything that has remained understated, between the lines, on that day.

The newspapers ignite, column by column, page by page, from the top down, and they read themselves with the speed of flame. The duration of the reading depends on the thickness of the paper, the humidity of the air, and the speed of the wind. One gets the impression that things are taking place very fast.