

Juraj Kuniak

Translated by John Minahane

A Stroll with Paul Klee

To pick up a line and take it for a stroll.
The essential is within, the mystics say,
but equally important is the outside:
a stunning summer sky, two wind-whipped clouds,
in the intense green background a dazzling yellow field.

The line crosses dead centre. To draw breath for surfaces,
smooth and cross-hatched: first impressions of place.
A distant rumbling. Scene changed by invisible stagehands.
Gadflies in sorties before the storm, a frenzy,
a slaughter: chaos linked up.

A flash on the horizon: a zig-zag line.
I set my face for rain. Paul notices a girl
with curly hair, fleeing: a spiraling movement.
A bridge comes into sight: row of curves. Lines
in his sketchbook appear in the richest profusion,

fading and gaining power, restrained and articulate move
and countermove. The rain's blurring it all. The feeling of space
intensifies. Mesh and brickwork, when one returns to town.
Voice. Polyphony. Strange face. Smiling greeting.
Above us the stars are revealed: scattered points.

The painter's tree grows from roots, but its crown
is a trip to the land of *better knowledge*. A flame-burst
directed by hand. A symphony of forms. A good thing
like a guiding thread in the dense bush at twilight.
A joyful equivalence. A whole.

Two Beings

The first is tossed in the maelstrom that's gripping the world,
sweeping everyone into its whirl without distinction,

not asking if it may, because will is what it is,
paradoxical situations arise from its orchestration,

bizarre combinations, unclean manoeuvres, unexpectedly
incompatible types are side by side, and together they must

play out their scene. Concealed within him, she responds
with ardour to every impulse. He feels like a grandfather

who's remained a boy, he still yearns to climb a peak
or at least a tree, to embrace a beech, to lap up water

from a well and then moisten his nose in it too, to fly
down a slope on skis racing the wind, or to swish

on the surf of the sea and hold the wind in his sail,
stretching out with it, to frolic upon the deep ocean

with sureness of balance, as it rushes ahead.

The second is not so passionately immersed
in what the first does, she keeps her in perspective

and at a remove, has another logic, speaks another language,
opens other doors: She says: "The only place in the cosmos

that may possibly be unclean is the human spirit."

Both Question and Answer, she leads him onwards, that is He:

his most profound depth, each time greater than his heart,
addresses him, and he learns to respond with the prayer

of St. Francis de Sales: "Lord, You know that I will grow old,
do not allow me to sink into babble and the fixed

idea that I am bound to pronounce on everything.

Free me from the desire to put right the affairs

of my near ones, and do not permit me constantly
to keep mentioning petty matters, lend me wings,

so that always I may be able to get to what counts."

Both of these strive for balance, in the integrity
of one eye that is open to outer and inner things.

How We Became Flowers

A glade in the tangled forest: wild raspberries,

sultry stillness, sunbeams enclosing us two
and the burdocks, the Rose of Sharon, sage, agrimony,
chicory, comfrey, forget-me-not, and other scents
and shapes and colours, diversely pouring into one.

Out of the blue on a slightly raised spot of terrain
the standstill air whirled in a flutter of wings.
Everywhere round us butterflies were flying,
countless multitudes, as if it was snowing butterflies.
A flickering cloud enveloped us.

I was entirely baffled, it seemed to me
that we'd found ourselves in virtual reality.
All of the butterflies were of the same kind,
the Old World Swallowtail, *Papilio Machaon*,
as if multiplied by a computer programme.

I remembered him from a children's picture game.
I had never seen one live, and here they were now,
a whole kingdom of swallowtails, out in such force
they could have carried us off if they'd wanted to,
but all they wished was to show us some sort of sign.

We were lost for words and gaped at the swarming apparition.
Sulphur-yellow (Linnaeus described them exactly),
network markings bordered in black with yellow
half-moons, on the rear wings a bluish dust,
black spurs, and near those a brick-red stain.

They were in no hurry at all to abandon us.
Whenever we moved, they came in company,

ceaselessly growing in number, as if they were teeming
from the trunk of a hollow tree in the bowels of some unknown
Papilio-Machaonist world.

Their manner was easy and sportive, they made the surrounding
space dance, and I felt the need for music,
and music there was: the most beautiful forest silence
that can be imagined, and there you could hear
the butterflies' wings as they beat the air.

At that moment I forgot our own human nature,
as all of those butterflies vied one with another
to touch us – my wife has a theory
that perhaps they had never before seen human beings,
and they supposed we must be exotic flowers.

Juraj Kuniak (1955, Košice). *Cor cordi* (2001), a verse letter to the great Slovak poet Milan Rúfus, and *Beyond the City* (2015), show different facets of his work, which addresses family, generations, Nature, friendships, joys and sorrows. Influenced by American poetry, he is also a Slovak translator and publisher of Walt Whitman and Robert Hass.