

Sanja Lovrenčić

Selected poems

Translated from Croatian by the author

still life: frozen begonias

brush captures the moment:
the stem still looks solid
ice in its heart makes it
apparently alive
while the sun is shining fervently
upon the deep-frozen world
you see in the background:
someone left open
the veranda door
in the coldest night
malicious master painter in the picture
on a piece of auxiliary something
delivery box perhaps
in which arrived
everything that's crammed
in the corner
is painting the rotting the gray the weary
plants as they will be
in only a few hours –
but not yet

dance of things

you're too big for that porcelain mug
thin transparent hand-painted
yours is just the injury
the crack on the gentle green edge
a root for blades of a
future fracture –
you're slowing it down
you're slowing down
adding
half-peeled lemon
blooming kale
shot pheasant

copper tray
dewy grape -
you're standing beside
engrossed
in the dance of things

epilogue

wherever you go
you build the cave
cook the soup
give to cats
remains of fish
on mute walls
you wipe your fingers
dragging behind
your garden shears

scrabble -8

new words:

epeunao

is a lost greek verb

that means to whimper

going in circles

alone

šilium

is a latin noun

(with a slavic Š

you might say corrupted)

the name of the town

where misguided masters end up:

uncertain about their choices

they produce glass slippers

and clocks going backwards

inventing

virtuoso excuses, part time

etesdeo

is a greek verb too

(if it were latin

it would mean:

I too hate god a little bit)

but in greek it says:
I'm putting a candle on the table
you put out some olives and the cheese

scrabble 4

new words:
brsluk might be the term
for the insolence of people
armed with
sandpaper
– oh my god! they just go around
abrading
olulate is a very noble fruit
which grows in hidden glades
in the rainforest
and rare are those who've ever tasted it
– but those who have...
in another place same means different:
in the north
at the moment when permafrost
starts melting
olulate is the name
of a lame Freon
that would finally take off
if it weren't held down by
druolaa – the call of the depths
anyway
brsluk is up
olulate down
at the bottom of the sea

Sanja Lovrenčić

Goldfish and The Eastern Ariel

Translated from Croatian by Iva Jila Mahalec

Red Shoes

Why do you wear red shoes, I would ask people. They would simply answer: because I like them. Why do you like them, I would continue. And then they would give me that look people give when they don't know what to say. Or they would ask back, why should I care about the colour of their shoes. Why do I want to know?

Red shoes are mentioned in books, in a fairy tale a heroine loses her feet because of them, for it is a debauched thing, the colour of blood on one's feet – but there has to be more to it.

– Find all the scenes where red shoes appear, and all the people who wear them, I would ask my loyal assistant, the old genie from a lamp.

– Only the females? he would ask promptly, already coming up with a few good examples, for he is a very skilled and clever genie.

– Very well, I would say soon, enough for tonight, take your sleeping pill and make yourself comfy in that lamp of yours, do not crouch and sleep tight.

For this was all just an excuse, a diversion so I could inconspicuously throw in a story I vaguely remember.

It all happened somewhere in the depths of time, in some remote village where travelling musicians sometimes come and make the dwellers of those narrow, sooty houses dance.

– Will you buy me a pair of red shoes? the old woman said, forgetting her age, to her scrooge husband. That morning an itinerant shoemaker came to their house, and while she was looking at that red leather in his hands, she thought she heard laughter in her bleak, muddy backyard. And she saw herself pacing lightly to her neighbour's house, carrying a cake, smiling, celebrating a holiday...

Her husband didn't even look at the shoes. He didn't even say „no“.

– What do you want them for? he asked. You never go anywhere. You will die before you get to wear out the ones you are wearing.

The woman nodded, undid her scarf, put it back on. It was black, the scarf. With tiny dark blue flowers that have almost blended with the black background over the many washings.

His words made her smaller, more crouched, older.

The shoemaker shrugged and left.

And she, looking at her worn, old shoes which have never been red, turned into a giant tear. She cried without a sound, over herself, over the one going somewhere, needing something, the one responding to a call of frantic musicians. The one who never was, but should have been.

I do not know what else happened in that story. I think it was some kind of a fairy tale, and it did have a happy ending, although I do not know what kind of a happy ending such a story could have. Maybe for such a story any kind of ending is happy?

Why do you wear red shoes, I would ask my reflection in the mirror. The answer would be: Because they fit me. Because of that old woman. Because any moment now, a holiday can happen, and some frantic musicians could call me to dance.

Goldfish – a Variation

It all began one day when he caught a goldfish. It was a fish, although to him, as time passed, it sometimes seemed it actually had been a horse. In any case, it was golden, and for a moment it was his. Release me, and I will grant you three wishes, the goldfish said.

Yes, everything was normal, just as one would expect. And he should have acted normally and said his three wishes, although even a child knows that it would have been better just to eat the fish. Although it is not that easy to eat something that talks to you.

But he wanted to come off smart, though this kind of smartness is highly debatable. Maybe it wasn't even his smartness, but of all those foxes who kept saying: I know what I would have wished for.

I have but one wish, he said solemnly, and that is for all my wishes to always come true.

Yes, yes, said the magical creature, that is the common reply nowadays.

And it sighed, well it sighed as much as a fish can sigh.

You know, it said, I am afraid the opposite will be happening to you now, whatever you wish for won't come true. I mean, maybe it will, but only if you don't tell anyone, not even yourself. You will have to learn to despise what you desire, and consider desirable what you don't need.

Maybe after saying this the fish smirked. And maybe not.

Wait! he said, but the fish (in case it really wasn't a horse) spread its magical wings and flew away.

It obviously thought he was very stupid, since it reminded him, when it was already way up in the air, not to wish for what he really needs. A man who has to be told everything twice.

And now the trouble with sentences began. What can I get you? they would ask him at a cafe. Coffee with milk, a beer, a glass of water ... as soon as he would honestly answer such an ordinary question, he would find himself on the shore, knee-deep in cold water, and the fish staring at him reproachfully. He would then have to walk back home, his shoes soaking.

When he eventually learned the names of cocktails and strange drinks – which he neither needed nor wanted – life became somewhat easier. What can I get you? One eggnog, for example. And really, instantly the waiter would be back with the creamy beverage. He was so happy when he first made it. But worse things were to come.

He fell in love. I do not wish her to call me, he muttered to himself, and out loud. I do not wish to see her. I do not wish her to do this and that with me ... but the gods didn't approve of lies – every now and then he would be knee-deep in cold water again. He changed his tactics, looked for flaws in her, mocked her and courted other women. That she did not approve of. To be more precise, after several evenings spent that way in the company of mutual friends, she began avoiding him. And he was eagerly and quite hopelessly trying to enjoy sex with various women he cared nothing about.

He wanted to get a job. He applied for one and got called for an interview. Everything was going well until the man on the other side of the desk asked the fatal question: Do you really want this job? Yes, he replied without thinking – besides, it would have been really odd had he said anything else – and he was once again back in the cold water with the fish. And he had to walk home, his shoes soaking, thinking about how he could maybe get a job in a bank or some marketing service.

As time went by, he got a flue. He was lying in bed, and a good-looking doctor was visiting him. Every day she was bringing him medications he didn't take, concernedly checking his temperature which he made sky high. Finally she asked him in a very serious manner: Do you even want to get well? I don't know, he said with an air of melancholy and cunning, but it didn't work. The sea was dim and wavy, and very cold.

I've had enough! he said, to hell with it all!

Well that's a good one! said a very old and very golden fish emerging from the water. We will make an exception and make your wish come true.

And then there was nothing.

The Eastern Ariel

What do you want me to get you? he asked.

They presented him with their as usually modest wish list with swords, transformers and water guns. And a few other things.

I want... I uttered, waiting for silence. I waited in vain.

All I want is one ordinary, small, the smallest... I tried again, trying to arouse the curiosity of my family. But it didn't work.

Listen to me! as soon as I said that, a breeze of resistance filled the air: she wants to be listened to?! All I want is one package of Ariel washing powder, I said. Words were faster than thoughts. One small package, the smallest you can find in the store.

But why? You have some right here, in our own bathroom.

Precisely, I said. But that's the eastern one, and I want you to get me the western.

Then I have to think of it, he said and sighed in a way that would make a rock cry. And then I have to bring it, a kilo more in the luggage, I could have trouble at the airport...

Just one small, smallest package, 600 grams, I asked him as a real heroine – modest, beautiful and coy. I know it is very difficult for you, but you can bring me an empty one if you want.

And what do I do with the powder?

Just threw it down the drain, I said and left the room, not paying notice to his horrified face.

I almost didn't even need that box, but just to be safe...

The traveller left, I stayed. Buried under a heap of express orders for translations which kept coming inconsiderately just like every time he went away.

And no one cancelled school in the meantime. Or dinner. The washing machine continued to spin happily, helping the day to pass faster. I can usually make it easily for the first three days. On the fifth day I get desperate, and on the sixth morning some miracle must happen to make me start enthusiastically again...

Fortunately, on the third day my life partner was supposed to return. Unfortunately, on the third day the phone rang and he told me he had made a great deal and that he would not be back before the following week. More likely the end of the week than the beginning.

On the fourth day it was Saturday, the children were staying at some friends in the neighbourhood and so I decided to clean up my desk. No better thing to do when you're alone and desperate.

I moved all the books from the desk, actually I moved everything I could possibly move. I put a large, shallow bowl in front of me, filled it with water and lit small floating candles. I have to get away, I said quietly, I have to get away from here somehow. I closed my eyes.

Stars, there were stars all around and they seemed to be singing. But it was the heavenly singer. With the voice of David Gilmour. He flew under the stars and was therefore invisible. But his voice flew independently of him, swarming around my head, clinging to my ear lobes: do you think you can tell... the difference, you think you can tell the difference?

Where are you? I said.

Close.

Close where?

The ground is not holding me so I am up high.

Why is the ground not holding you?

I can not tell the difference, I always quit the game.

Tell the difference – between what?

This heaven from this hell, what I need from what I admire, what I want from what I don't want... good wind from a stormy weather, a cry of a seagull from a cry of a child...

His voice was irresistibly sliding into a song...

Eastern Ariel from the western one? I said – and broke the spell.

It was all back to normal, last stars were flying across my computer screen. The song remained in splinters.

When the package finally came, it confirmed what I had already known – the eastern Ariel contained phosphates, the western one was definitely phosphate-free.

The traveller, as an environmentally conscious person, brought back a full package.