

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

STONE PAVČEK
YURI MURI IN AFRICA.
THE BOY WHO
WOULDN'T WASH

PUBLISHED BY: MIŠ, 2012

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ORIGINAL TITLE: JURI MURI V AFRIKI: O FANTU, KI SE NI
MARAL UMIVATI

NUMBER OF PAGES: 23

Tone Pavček: Yuri Muri in Africa. The Boy Who Wouldn't Wash

Yuri Muri, rag-tag Yuri,
born beneath a waxing moon,
set out yesterday in fury
for Africa, at five past noon.
He simply couldn't live at home,
scolded here and pestered there,
to wash his face and use a comb,
when water he just could not bear.
So he thought: it's best I go
to the south side of the world;
people there don't wash, I know,
they have no water, towels, or so I'm told.

He walked for half an hour at least
- Africa's ten miles or more! -
but then he rode a hen, a friendly beast
and soon arrived upon a shore
where there was water, wet and cold,
cold as ice and twice as wetter!
Yuri cried, of this he'd not been told,
but a seagull saved him. That was better!
Over the sea did the seagull fly
Yuri sitting on his back,
and there beneath the hot south sky
a parachute he did unpack,
and floated to the yellow ground
in Africa; he landed safe and sound.

Heavens, what a devilish land!
What's more, what devilish beasts!
Lions gorging everywhere, a frightening band,
snakes slithering, seeking feasts,
and lynx and monkeys in the bushes
and elephants, with trunks and beady eyes.
Across the desert zebra rushes
while rhino ambles, contrariwise,
and in the distance, in the Nile,

lives the fearful crocodile.
Yuri Muri hurries, scurries
in the sand his head he buries
and leaves two tears, or even three
in desert sands. Well, wouldn't you or me?
From his gloom, though, he's awoken
by an ostrich, large but friendly.
His words are kindly, too, when spoken:
»Lad, don't ever fear me!
I'll show you Africa; by my side,
its length and breadth you'll wander
and may I be a monkey if I've lied,
this land is full of marvellous wonder.
Don't hide your head please in the sand,
that's something not done in this land,
unless, so to speak, you're an ostrich,
but even for us it don't help much!«
Then it went just as smooth as you like,
riding an ostrich's like riding a bike,
and in only seven days,
he knew Africa's ways,
and all of its animals, long, short and tall,
the large and the small and the round like a ball:
the zebra and antelope, graceful and speedy,
and sultry old lion, with teeth made for meat,
and lumbering elephant, eyes that are beady,
and trunk that is long and massive great feet.

Yuri was master of all he could see:
he went to the lion for meat;
the monkey made coffee,
and ostrich fried eggs (which was neat),
while daily the zebra did bake
biscuits and pastries and all sorts of cake.
But bananas, soft and sweet
he picked for himself. What a treat!

One day with ostrich off they trek
where tall is mistress; by and by
they meet giraffe, so long of neck
she knocked a star from out the sky.

The star soared sizzling through the air,
the sand of Africa caught fire,
barely did they win the race,
fleeing from the fearful furnace.
Heavens, Africa's the place!
Since I suppose that it's the case
that even snakes for such a boy
are more than anything a toy!
But perhaps what's best
in this great land is not some beast
but that Yuri has the hope
that here he has no need of soap.

Elephant not once has asked him
if he's washed his face today,
if his hair is neat and trim;
merely in a loving way,
on his back he's carried him
as if he was a king of yore
or perhaps an emperor,
at the least a local ruler.
So it's really not that strange,
when all the beasts in wonder halt
before the elephant and greet
the marvel who there has his seat,
that Yuri-Muri, rag-tag Yuri,
born beneath a waxing moon,
did decide and did declare
he will in Africa remain.
Glory, fame, it's all the same,
even false, it's fame's the game!

That Tuesday, when around our home
winter weather's cold had come,
Yuri reached the Nile,
a paradise for crocodile.
There was no snow, and why?
Because the sun burned in the sky,
and the crocodile lay drooling,
quietly in the mud lay cooling,
dressed to kill I'd almost say

waiting quietly for his prey!
And while waiting shed maybe
buckets full of tears, or two or three.
Yuri-Muri village lad,
born beneath a waxing moon
by the ancient river Nile,
got to meet a crocodile.

Let me say: from the beginning
this meeting by the Nile was bad,
Yuri didn't like his grinning,
very quietly got quite mad:
Such a path and suchlike aims and all the while,
he's just a mucky crocodile!
And (stupidly in fact)
says out loud, with little tact
»Clean you're not, despite your wile,
well-known stubborn crocodile!«
Here begins a change of luck, though;
his words the crocodile annoy,
he clambers out, from out the muck - oh
what luck, the elephant protects the boy
with his trunk, but Yuri fell
from off his back and, sad to tell,
bounced on his tusks of ivory,
tusks that all in Africa do envy.

The elephant he stamps and howls,
flaps his ears and then he growls:
»Yuri-Muri, rumpety poo,
grubbier than any two,
stands here, stands beside the Nile,
and reviles our crocodile!
Croco cools himself with mud,
but I've got this to cool your blood!«
And before the words were out
with water sprays him, Yuri gives a shout.
Water, water, wet and freezing!
Heavens, that's not nice.
Anger, even fury seized him,
gone was friendship in a trice.

Yuri sets off full of bile,
but elephant just roars with laughter,
even croco gives a smile,
laughter follows Yuri, echoes after.

Across the burning sand on foot!
Oh, it was an awful day.
A monkey made it worse, to boot,
threw walnuts at him all the way.
Yuri falling, rising, falling,
how the desert sands do sting,
hungry, sore, just barely living,
real Africans are Yuri ringing.
In the jungle, midst the trees
'neath branches waving in the breeze
in wondrous houses Yuri sees
real Africans, resting at their ease,
and among them sits their ruler
a black, enlightened emperor.

He knew at once that he'd intruded,
a ring was round the boy concluded.
Then said the chief, their ruler,
the black, enlightened emperor:
»From whence has sprung this little mite,
who isn't black and isn't white,
there's so much dirt on him congealed
his skin is utterly concealed.
Lads, it's soap we need
to wash the mucky lad, indeed,
so we can know what sort we've got,
whether black or whether not!«
A long, long year they washed and rubbed him,
washed and lathered, roughly scrubbed him;
but while still with soap he's covered,
long before they had discovered
what sort of colour he had been,
black or white or in between,
the ostrich came and saved the day
and on his back brought him away.
Oh dear, oh dear, oh hairy fairy!

Something isn't right with Yuri!
No more his hair a tousled mop,
and with washing just can't stop;
since meeting with the coloured king
he thinks that water's just the thing.
But Africa's a desert bare,
neither towel nor water there,
and the age old thought, though trite,
says going home is only right!
But before he says farewell, to all,
both man and beast, he must this tell:
he's sorry, simply rendered,
for any insult unintended.
So says Yuri, and goodbye!
Crocodile could only cry
tear after tear, and lion pawed
the ground in sorrow, roared,
while monkey was extremely miffed,
and zebra wiped the tears away,
and even elephant, well, almost sniffed,
and ostrich ...ostrich found no words to say!
Yuri kissed them, one and all,
and promised that he'd write come fall
and home he came that very day,
clean and neat in every way,
his model cleanliness a virtue,
and believe me, it's all almost true.

About a boy

What can I contribute to such excellent and sympathetic company of the eternal Yuri Muri and his new court painter, Damijan Stepančič? There's really nothing to add to these very familiar, polished and popular children's rhymes by my father, Tone Pavček.

Who knows for how many children Yuri Muri was their first book? How many parents remember their own childhood in his company? How many are surprised when they read Yuri to their grandchildren, to find that they still know some stanzas by heart? Not to mention all the reprints, settings to music, performances, school commemorations, TV broadcasts – in one of them Tone and his three year-old grandchild Maj splashing in the salt pans... Nevertheless, I must scour my memory and the tales of others to be able to write some details, impressions, in order that this new, fresh and colourful book, with the scent of African soil and full of its illustrator's sly humour, will obtain the encouraging and open accompaniment that it deserves.

It was 1958 when the first Yuri Muri in Africa was published, with the unforgettable illustrations of Melita Vovk. I wasn't even in the world at that time, although it seems now as if I was. I see everything as if I had been part of that time, the tales of my parents are mixed with selected records, with fragments of dreams, with phantasy images ... I can see my father very vividly starting to write Yuri Muri, in a fever pitch of imagination and inspiration scribbling in a tiny notebook with orange covers that are reminiscent of a peach skin to the touch. The letters, as I remember them from childhood, always seemed to me like some kind of characters, he wrote them on small graph paper in those frugal orange notebooks. He sometimes tore out a leaf for me to draw on but the crayons always slipped off the edge of the small paper, while my brother skilfully sunk ships on the little squares ... So I remember father's writing as a miracle of unimaginable dexterity, which the clumsy fingers of my left hand could not achieve. His 'letters' were always aligned with those tiny squares, never too big, as if he wanted to squeeze onto the paper all the ideas, all the giddy inversions of the story, all the singing verses, to capture all the rhymes and all the soaring heights of his spirit.

That is how I see him, starting to write Yuri Muri, probably in 1957, perhaps even earlier. He writes it, as is known, while waiting in line for a cinema ticket. I can see him with his glasses on the end of his nose, a little bit dry and bent over the notebook, moving in line and, unaware of others (or perhaps even more concentrated precisely because of them), furiously writing with a sharp pen; the sound is identifiable, clearly audible, with lively syncopation. I am sure that, despite the external appearance of being absorbed in thought, inwardly he laughed at his wicked jests, enjoyed when the main hero flees from home and even more when he felt the verses flowing, when he captured their rhythm in the tension of the story. When he surrenders to the child in himself, so that he relives his own predicaments and quandaries and gives free rein to adventurous fantasy, he is like Yuri riding across the ocean.

By means of poetry, he also expressed that which he perhaps wanted to conceal, *about a boy, who ...* It is actually true that Tone as Tonček, little Tony, didn't like washing, about which he often spoke. He spent part of his childhood in the care of the reverend sisters in Marijanišče, the boy's orphanage in Ljubljana. He said that they washed in the cold mornings at the sharp command of the mother superior. All the boys were first soaked with cold water at the same time and they then soaped themselves in the dry, followed by a quick rinse. Tonček was afraid of the water and tarried behind in the crowd, still all soapy, and when he plucked up courage to step under the shower they shut the water off! The dry soap stuck to his skin all day and at night itched but he had to hold out until the next washing and a repetition of the whole torture.

So it is not surprising that, in Yuri Muri, in his mature thirties he made fun of himself and his childhood fears, launched into a youthful adventure and (at least it seems to me) with a wicked child's eyes winked at the poet whom he infinitely idolised – France Prešeren. As if a little in jest and certainly with delight he wrote for his compatriot a gay and witty boyish antipole to the melancholy sonnet *A traveller comes to the African desert ...* and with it awakened the belief that all is never lost, that beasts cannot be merely beasts, that animal kingdoms can be genuinely sympathetic! That a person, although fearful, not understanding and lonely, can find hospitable and open people, who accept him and enlighten him as to what is right and wrong in life, what is error and what prejudice and, not least, how important it is to be a *clean example*, not just physically but also that within, which forges pure bonds of friendship.

Not to bury our head in the sand before the unknown, the unusual, before responsibility and mirth, thus still and ever afresh commends the poet who was proud of all children that, still with their milk teeth, enthusiastically recited: *Yuri Muri, rag-tag Yuri, born beneath a waxing moon ...*

Saša Pavček