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Uroš  
Zupan  
**Slow  
Sailing**

*Translated by  
Michael Biggins*

*With an afterword by  
Richard Jackson*

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*I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures.*

Frank O'Hara

*I don't know of a single masterpiece that lacks flaws or is without imperfections.*

Andrey Tarkovsky

*Be very selective about the feelings you want to express, because otherwise you could get as subjective as an infant that's crying in its crib. No one can deny that this infant is expressing himself, but no one would call it art.*

Bill Evans

*My own feelings  
are things that happen to me.*

Fernando Pessoa



# Slow Sailing

This night is a calm sea and  
this bed is the raft that  
keeps us afloat. With each breath  
we touch and practice slowly

counting on our fingers. As we press  
together asleep, we can't help but erase  
the boundaries between our warm skins  
and the dreams that would just as soon

part and disperse us through time. One  
child shifts between us. The other  
hovers and floats in your belly.  
The silence is equally distributed

among all of us and the bed is  
trapped in a perfect calm, no breeze.  
We are its living sides, its guard  
rails, whether in light or in dark.

## The Garden: Bach

There is no death here. All shapes just flow into each other. Everything hovers and floats. I close my eyes and see gravel flying into the sky. Some acacias, profligate with their shadows, scatter the whiteness of their scent. From the other side of the yard, the far edge of day, the cherry trees respond. Their language will turn red soon. The dull brown facades of some buildings, their windows ablaze, devour the afternoon sun like many-mouthed giants. Yellow bulldozers have gnawed into the hillside. I'm little. I pet a tiny kitten that's shorter than the May grass. I hear the voices of people going into and coming out of the house behind me. When they go in, the cool darkness licks them, and when they come back out, they're covered by the dust of the sun. A row of lilacs separates our yard from the street, separates our yard from the world. Only some atomized voices and snippets of shadows are allowed in. Everyone calls me by name and puts a hand on my head. Here are some words I don't know yet—Anger, Fear, Hatred, Pain, Leaving. I don't know the spaces behind their sounds. I don't know anything, only this yard, the limitless reach of my eyes as they size up the world. If I lie down on my back, I can see clouds. If I breathe carefully, the clouds change. Now they are: an airplane, a dog's head, a horse, a sheep, hands bringing snow. Now we all float together. It's seven seas and nine mountains from here to the first river and last valley. There's no end

to the yard. No end to the world. An eternal flame or maybe just one candle burns in the room of all hours, the intersection of all days. It doesn't matter. Pages of the future turn on the inner side of the gold. Because I'm little, I don't know how to read them. Because I'm little, I can crawl right up under the eyelid of Time. The door to the light is wide open, upholstered and soft. It doesn't whack anyone or keep anyone out. I lie on my back and watch and breathe silently. At any instant the yard will turn into a cloud. That way it can last longer in the archive of the sky.

# Tractor Drivers Are the Best Philosophers

Every house has its squirrel.  
Light-colored houses have dark squirrels  
with little white bellies. Dark-colored houses  
have squirrels brown as foxes. When the dark  
squirrels get angry, they drive the brown  
squirrels out, which squeal as they tumble from  
one bingo card onto the next. Every car has its own  
squirrel. Sometimes every seat  
in the car. And in some cases there are  
two squirrels to a seat, holding  
paws, because they're afraid. Every  
tent bears the trace of a squirrel  
that caught scent of the pancakes, and  
every dream has at least one imprint  
of a squirrel paw on some distant star.  
I knew a squirrel that once  
swam the English Channel.  
The squirrel said, "It wasn't easy. I ran  
out of acorns and sports drinks  
before I even got halfway across.  
The waves soaked my tail and I  
was constantly being pulled underground."  
I once saw a squirrel that was bigger than the Eiffel  
Tower. It caused traffic jams.  
It didn't live in a house. It didn't go to  
school. It had to sleep in the ocean.

It used the sky for its covers.  
I read about a squirrel that had  
plastic surgery so that others would call her “Babe.”  
I heard of a squirrel that  
behaved like a single mother.  
Her former husband had been a tractor driver.  
He ate a macrobiotic diet, bathed in the  
fountain of youth and listened to Bach fugues.  
Tractor drivers are the biggest philosophers, that’s  
why they have the most squirrels of all. They  
never get lost on transcendental highways  
or in inaccessible music. In summer they sit  
on druid stones, drinking beer in the  
shade and pondering questions  
like: What is the nature of squirrels?  
When they hover in mid-air, they behave  
like black angels that would like to become  
squirrels. That’s when clouds of  
sugar froth begin to fall most  
intensively onto their fragile lives.

# Yellow

*(Suddenly, one spring)*

I

The fire-gutted remains of quiet days  
shine in a slight, pallid glow.  
Well-rested light sets its  
slow, lazy gestures before us.  
Winter is no longer heard speaking  
embittered words.

II

Every book has its season.  
Russian books are for reading in March and April.

III

For years the old doctor lectured me  
about flowers and decorative shrubs  
that I recognized by their color.  
He was dead and his words  
emerged from a pale sfumato,  
“Forsythias are blondes.”  
If I stared at one for a long time in April  
I could imagine it as a woman.

IV

The bare branches of the beeches sway  
over our embarrassed shadows.  
The clouds live hundreds of floors further up.  
Any time now they're going to move them here  
and there will be storms again.

V

My style requires words and evening light.  
My style requires alternating rituals  
of clouds and an exhausted speed.

VI

The gentle devastation  
left behind by the spring storm  
slowly begins to heal over.  
The day's shining edge sinks toward memory.  
The air loosens up like a dozing,  
invisible veil.

VII

If we're sad, we clasp our hands,  
hide behind sunglasses  
and let a  
vague image of heaven fall onto us  
like the shadow of a tree  
that we walked past obliviously.

### VIII

The mornings are fresh. A cool breeze brings air  
tasting of sky. The branches carry the last  
chattering remains of autumn's leaves. Some narcissi  
deposit their annoying scent in the kitchen. Crows caw  
from a nearby trash heap. Blackbirds scratch through  
some shallow ditches. A magpie turns all its attention  
to some shiny object as it flashes in the grass. The  
emerald neck of a pigeon glints in the sun. At the place where  
its wings clasp onto its tail it has a pattern  
resembling Kline's *Accent Grave*.

### IX

"I'm always nearby," says the shifting shape,  
"I don't cast a shadow. Don't breathe. Don't dream. Don't  
have an address, except here, inside, in your bodies. You experience  
me as a strange, almost flabby embrace that neither  
holds tight nor lets go, but simply *is*."

### X

First Czesław Miłosz settled among the spirits.  
Then the pope came in through Christ's gate.  
A good poet and a bad poet.  
Which one is more deserving of life everlasting?

XI

An excerpt from “Lucky Coincidences”:

Summer stretched like a cat waking up.  
The darkened hours of sunny days were  
there to relax us and the river wrapped  
around our bodies like a wintery glass, to take  
our breath away for an instant and drive the blood  
through the skin. Then we swam up to the surface, as though  
swimming away from fate, surprised at the amount of  
life that had suddenly collected inside us.

XII

The city approaches, bathed in a  
yellow, misty languor.  
The scorched scent of air follows it.  
Looks for its remains in blood  
filled with hesitation.

XIII

The narcissi hold firm in their vase.  
The orchid has faded; immersed in  
thought, it accumulates a new store of juices.  
The bamboo feeds on water and light  
and boldly grows toward the ceiling.

XIV

Spring gathers prismatic impressions and  
various moods.  
It promises something and almost delivers.  
Then reconsiders and snatches it back.

XV

And now our lessons on impossible  
homecomings may recommence.

The planet with its atmosphere and  
unchanging map of rivers  
waits at the far end of the courtyard.

Old friends with old faces  
sit on the stone fence.

They look at you, as though you can sense  
they've been talking about you wordlessly,  
just with some good-natured, startled mimicry  
woven into the language.

The lessons on impossible homecomings go on forever.