

Shimon Adaf

Apologetica

Well, they say poetry -- that elusive quality which stems from a unique conjuncture of sentence structure (syntax), music (phonetics), meaning (semantics), flow (dynamics) and cultural connotations (allusions, tradition, context, whatever) -- is the very thing that gets lost in translation. Translated, poetry can be harmed in more than one way. Mine, I feel, is mostly (though not solely) damaged at the level of syntax. In having been resuscitated as a spoken language, the modern Hebrew was faced with the need to choose one normative syntax from among the several syntactical systems used over the centuries since the biblical era. In my poetry I try to integrate these older, abandoned systems into modern Hebrew, producing thereby anomalies which, I hope, turn the reader's gaze onto the workings of the language. Since this formal aspect has, superficially speaking, nothing to do with the apparent themes of my poetry, this layer is completely lost in the translations that follow. Bear that in mind.

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Cradle song

*There are children in the morning,
They are leaning out for love,
And they will lean that way forever
--Leonard Cohen*

Father,
Forever missing the mark,
Consumed with love, like a match,
Bent over a book.
Unsung,
Kislev dissolves into the air.
A clumsy moon pounds against the ribcage of the street, herds
Of fog trample in the dark.
When he gapes his hands
On the elusive table,
In his cold, done sleep,
It's hard to believe he once crossed the ocean and once
Saw snow,
In the shrunken houses of Morocco,
The end of the forties,
The cradle of time.

Translated from the Hebrew by Orit Krugilansky

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First draft for a love song

You can't live easily
You can't even speak
--Pixies

my mother,
by my father's side,
Swaying in the vice-grips of light.
In the morning she is careful in her longing.
The children rise like moss in the air.

By the window,
Greedy I watch the rain,
Or report
The sun's progress.
Sometimes it stabs, like a machete, the thickness
Of birds and wind, sometimes
It can't even break through the fragile dawn.
My voice is not heard, it comes from
afar, through many waters.

My mother, by my father's side,
Under the threat of dust,
In spattered evenings.
How can it be
That I have yet to find
The right comparison
For our unexceptional life.

Translated from the Hebrew by Orit Krugilansky

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Love
(Poem for the third day)

my love is voiceless
faced with the world's extravagance.
It comes from small, remote places,
And wonders.
I watch the trees
coexist with the violence of wind
their unthinkable flexibility,
and yielding grace.
The forests are harems of
Fragile girls.

Every so often I am ignited by sleep,
by large bodies of water, my breath is taken
The skies make peace amongst themselves and fall
On a hard earned workingman's town.
Through industrial shadows, smoke sheets,
my childhood fears jump me, like
Armed assailants from the back alley of a forsaken night.
The water cycle which began a while ago
Still rains a lot.

My love is paralyzed,
Push it as I may, it is rootless
In the sense that it is provincial and inferior.
I watch the simple daisy
Spider-like, swarm in the grass
Or attack the hill
With hurried bloom,
To make spring.

Translated from the Hebrew by Orit Krugilansky

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Ars Poetica

1.

when I write
I am beneath contempt.
What's the use
If this is what I write.
I write:
mother is asleep.
No angels guard her forehead –
Beads of sweat.
(I will not say her days in darkness
not because they aren't
but out of pride)
full sun, I forgot to mention,
Tamuz or Av, the days
Summer their dwellers
In the exhausting air.
Trees as locust,
Birds on the edge of noon,
If the light is an abyss, if the light
Is a chasm, wide and deep
I have already written
Mother is asleep.

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2.

exposed to the dangers of cooking
I will not judge her again
By the measure of her success.
Five years now
I am distant and tiny
Like a speck of dust to the naked eye.
In a frugal bachelor's kitchen
learning every minute
how hereditary fate, like cancer
and diabetes, is trained on blood's vessels
Summer spies, dozens of birds
Uncontrollable blossom, are always
In this air.
No, mother
In the sweet caress of the evening
Neither of us can be loved.

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3.

on the way from Morocco, the wind is no arabesque,
nor aroma of spices,
certainly not dark light
over cliffs skies cry not like a bird.

It's not true what they say of the orient.

Seagulls on the masts, cooling off from height and flying
Noiseless waves
A sound falls on the deck
not a sound of breaking
but the cracking open of
one thing, emerging from another:
a moon from the day
my mother from her calm.

4.

a poem, like any human act
is an argument,
its meaning
determines which cry has more right
to be heard.
Mother, for example, had roses
In the obstinate soil of the south,
Leaden with the heat waves of Sderot, putting forth into the air
A discharge of buds, too stubborn to live
Slouching
And then some herbs for tea, luisa, nana, shiba,
Collapsing further into decline
In that thirst.

Around 13, I think, the age of ritual,
A doubt occurred.
The body is filled by the chance to be suddenly
Present, earthly.
I cannot remember a pleasure of this kind, when all of flesh at once
Strives to a point, the one meaning
Of the heart's longing.
After that, what prayer could
Lull the sound of rushing
Blood.

The virgin silk of days
is torn by the heavenly bodies,
Woven skies through which
The light strikes.
All books read, on the horizons
I can feel a supple occurrence
Of birds, concentrated incandescence,
Intoxicated by the unattainability of their height.

Ayamah,
here we measure beauty by its distance
from the possibility of touch.

A child's fear upon the beds.
He is told, this is flesh.
It is not good for you to scream it into your finger tips,
When you lie down to sleep, you are growing
Closer to it and
you are betrayed, you are saved
it is all the same to you
you strip yourself from all history of love.
And when you rise
Panting another failed thicket of roses or
Herd beasts of bloom,
Trampling through the different seasons, the thick

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Realness of the world, burdening breath
With so much smell
This is flesh, they say, get it
Into this you are being made

By the hour

Ayamah

ten years from now I might understand this desire
to come next to a body
and ever beyond tongues.
what is verse
but the pure need
for
things to be as they are
not slipping into frail existence
tenderly broken
by words or eyes.

What is it
But for the
Sourness
Of throat to silence something
Ayamah,
what am I
if all the words in the dictionary
are not enough for me
to say I
not to mention anything more.

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5.

mother, the moment of birth
which I can't stop feeling, even in the guillotine air
of the early morning, Tamuz
flesh
is mortal
but
more durable than spirit.

Come strike me, wind, and sun
With daybreak's burning blades
If only I knew how verse,
The true sword,
hung
as before
breath taking me to the edge of what is said.

Translated from the Hebrew by Orit Krugilansky

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Anatomy

This is where June slowly transforms into a hail of longing.
Childhood blindness replaces
nightfall.
A late, unexpected tooth
In the mouth of sderot.

What is mine I gather and break
Like heat
In the wings of a fan.
Little blades of birds
In the battered blue flesh of the horizon.

What is bound to change does not change;
Eternal porch. Mother holds back her gaze. Lost
Up to these trees, this garden.

What the light calmly erodes is fixed here
With hard nails, the streets
Are motionless. It is evening. They are dead
Like the grass, like all
the thick growth spurts
of the summer.

“if only you knew the agonizing complexity of the air which allows me
the journey
and its return”

but I do know but
Not so much for passion, not
For eternity. More for
Ignorance, the ignorance
Of the inability to forgive.
Even now
When under a scorched sky
Everyone I loved still is
a great and strong wind rent the mountains is trapped in these lungs.
Slowly
I
Breathe.

Translated from the Hebrew by Orit Krugilansky

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Someone writes about another

I have nothing whole
that is my own.

Even my parents
in a way silence something
in small vortices of air
under blade strokes
of suns rising to shine.

And between us there is nothing but
a great cycle of blood and stars
that traps us without end
in its turning, like a
blender.

Translated from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden

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I
(Poem for the sixth day)

I am named after my grandfather.
And I have not yet begun to understand
the celestial light that was hung in his days,
the ambush of serenity
the trees laid for him.
The heat of sunflowers burst from the belly of the earth
hardening into a yellow strip
in some field.

Me, my paleness is forced
even in my darkest hour,
a passing car spills a shadow on a wall,
a moon shrinks to a dagger.
Waves of fog conquer the town.
The spears of my pulse are taken out
and driven back into the flesh
every morning.

Forgetting, however temporary,
is forgetting.
My grandfather in black on his grave
year after year,
the letters are drawn into the depths of the marble.
The world caught in the wonder of my gaze
is the entire world.
People cluster around my love
like beads of steam around
a grain of dust,
in every possible cloudiness,
even in clean, cloudless skies.

Translated from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden

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Sderot

It took me twenty years to love
this hole in the middle of nowhere.
The cotton balls spread a white flame
and there was an ill wind in the cypresses
until for the first time I saw,
with a just eye,
the unsophisticated houses under the roof of clouds,
until I heard
the wonderful murmur of the street.
The last whisper emitted by the waves of asphalt
mingled
with the bang of the evening on the ground,
like the voice of a forgotten woman that had betrayed her
and told the truth she tried
to hide in her face.
Decades of wear and tear
have taught the children to caress the water in the stone,
to float paper boats in puddles with ridiculous hope.
The circus past of the girls bloomed in the swirl of a skirt
when the gaze of the crowd sawed through it.
Only loveless places are worthy of absolute love.

Translated from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden

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A poetics of rescue from oblivion

Exit

It's easy to know
that all this will pass –

opaque as poetry and opaque
as a man
I go out into the rain
still coiled in the heavens of
December.

On Allenby Street warblers peck
storms of chirps on
the trees,
loosely.
The words are small shocks and then
go to hell in buses full of human heaviness
of all-too- wanting flesh.

It's the others who are right.

It's good to know that the world is ephemeral,
that the suns are too sharp
to be etched in a day or allow me
sight.

At a time like this,
in this light,
even one's
cruelty to oneself
is an illusion.

She catches the number 24 bus

What's poetry about that I can hardly walk, even
with a cane I can't get there fast enough. The doors
are already folding and the lungs bite hard into
another piece of air. Saying December. Only a male
finger could draw the sun as a
bleary eye. The clouds gather around it
like the anger before a husband strikes,
starved and dripping dark rains. I'm almost
there, beating on the glass, open up,
open up, you stupid bitch,
and unwillingly the bitch opens, like a hostile husband
swallowing food, thanks, thanks. The spit becomes
vomit, outside, a storm. Only a male hand could
build steps like a gallows. What's poetry about?
Wish I were more alive, knowing how to curse

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from here until further notice; the youngsters have taken
all the seats, the little shits, letting me stand, phooey,
sluts.

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Return

The cracked mouth
I defy,
the sigh.

Therefore I do not say.

When I return late
and tonight what do I know
about the word, not to speak of
starting.

What is the whip of the moon and what
is this strip of battered dark
at the head of the bed.

I do not say.

Help, help, what's with you?
Help, Father, help.

What began as a prayer
now is barely
a protective spell.

Translated from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden

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An Unfinished Poem

The wind brings ragwort back to this barely a house
flings on the window
all kinds of things rescued,
trees from the dawn or the sun from the thickness of summer
that solders the streets.
I found children here in the sand;
old men training with young blood, strips
of honey and milk on lips,
women at the market; dealings of
bending and loading,
their heart dull as a butcher's knife from cutting meat.

The sirocco does not let up, not really,
demanding its part in the burden of the wilderness – curtains
of fog in the night and storms of light by day.
The seasons bring names of distance
like grass and sea, detailed like cloud and rain, like
mountains, hiding.
Twenty-three years
by my parents' door
I've been sitting and forgetting
for the benefit of future generations.

Translated from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden
