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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.