

Uroš
Zupan
**Slow
Sailing**

Translated by Michael Biggins



LITTERÆ
SLOVENICÆ

Slovenian Literary Magazine

I/2022/LX/155

Uroš Zupan: Slow Sailing

Original title: Počasna plovba

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© Translation: Michael Biggins and Slovene Writers' Association, 2022

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Proofreading: Nada Grošelj

Published by Slovene Writers' Association, Ljubljana
Dušan Merc, President

First digital edition, Ljubljana 2022

<https://litteraeslovenicae.si/>

ISSN 2712-2417

Price 12,99 €

URL: <https://www.biblos.si/isbn/9789616995856>

Kataložni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v Narodni in
univerzitetni knjižnici v Ljubljani

COBISS.SI-ID 110199043

ISBN 978-961-6995-85-6 (ePUB)

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*With an Afterword by
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DRUŠTVO SLOVENSКИH PISATELJEV
SLOVENE WRITERS' ASSOCIATION
LJUBLJANA 2022

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.

A Psalm—Magnolias in April Snow

Let's bite through the chains trapping our words,
father, let's melt
the iceberg of silence that looms up between us,
I'm ready, I've turned off my cell phone,
locked the door, there's nobody else here in my world.

Now my psalm will sing of my dreams,
you call them dreams, the sources of flourishing,
the water magnolias drink before they
open amid April snows, the evenings
that have burrowed into my skull,
long scarlet clouds flying over the earth,
you see them father, you see beyond them,
even as the cool feathers of night enfold
your outline standing there in the doorway.

No, these are one thing you can't rank,
as you assign things their place in the schedule of
fleeting days.

I can't, father, I won't try.
I have no intention of squandering endless hours
in the jaws of your offices, amongst all the sipping lips,
cheap perfumes, and brandy-swilling
sex deprivation of your business associates.

For me it's about poetry, long wild lines of poetry
that gallop like horses through the traveler's longing,
like cold, crystal clear water that I submerge in naked,
poetry that gives me air,
poetry that I can pound into the paper forever.
Poetry measuring time, my time, our time,
the only thing that sets milestones to our passing.

Now I'll sing you a psalm about a world you'll
never set foot in, about heaven and hell,
about ecstasies that consume me, about Icarus falling,
about the magical union, the divine connection that
jazz musicians feel when their instruments talk
to shadows, etching kaleidoscopic images
in the unknown and sweet-smelling night, the empty
streets
as the last drunkards lurch home
and cats poke their heads out of trash bins.

And now my psalm will sing to you of Kafka, about how
he wrote a long letter to his father and never
summoned enough courage to send it.
No, you've never heard of Kafka,
even though you did subscribe to *One Hundred Great
Novels*,
even though you did dust the bookshelves each
weekend.

Too unstable a world for you,
too elusive.

My friends have told me about their
painful experiences with their own fathers,
I just wanted to beat him up, one of them said,
thank god he died, cancer,
cirrhosis of the liver, we all heaved a sigh of relief,
each of us ashamed to admit that we'd been
crying in secret.

And what about us, father,
we've been meeting for years, the way trains meet
and pass at specific locations, at precisely set times,
cool as steel, amid a burst of speed,
with their live cargo inside.
We're stubborn, the two of us, stubborn.

Now it's time, father, for you to hear my psalm,
a psalm that breaks free of these talons of darkness,
that sets fire to leaves on forest paths, that
descends like a bird onto hillsides, a psalm
whispered by fishes and stones, a psalm whispered
by men of sun and rain both.

I'm getting ready for war, father, for war,
and you know that I'm going,
you're more afraid than I am,
yes, there will be bastions of habit destroyed,
let ivy conceal their ruins, let the princess sleep on.

There will be nails broken and skin furrowed
and there will be casualties, many motionless hours
breathing noiselessly amid four walls,
on bridges that lead over metaphors of eternity,
the only rations the dust of dreams, and
the sole refuge the diaphanous shape of some fantasy
love

and there will be no reward of pieces of silver
and I won't feel like Judas Iscariot
when he was bought to betray the one
he loved most of all,
and perhaps I'll prevail, or perhaps be defeated,
but I'll always be reminded of you
when I see some smooth shaven office worker
who's never tried anything new,
who's never broken a rule, who curses
at not finding a parking space,
who wrote his wife the dreariest love letters,
and you'll be reminded of me, too,
when you'll be drinking beer somewhere alone and
everything crumbles around you to bits and you say
for the first time in your life to hell with it all,
all that can wait,
and for the first time in your life you'll sense

that there exists something else, something
exceptional,
some crescent moon overhead and some moments of
brilliance
that open us up like those magnolias
in my dream, magnolias opening in the April snow.

Locomotives

(A warmth that never goes dark)

A few months ago we visited the graveyard of old locomotives.

It was dusk and the day's warmth was draining away with the light

which at that time of year is its synonym. And the darkness gently,

by fractions of an inch, drizzled down and accumulated, falling into the depths, the way

the abandoned edifices surrounding us, even amid that vanishing,

indistinct netherworld verging on blindness, were falling and showing clear

signs of age, which grew more evident with each passing year:

signs of hunching and being pressed to the earth.

We walked among those big, retired machines still connected

to some other time that had passed by, or that we had left in a hurry,

so we could move from one hour to the next, from day to night, from

life to death faster.

The darkness now opened its mouth wide to swallow the smooth lines of those

prehistoric iron beasts, now placidly grazing in the fast chilling air, still distinct

for the moment, but progressively darkening and sinking into the ever

darker and deeper sands of the night.

I love the smell of rusting iron, the smell of the factory floors,
the voice of the wind as it whips through them, its breath moving from one space removed from the world into another connected with life, without lingering in either for long. I love the drifts of dust and the copper brown pollen of rust that covers the floor and window sills, the obliterated traces of footsteps onto which human bodies used to cast weightless shadows. I love the powerful wheels of these stunned beasts, trapped on tracks that lead nowhere. If I encounter them, it's as though I've been sent home, but that home is no longer a house, it's an illuminated space that a child's footsteps have measured countless times.

I knew more and dreamed more about locomotives than other kids, but I kept quiet. Still, that wasn't real knowledge. It was more like layers of images, layers of sounds and silhouettes, a kind of spectral refraction of memory, the refraction of the shape of it, not come to term, which I had no idea still belonged to me.

When I was still a child I had my favorite books. I still have them, even the oldest ones that didn't wander off to distant

relatives and in their interiors, between the covers,
still retain
the dense, stuffy, overripe smells of the crib. Among
them is a hardback
Book of Trains with pictures. A book full of trains and
train cars.
A book that said: grab your suitcases and get ready to
travel like our
two young heroes who are about to see far-off lands
from the train. A book
with pictures of steam locomotives, electric trains,
dispatcher
stations, viaducts and train stations in big, bright
capital cities
that had to be someplace on the far side of the
mountains, beyond the quiet
and motionless world I lived in, the same place where
the invisible
waves came from that got our big wooden radio
receiver to
talk and perform the music I listened to as I lay like
some
little castaway amid my huge bed that seemed to me
as
vast and peaceful as the ocean just before it goes to
sleep.

So much real life rose up from that paper,
materializing
in the head and imagination of the child and becoming
real
life, not like the artificial fire he could put his hand in
without feeling any heat or getting burned. I sailed on
the
peaceful wind of that written, depicted world without
borders or seawalls, but

the locomotives weren't just drawings and letters that I didn't yet know, they were something else, too.

At that time we lived in a building at the edge of the workers' development that was separated from the road by a dense lilac bush whose fading scent merged every year into the scent of the blooming acacias that grew on the far side of the road. In old photos with jagged borders I'm usually sitting on a blanket spread out on the grass, dressed lightly for springtime, surrounded by playthings I still remember: a sheep that had buttons for eyes, a plastic, green-trousered duck that quacked, a little stuffed bear—my vigilant companions and allies in sleep.

On summer evenings as the sun lost its strength, the shadows lengthened and the brown brick of the buildings in the workers' development acquired its tinge of gold, father or grandfather would take me to the strip mine to look at the train engines. The road we took in our adjustable pairs was straight, it led past the foot of the buildings in the workers' development, past the Maria Theresa mine, down past a labyrinth of gardens and barracks, past a fishpond surrounded with reeds where carp with fat bellies would hover up from the mud to the surface to snap up some

chance bit of food, past the mine shaft and then uphill along the steep flanks of Retje, from which the valley almost looked like a flat surface which at a certain distance suddenly broke in the air, as though it had slipped and lost the ground at its feet.

The strip mine was at the end of this trail, shoved to the far edge of a child's horizon, to the utmost limits of a child's capacity. At the time this was an area in its decline, dissolving in the faded aura of an era that was receding. It was another country, on the far side of language, a lunar landscape of high ramparts and dark fields of scree, a landscape riddled with puddles and reservoirs, with thick clumps of sedge and swamps where in the dark frogs tirelessly croaked their monotonous language of warm nights, where grass snakes zig-zagged their way through the reeds, so slowly the water behind them failed to close, because it hadn't opened before them in the first place.

The strip mine was a wound, a gash on the skin of the earth that no yellowish, transparent lymph had filled in, but which emanated a smell that followed you into your dreams and stayed with you year after year, no matter if you changed your language and country, your name, even your life. The smell of coal. Most of all, though, the strip mine was a kingdom of bulldozers and tracks, train cars and abandoned train engines patiently absorbing the heat of the blazing sun

and stoically enduring the driving rain. These were no small, green, diesel or other electrical mine engines, which reminded me of props from some dreamlike, inaccessible amusement park behind a fence. These were the huge, dark monoliths of steam engines.

Did I really ever get near those train engines, those affable ghosts that ruled over that space? Did I ever climb up onto them? Touch their levers? Look into their boilers? Behold the world from up there, protected by the all-powerful machine built to carry me down the tracks as though through the air? Or did I just remain in the little body of an observer, still bound to the earth, looking from a distance at those dark monuments, for which those afternoons of gentle sunlight and lengthening shadows seemed tailor made? I don't know, because all the memories and the hours, all the dead ends of time past began to mingle together, layer on top of each other, sift through each other like the floors of a collapsing building, rise up like the sea at high tide and flood the dry land which was the only place from which you could see what had happened. Nothing is certain anymore. Nothing is present.

It's May. An unusually hot one. Forests stretching to infinity cover the neighboring hills. The sky is smeared with a thick, frothy gray and has a lid