2009

Not Lost in Translation

Sharon Madjar
Northern Michigan University

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NOT LOST IN TRANSLATION

By

Sharon Madjar

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Sharon Madjar is recommended for approval by the student’s Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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Sharon H Madjar       June 24, 1964
Not lost in translation is a short anthology of poems and prose that I have translated from Hebrew to English. There are fifteen poems and three stories by current Israeli authors. The subjects of the poems and prose are about life in Israel, and include universal topics such as love, war, nature and relationship among people. The author demonstrates that different cultures share universal components of human behavior and ideas and that through translation a window opens to the understanding of others.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This thesis follows the guidelines set forth by the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*, and the Department of English.
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INTRODUCTION

I grew up reading translations. The world of literature opened up to me through the wonderful translations into Hebrew of Dickens, Shakespeare, Alcott, Twain, Balzac and others. The translations I read in my childhood triggered my curiosity for the experience of reading in English when I was older and, though I was thrilled at reading them in English, it seemed to me as I re-read those books that little or nothing was lost in translation.

The idea of translating Israeli poetry and prose came to me as I was searching for a creative way to reflect my culture through writing. I took a writing degree and wrote mainly in English, but the topics of my writing invariably related to my life in Israel. My family is partly American, but my first language is Hebrew. I grew up in Israel speaking Hebrew first, and later English. My experiences growing up as an Israeli and the tumultuous political situation in the Middle East made me wish for an opportunity to give voice in English to Israeli writers. Life in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula was so different from my previous life in Israel; I felt that it would be almost impossible for me to start writing in English without connecting my culture and language to the culture I now live in. Thinking about translating prose and poetry from Hebrew to English seemed like the perfect solution to my problem; it seemed like the proper introduction of me to American readers.

My next challenge was to decide whom to translate and what topics and works are current and reflect my history. I searched for authors and poets that I liked, whose writing
evokes current Israeli thoughts and ideas that are also universal. I believe that readers can gain insight into different cultures by learning about the similar attributes people share.

In the prose section of my thesis it is more evident why a prose piece is Israeli. There are descriptions of landscapes and names of areas in Israel, allusions to the Israeli Palestinian conflict, and depictions of streets using Israeli street names and descriptions of ethnic food. In the poetry section, it is sometimes difficult to see what makes a poem a Hebrew or Israeli poem. For example, Rachel Halfi's poem "Love in McDonald's" was written in Hebrew, but it is not necessarily a Hebrew poem. The writer describes her love for her child while sitting in a McDonald's restaurant. This poem could have been written by an American or British poet, not necessarily in Hebrew: "I love my kid at MacDonald's...he devours a double sandwich...suddenly I have time to look him straight in the eyes." Only the name of the poet gives some indication of her nationality. Since Hebrew is a Semitic language and is written from right to left, the typography of the poem is important. That is why I chose to print the translated poems side by side: so the reader can see how the poem looks on paper even if it is in a different language.

DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSLATION

My thesis is titled *Not Lost in Translation*. I found this to be an appropriate title because, after reading work in translation by various writers, I realized that although there are differences among languages; translators do succeed in conveying a writer's message and unique talent. The majority of human experiences are similar, even though their expression through language, religion, and culture may differ. Having said that, translation is an extremely difficult process and my aim was to show not only the
commonalities in human behavior that are similar in different writings, but also the difficulties that arise for a translator when dealing with the differences between languages.

An example of the kind of difficulty I came across translating is Leor Sternberg's poem, "An Old Song". Although it expresses certain experiences that many people can relate to, it also describes experiences usually familiar to Israelis. It describes a man waking up with his girlfriend to watch the first rain of the fall season. The poem's story is simple but poses a challenge for a translator. Hebrew has important gender differences. Living objects and inanimate objects are related to according to gender. For the English reader, there is no clue that this man is writing about a woman, because in the second person in which the poem is written, there is no gender attribution in English. Even though I adhered to the poem's rhythm and content, I could not translate the gender clues that appear in every line of the poem contributing to its sensuality. In the end, after the poem’s title, I chose to add in parenthesis that this is a poem from the writer to his girlfriend or wife. I felt that this would add to the accuracy of the translation.

Another difficulty that I encountered had to do with the fact that Hebrew does not use capitalization. I already decided that I would use capitalization in the prose section because it would be clearer for the reader. I had to decide whether to capitalize all the poems or leave them un-capitalized. When I started my translation I left all the poems without capitalization. But the Hebrew typography is different than the English and I found that the poems looked strange on paper without capitalization of the word I, and without capitalization of place names. Since I wanted uniformity in my work, I finally decided that I would capitalize the poems since capitalization seems to work with the
typography and actually looks better on the page. I did not capitalize where the natural enjambment of the poem was important to the translation.

When I translated the prose I had other issues. Upon translating Ron Leshem’s Beaufort, I came across Hebrew slang usage and military terms I was not familiar with. I had to be certain that I used the correct terms. Whenever I came across curses in Hebrew, I decided to use their English equivalents, rather than transliterate them into English, explaining their meaning by footnotes. I believe that these choices make the reading flow better.

In conclusion I feel that I achieved my goals in translation. I feel that readers who read these poems and stories will be able to appreciate their beauty and also be familiar with the themes introduced in these works. Not Lost in Translation is a short anthology of Hebrew poems and prose that I chose based on my personal preference and their similarity to my life story. The subjects of the poems and stories are life in Israel and universal topics such as love, war, nature and relationships among people. I strive to show that however different cultures are, there are universal components to human behavior that are similar and shared in all cultures, which make people relate to each other’s story-and that is why people want to read works in translation.
POETRY

Alex Ben Ari

Today, with fully rested soul, 
With light wind, and relative cleanliness 
I'm writing: 
The soul is not a moldy basement. 
The soul is not a far away island. 
The soul is a nearby playground no one visits. 
It is a collection of happiness capsules neatly packed. 
When you arrive at the soul a light turns on 
Like an electronic supermarket door 
And air smiles into your lungs.

Figure 1: Untitled Poem by Alex Ben Ari
Moshe Ben Shaul

I Draw Myself Slowly

I draw myself slowly
movement after movement
that I saw in a window shop in Paris
just as I look into the little mirror
in the electric shaver

That look absorbed in other faces
of other people, the mirror
that cheats is beaten year after year
by the background
of drooping mouth
that doesn’t undress itself of words

And maybe there is a need to hurry because of
elapsing time
and the rebellious tear in the eye
above the lip biting
a lip
Oh what can I say

I paint myself with words here
in Tel Aviv, on a certain street
I see the computerized electronic
route that surrounds me
in a zero shape coldness

And when will the portrait be
finished, and it is not even a nude
And when will the test be over
The test
that has only steep winding hills
and earth

And a dessert of oranges and earth

Figure 2: “I Draw Myself Slowly” by Moshe Ben Shaul
Wind Playing Music with Carob Trees

On the boulevard, sitting on the coal boat
sailing beyond darkness.
My hands lack oars, and the coal doesn’t fire or
smoke but the wind going through
to play music with the carob trees.
I didn’t know what to ask, what will you ask
if not for the end of darkness.

The earth collected to its bosom a mound of leaves
like collecting fish in Michmoret lake
and I left there, a captain of a lost ship
his feet deep in the waves

Figure 3: “Wind Playing Music with Carob Trees” by Moshe Ben Shaul
Ilan Berkovits

Peaches

You are a peach.
And I am persimmon.
And you will be famous.

They will say: “the first female poet and artist of Tel Aviv.”

And I will wait for you by your house, near the old night lamps whose lights are tired like a long lasting love,
and till you come I will pick flowers for you
and publish your beauty in the flower beds.

On spice street the night is bitter.
The spice bags are embarrassed to peek at the head spice person’s
Italian lover, how she
slaps him on his cheek and
all the grain spills out of his pockets.

Till dawn, the smell of burnt, frayed love,
that shatters, will fade away in the air.

The first street cleaner will be the new day’s angel.

Figure 4: “Peaches” by Ilan Berkovits
A morning in the country

In the morning there is a string of dew on the grass, on two bushes that flower in startling beauty.

In the morning I could survive for an hour as I wished, and later the day will come and clarify the flaws.

On the side road some bullies pick discarded fruit, they smile as I pass by: It is difficult to tell dangers apart.

But I am content to travel early through the hills to see all the blossoms that you couldn’t see, and that’s why it will always be my private possession.

Figure 5: “A morning in the country” by Ori Bernstein
I’m not home, I mumble to myself
in a routine search for me
and I’m not outside -
I already checked that,
running around with slippers,
wrapped in a blanket.

When the phone rang
I didn’t answer -
When I return there will be
or there won’t be a message
on the answering machine.
Usually it doesn’t answer,
just records and gets messed up.
Maybe after I dress I will listen to it
to those last ones searching for me together.
Shai Dotan

In the fitting room

In the department store
you will try on the dress
that you drew for me yesterday in words
and I will wander through the perfume
section,
splash on my neck the one
that counts the beats of your breath.
When the attendants at the counter
will glare their thin eyebrows at my back
we’ll sneak into the fitting room,
behind the screen
you will take my measurements.

Figure 7: “In the fitting room” by Shai Dotan

Asher Gal

Happiness

Little but strong
eating tree stumps
in slow assured warmth
careful not to wash off
to be a wall of fire
he warns: don’t ask
about me too much.

Figure 8: “Happiness” by Asher Gal
Suddenly a day happened

The little red head girl
became invisible but could see
and the green of her eyes
went wandering over the green
leaves

Merchants came out of stores
provoking the sun
like cats in heat

We could make a kite
from the roaring jet plane
and pull its string
behind us

Eternity looked like
half an eternity

Figure 9: “Suddenly a day happened” by Rachel Halfi
Rachel Halfi

Love in MacDonald’s

I love my kid
at MacDonald’s
love him very much
released from asinine kitchen chores
from the chilling responsibility of a healthy diet

He devours a double sandwich
of drippy meat
and I’m chain-smoking French-fries
He chugs down a gallon of coke
and I pour into my stomach a third cup of coffee

Suddenly I have time to
look him straight in the eyes
suddenly I have the time to write
this little confession

How liberating is this shared
sin!
How this cosmopolitan
business contributes to the peace
of this nuclear family cell

The store’s glass windows
reflect little cold neon lights
Through them the city signals
that everything is now friendly

And everything is an ally

Figure 10: “Love in MacDonald’s” by Rachel Halfi
What is left?

Rachel Halfi

The Imaginary “I” wants to attack
Like a tsunami
To rise
To lift
To hit
To hug
To rake

This little scared I underneath
The shimmering I
That is a shimmering trembling
To all this breaking drama
The trembling shimmering frightened I
That I –
I barely found it for a second –
It shimmered and folded
And altogether disappeared

So what is left?

Figure 11: “What is left?” by Rachel Halfi
Asher Reich

Elegy on the Yarkon river

Summer's end: the city talks to me
in inter-seasonal pictures. The toy bridge
over green water. A rumor about scents
reaches the nose. A caressing wind with changing voice
from the sea cloud shadows are moving. A couple is
probing the world
for an hour that had not yet blossomed.
A trash can near a bench, near a tree. A bird laughs.

And in the air there is the troubled smell of summer's end
the park trees emit different stares
Scents of urine beside scents of love.
Condoms with new colors strewn on the ground.
Summer's dreams realized.

Figure 12: “Elegy on the Yarkon river” by Asher Reich

Rami Saari

Eyes shut

If tonight, bitter death, you will come
and open the door widely,
I will quickly understand, that there is no use
for my poem to wag its tail.
you will caress my open skull and kiss my pale lips.
the eye sockets of my blind face,
will transfer to a flat dimension.
So we'll sit and bleed together
in honor of the coming days.
Here, so nice and pleasant
to bleed without fear and sadness.

Figure 13: “Eyes shut” by Rami Saari
Benny Shvili

halfway through the day when I screamed and yelled
and was humiliated and I worshiped anger and the
Zodiac signs I entered my room and opened the
second degree book of wisdom
and I saw that it was written that it happens that God
answers just at the time where you are most unworthy
and it happens he won't answer you ever, and not in
your
next life and the ones that will come after and after
and also it was written that praising God must be done
to
better the soul and what's inside it and I felt better
and I felt like being caressed by a warm hand and I felt
good and I loved all that I hated before and I
became a servant of the soul and the mind and
knowledgeable in all that is unknown

Figure 14: Untitled poem by Benny Shvili
Leor Sternberg

An Old Song
(From the writer to his girlfriend or wife)

You asked to wake me
so I will watch with you
the first rain of the season.
It rained for only a few minutes
but strong and full
leaving after it
the familiar scent
and fall like afternoon.
Your hand went through the
wind chime. Wakefulness and dream
passed through each other. I just saw your bare foot
between the terrace bars
and the image of your voice slipped away
among the rooms, lost in a heap of dreams.

Figure 15: “An old song” by Leor Sternberg
Beaufort

Ron Leshem

He won't, anymore.

Jonathan won't see us getting ugly. "We will never be more handsome than we are now," he would always say, and I used to ask if it meant to cheer us because it didn't.

"Tell me, are you screwed up? How come you don't know this game? It can't be that you don't know it. It is called "he won't anymore" and that's what everybody plays when a friend gets killed. You say his name and anyone around has to complete the sentence, to say what he won't and can't do anymore. Jonathan won't take his little brother to a movie. Jonathan won't hear the new disc of Zion Golan. He won't be at his grandfather's funeral, won't know if his sister gets married. He won't know what it feels like to rent an apartment with his girlfriend and to go to Roladin in the middle of the night because she wants a jelly doughnut. He will never know what it is like to sit with his own child on the grass telling him how great we were on those ambushes in Lebanon. Jonathan will never know how River the medic cried over his body, not letting go, he fell apart. He wailed like a baby. Jonathan won't know how Forman and I roamed around a whole day in the mountains to look for his missing head. Jonathan will not know at all that we got out of Lebanon."

* The Hebrew sources for this and following excerpts are not included due to computer file size limitations.
Try to imagine that they stick you on a high mountain, higher than the roof top of the Azrieli sky scraper. How can the view not be breathtaking? And here vast spaces of green countryside, checkered with brown and red plots of land, snowy mountains, frothing rivers, narrow European roads, winding, deserted, and the sweetest wind there is. Zeitalawi would say that air like this you have to store in a mineral water bottle, to sell to the northern Tel Aviv stuck-ups in their fancy neighborhoods. Ahhh, what quality, what is this pastoral place? Fuck it; you slice the tranquility with a knife. And our sunsets are the most beautiful sunsets on the continent, and the sunrises are even more beautiful, twilight of peacefulness on the top of the world. Bring here a girl or two when the sky is orange, and you’re set. And the dawn is a stunning cocktail of deep blues and turquoise and magenta and thin stripes of pink, like an oil painting on canvas. A deep valley bends from our large rock. Here you broke down? Go figure.

But from that night I remember the lights of Kiryat Shmona, on the Israeli side of the border, as they recede on the horizon, and everyone’s beating hearts. I swear it, I can hear them as we make our winding way up to the top of the mountain that very first time. And it’s getting colder every passing minute. And there is no one but us, and no villages in our zone. Our convoy crawls along, swallowed in thick fog, and you can’t see a hundred meters in front of you. Tanks are spread out along the road to give us cover. From a narrow slit of the tank’s roof I try to guess our location, whispering quietly while pondering the intimidating map and hurrying through an abbreviated battle history, muttering, “no talking is allowed.” Where will the evil come from? I suddenly have the urge to shout to the commanding officer that we’ve gone too far, but I bite my lip and keep quiet. From this moment on no one can tell me, “You have no idea what Lebanon is
like, wait till you get there.” I’m there finally, that’s the point. The convoy is long, heavy traffic, Safari food, Safari soldiers, Safari diesel, behind these an ordnance truck with a big crane, an Abir truck carrying a doctor and a medic, another GI Safari, the commander’s Hummer, the lieutenant’s Hummer, and an Electronic Warfare Hummer. Oshri asks if I’ve brought my lucky underwear. I have them on, I point to my pants, and fate is dependent on my underwear. I have them on, even if it means thirty-two days without laundry.

And I remember how the gate of the outpost opens to let us in, how the Safari comes to halt inside a cloud. And each one of us grabs whatever is around him, bags, equipment, his own, not his own, and runs inside hysterically. The commanders are yelling in whispers, “Fuck yourselves out already,” and “run quickly.” People are coming up, going down, it’s forbidden to stay in one place, you have to take cover in the secured area. When the parking lot has filled with soldiers, the enemy starts mortar shelling. And I try, but I can’t see anything, I don’t recognize anyone around me, I grab onto another soldier’s shirt and lumber after him. I am thrown into a narrow cramped maze, surrounded by heavy concrete walls on all sides, long corridors without entrance or exit, a room that leads to a stairway with a dead end, and a bunch of halls lit in red with low ceilings, and stretchers. Half a minute later I am in one of the safe rooms, a narrow long niche, a kind of underground cave, with concave walls covered with rusty metal and crowded three storey bunk beds that hang from the ceiling locked in heavy metal chains.

Someone had carved above the entrance, WELCOME TO DOWNTOWN, in English, and inside the air is compressed, you feel like suffocating, and the stench of sweat engulfs you once in awhile in waves. In this hole which is called the submarine, my
life will go on from now. I consider using the restroom, but a veteran sergeant explains to me that you follow the blue light and turn right at the end. Also, you need a helmet and bullet proof vest. I will hold it in. What’s going on? Is this a war? I really don’t feel like disappearing right now. The restroom looked to me like light years away. Actually it was 10 meters or 15 meters away, three green toilet seats with make shift writing, I CAME, I SAW, I CONQUERED - JULIUS CAESAR, and another army sign prohibiting shitting on the latrine seat, so you will always remember where you are. And in the morning, at first sunrise, when the view of Lebanon was spread in front of us, our commander said the opening sentence that he practiced for weeks, or months, or maybe inherited from previous generations: “Welcome! If heaven exists this is what it looks like, if hell exists this is how it feels, Beaufort outpost.”

Once Lila asked me what is the Beaufort exactly, and I thought how difficult it is to put it into words. You have to be there to understand, and even that is not enough. Because the Beaufort is many things, like any military outpost, Beaufort is Backgammon, black coffee, and grilled cheese sandwiches. You play Backgammon for sandwiches, and the one who loses has to make them for everybody with a zesty pesto.

When it's really boring you play poker for cigarettes. Beaufort is living without one split second of privacy, long weekends with the squad, beds on top of beds, being able to identify while sleeping, each person’s shoes, just by the smell alone. You can tell at any moment who farted even with your eyes closed. Just according to the smell. This is how true friendship is measured. Beaufort is lying to your mother on the phone so she won't worry. You always say, "Everything's fine, I just took a shower and I'm going to sleep." When in reality you didn't take a shower in twenty-one days, there is no water left
in the water tanks, and in another minute you are up for guard duty. And it's not just any guard duty, it's the scariest position there is. When she asks when will you be back? You answer in code. " Mom, you remember the name of the neighbor’s dog? Take off two from the first letter, and on that day I'm getting out of here, most important so that Hezbollah won't listen and blow up the whole convoy. You really want to tell her that you love her, that you miss her, but you can't because the whole squad is around you. If you say anything you will give them ammo for two months, they will tear you apart with humiliation. And the worst is when while talking to your mother there is a sudden explosion of mortar shells around you. She hears the explosion, and then the line goes dead. She is shaking, convinced that her child has been killed, waiting on the balcony for the city's bereavement team. You can't stop thinking about her, feeling sorry for her but till they reconnect the phone lines at the outpost many days can go by. Worry. That is why I personally preferred not to call at all. I told my mom that I was transferred to an Army unit on the border, near the fence, Lebanon lite, not too deep at all, so long as she can sleep at night. Gut feeling, you ask? She knew the truth the whole time, even if she won't admit to it to this day.

Figure 16: Excerpt from “Beaufort” by Ron Leshem
Alberto sat near one of the tables in front of the café facing the side of the street that was still washed with sunlight. He sat cross-legged playing with a cigarette lighter, now and then nodding at people walking down the street. Smells of the shoe repair store and fried fish rose from the nearest alley that was shaded and looked like a pleasantly cool place. From far away he could see Shlomo who was riding his bike coming from Bustrus Street. When he came closer, Alberto waved him over. The boy turned, got off his bike which he leaned on the sidewalk and approached Alberto. Peering through the dusty lenses of his glasses, he was evidently very pleased to answer Alberto’s call, and willing to do Alberto’s bidding.

“You want to make some money?” said Alberto.

Shlomo nodded and wiped the sweat on his shirt, the shirt was dirty, covered with stains. He was about 13, tall and slender and his black hair was cut very short. His near-sightedness caused him to look embarrassed and scared.

“Here, take.” said Alberto and handed him a paper bag. Shlomo took the bag and held it very carefully.

“You have here sixty tickets for the second show. You can count them if you want. Take five and a half not less, do you hear me? “Lower the prices only after the nightly news.” Shlomo nodded again, but this time without merriment as he corrected the position of his glasses that seemed to bother him and cause him discomfort.

This wasn’t the errand he had hoped for and not only because he told Mordechai Jildati that they will go that evening to shoot pool, but mainly because he didn’t want to
deal with scalping. Also he was very scared of his father. He knew that if he found out from anyone that he saw his son around the movie theatre scalping tickets, he would be brutally beaten by him, not to mention his fate if he was caught by the police. “Count them.” Repeated Alberto and offered him the tickets. Shlomo smiled shyly and tucked the package of tickets in his pocket.

“Try to sell them all,” said Alberto fondly and tapped him on his shoulder. “OK” said the boy and again wiped his sweaty face, and he got on his bike and rode away. He felt distressed because he was afraid of his dad and because of Mordechai Jildati. He wasn’t worried that he wouldn’t come up with a good excuse, which Mordechai would accept without suspicion, but he wanted to go play pool and did not want Mordechai to go with some other friends. But with all of his distress, he found some satisfaction in the knowledge that he would make Alberto happy. That counted more in his eyes than the money he was going to make, although the thought of the money made him glad too. He didn’t know what amount Alberto wanted to pay him, but he thought about 20 lirot or even 25. Now he was quickly maneuvering among the cars that were driving leisurely on Jaffa-Tel Aviv road and in his mind he was creating a story to tell Mordechai Jildati.

At about ten he returned to the café, leaned the bike on the sidewalk and went inside. He was happy and proud, because he managed to sell all the tickets at the price Alberto stated. After he was done, he did not hesitate at all, but flew on his bicycle hurrying to let Alberto know how well he did and to win his smile, compliments and the affection that he deserved. But now he collected himself and waited near the entrance hoping Alberto would notice him and call on him. He was hot and sweaty and his glasses fogged up. The wait was very long because Alberto was engrossed in the Backgammon
game and did not raise his eyes from the board or Manunu’s hands who took advantage of his opponent’s inattention to move the pieces illegally. Shlomo had to take a few steps forward and then stop again.

“You’re back?” said Alberto finally noticing him and throwing the dice.

“Yes” said Shlomo, and moved closer to the table. He handed his paper bag with the money, folded paper bills and coins and added, “I sold them all.”

“Good for you,” said Alberto moving pieces across the board game, and Shlomo was left standing, his hand holding the money bag in mid air. “Play,” said Manunu, after he had his turn.

“Wait a second.” Now Alberto turned to the boy. He smiled at him, took the bag from him, emptied the contents, counted the money and put it back in the bag mumbling, “Good job, good job…” Then he took a five lira note and gave it to the boy.

“Here, take it.”

Shlomo who was ready to shake hands and thank him did not do so. He looked at Alberto feeling foolish and embarrassed through his myopic eyes as if he didn’t understand him.

“Take it, it’s yours,” said Alberto waving the bill at him.

“Play,” said Manunu impatiently, “It’s your turn.”

“Is that it?” said Shlomo.

“It’s not enough for you?” said Alberto mocking him, glancing at him pitifully.

“Take, take,” he rushed him, and already started to turn away from him and picked up his die to continue with the game.
“I thought fifteen,” said Shlomo cowardly and pushed up his glasses that slipped off his nose.

“You thought, so what if you thought?” said Alberto, who was angered by the kid’s sudden stubbornness. He wanted to finish and be done with this affair and return to his game. “And if you thought a hundred lira” he added, “Just take it and leave,” he concluded, and handed him the five lira bill. But Shlomo just kept on looking at him with the same beseeching look and in his heart he still hoped that Alberto was just kidding.

“Take it and leave!” repeated Alberto and threw the bill in his face. “Play already” said Manunu who couldn’t stand the continued interruption of the game.

“If you don’t take it you won’t get anything, kid,” threatened Alberto, emphasizing the word kid in a condescending and cruel tone so Shlomo imagined he was slapped. Now all his hopes were gone. He felt humiliated and insulted, but mostly betrayed, and he wanted to run out but just stood there in pitiful stubbornness still facing Alberto.

“Take it and leave!” yelled Alberto angrily and tore the five lira note throwing the two halves of the note on the floor. He then turned to Manunu. “Where are the dice?”

Manunu gave him the dice and he shook them in his fist, but before rolling them he turned to the boy who bent to pick the money from the floor. He said to him, “Don’t ever expect to be treated kindly, do you get it? Don’t even expect it from your father, and don’t look like that, now go, get out of here,” and he turned back to his backgammon board.

**Figure 17: Excerpt from “The Lesson” by Yaakov Shabtai**
“The Boredom Theory by Gur”

Etgar Keret

Of all of my friends, my friend Gur has the most theories, and the best theory with the best chance of being correct is the Boredom Theory.

Gur’s Boredom Theory claims that the reason for almost all events in the world is boredom. Love, war, inventions, and wall siding. 95% of all this is boredom. In the 5% left, he considers for example the beating that he got in a New York subway two years ago when two black men robbed him. Not that they weren’t a little bored, but more than anything they looked hungry. He likes to explain this concept on the beach whenever he is too tired to play paddleball or go swimming.

And I sit and listen for the thousandth time hoping secretly that today a hot girl will finally come to our beach. Not that we try anything with her, just that there will be something to stare at.

The last time I heard Gur’s theory was a week ago, when a few policemen caught us on Ben Yehuda Street with a shoebox filled with pot. “Most laws are created as a result of boredom,” Gur explained to them in the police car, “and it’s okay, because it makes things interesting. The ones who break the law are afraid to be caught and this passes their time. And the police? They are euphoric because when you enforce the law, it makes time fly. Because of this, on principle, I don’t have any problems with the fact that you arrested us. One thing I don’t get, why did you need cuffs”?

“Shut up!” the plainclothes police man with sunglasses who was sitting in the back with us barked at him. You could tell he really didn’t like to get back to the station with two screw-ups who smoke weed because they ran out of money for beer. They
would rather look for a serial rapist or a bank robber. When interrogated, Gur and I enjoyed ourselves immensely, because, beside the air conditioning, there was a cute police woman who sat with us for a few hours and even made us coffee in styrofoam cups. Gur explained to her his theory regarding the war of the sexes and he managed to make her laugh at least twice. It was relaxed, except for one scary part when some cop who watched too much NYPD wanted to beat both of us to death. But we outsmarted him and admitted to everything before he could get near us at all. Now when I tell all the interesting parts it sounds like it all happened very quickly, but the truth is that when the whole business and filling forms ended it was nighttime. Gur called Orit who was his girlfriend for eight consecutive years till she got smart and left him to find a normal boyfriend. But she came to the station to get us out on bail. She came alone without her boyfriend and pretended that this was another burden that Gur saddled her with, and that she was very irritated with him. But it was obvious that she was glad to see Gur and that she missed him terribly.

After we were released Gur wanted to take her out for coffee or something but she said she had to run, because she had a night job at the supermarket and maybe some other time. And Gur said to her that he calls her so many times and leaves her messages on her voicemail but she never calls back, and if he doesn’t get arrested he doesn’t see her at all. She told him that it’s best if he doesn’t call because nothing good will come out of the two of them together, as long as he keeps running around with people like me and doesn’t do anything but eat lamb-filled pitas, smoke dope and stare at girls. And I wasn’t insulted at all that she was talking about me this way, because she said it with sweet honesty and it was also true. “I’m really late,” she said, and got into her Beetle, and waved at us
through the window as she drove away. After that we walked all the way from the police station on Dizengoff Street home without speaking at all. This was a pretty ordinary occurrence for me but a rare one for Gur. “Tell me,” I said to him when we reached my street corner. “Orit’s boyfriend, do you want to kick his ass or what?” “Let it go,” mumbled Gur, he is an okay guy. “I know,” I said “but anyway if you want, we can clobber him.” “No,” said Gur. “But I think I will take your bicycle and go watch Orit in the Super-Pharm.” “Sure,” I said, and gave him the key to unlock the bike.

It was a routine pastime for him to go watch Orit when she worked the night shift. The truth is if you look at it theoretically, hiding for five hours behind a bush just to see some girl working a register and putting Tylenol and Q tips in plastic bags should really be a result of boredom. But somehow when it came to Orit, Gur’s theories never seemed to work.

Figure 18: Excerpt from “The Boredom Theory by Gur” by Etgar Keret
WORKS CITED


