

Abstract

In the summer of 2014, poets Somaya El-Sousi, Hanna Hallgren and Jenny Tunedal were working together in a translation workshop via Skype that had been ongoing for more than a year. When war broke out in Gaza, where El-Sousi lives and works, this translation workshop transformed into a daily conversation on war, despair, food, rooms, objects, women, children, mothers, intimacy, fear, news, weather and writing.

The differences and distances always present in translation work became enhanced and acute, as did a sense of closeness. The circumstances of war cut into our work and somehow into the everyday quotidian life of Sweden; as a shock, as a difference, as an acute experience of a lack of experience. The computer screen became, in El-Sousi's words: "a blue window of hope"; the hope of continuing, linearity, future.

Continuity is complicated for anyone living in Gaza. Life is a secluded incarceration, not only in space but maybe even more so in time. Future as well as political and personal history are constantly being cut off from and/or conditioned by a claustrophobic present. The disaster that war is adds enormous pressure and fear to this present, to the extent that chronological time seems almost entirely dissolved.

Translating 51 Days: These Texts are not Memories

SOMAYA EL-SOUSI

Somaya El-Sousi is a poet and a researcher at the Palestinian Planning Centre Office at the Department of Social Issues. The Centre is a governmental office in Gaza doing research on politics, economy and social issues. As a researcher she writes studies and reports, all published by the Centre in the Palestinian Planning Centre Magazine and distributed in Gaza. She has published four books of poetry: *The First Sip of Sea Breeze* (1998), *Doors* (2003), *Lonely Alone* (2005), *Idea, Space, Whiteness* (2005, together with the poet Hala El Shrof Shier). El-Sousi's poetry has been translated into English, Swedish, Greek and Norwegian. An ongoing project is "The city"—literary prose on life in Gaza and its contradictions", from which articles have been published in *El Ayyam* newspaper in Ramallah and translated into English, French, Swedish and Korean.

JENNY TUNEDAL

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HANNA HALLGREN

Hanna Hallgren is a poet, literary critic and Professor of Literary Composition, University of Gothenburg. She has a doctorate degree in gender studies and is a member of several research networks, such as RAW (The Network for Reflexive Academic Writing Methodologies) and EUFRAD (The European Forum for Research Degrees in Art and Design). She is one of the founders of the new Centre for Gender and Language at Linnæus University. Hallgren has published several articles and presented papers at numerous conferences. She is the author of six books of poetry: *Ett folk av händer* (2001), *Burqa* (2003), *Jaget är människans mest framträdande sinnessjukdom* (2008), *Manlighet* (together with poet Johan Jönson, 2009), *Roslära* (2012) and *Prolog till den litterära vetenskapsteorin* (2014).

1. Hind Juda's texts have since been published online, in *New Internationalist Magazine*, translated into English by Ibithal Mahmood. See <http://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2014/08/26/gaza-53-seconds> (Accessed 2016-07-14.)

2. Lamarre, Thomas. *Mechademia 4 War/Time*. Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2009.

3. Juda, Hind. "Eight O'Clock".

4. El-Sousi, Somaya. *The art of living in Gaza*. Translated by Christina Phillips, published online at <https://palestineinsight.net/category/somaya-el-sousi/> (Accessed 2016-07-14.)

5. Mourtaja, Rana. "Diary of a Third War Passing".

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

A conversation between Hanna Hallgren, Somaya El-Sousi and Jenny Tunedal

This conversation piece was created through a communal writing process. Its main source of material were texts by Palestinian writers Mona Abu Shark, Hind Juda, Rana Mourtaja, Najwa Shimon and Somaya El-Sousi, written between 6 July and 26 August 2014. They were gathered by Somaya El-Sousi and Serin Fathi and translated from Arabic into Swedish by Anna Jansson for the ongoing research project *Translating 51 days*, a project that grew out of the translating workshop that Hanna Hallgren, Somaya El-Sousi and Jenny Tunedal started in Ramallah in 2011, and that was interrupted, changed, transformed by the war in Gaza in the summer of 2014.¹

Hanna Hallgren (HH)
Somaya El-Sousi (SES)
Jenny Tunedal (JT)

"War and everyday life are inseparable, and both our daily time or temporality and our historical moment are conditioned in war."²

1. Gaza Time

SES: Hind Juda writes:

"Indifferent time / I wait for you to pass
by like an unusual woman
in love does in an uncommon country /
when she tries to find out if the missiles
have

ravished her beloved / He who said he
would come at eight / Time doesn't move
anymore"³

In a text about the skills of living in
Gaza I once wrote:

"The first of these skills is the ability to interact with time. I don't mean that time is important, to such a great extent, in this city. On the contrary: in Gaza there is a great surplus of time, which you must know how to use up, how to get rid of, in every possible way, as there are no important appointments binding you to your schedule, and no particularly sacred or respected times. Everything is possible at any time, and it's up to you to kill time as you see fit. So you either remain a prisoner in your own home, workplace, or wherever it is that you know and that knows you, or you think of other ways to kill time. Whatever you do will lead you to the same result in the end: you will make it as far as your pillow, at night, with a sense of absolute futility. You will be unable to find anything to think of other than fleeing from your self, the self that asks itself constantly until when? And what will you do tomorrow? And how are you going to spend the rest of your life?"⁴

HH: The incarceration of the people of Gaza is not only a spatial but also a temporal one. Wartime can be perceived as an extreme tightening of a temporal closure.

Time to kill versus
Time to get killed or not.

2. The Diary

JT: Rana Mourtajas' "Diary of a third war passing" uses the specific—although disputed—clock time of 53 seconds, a time range that became known as the amount of time between the so-called "knock on the roof"—the warning missile—and the ensuing bombing of the house. Mourtaja writes:

"Fifty-three seconds or less"—or, if you have the luck of a four-leaf clover, you might think 'or more' in your head.

Here is my definition of what I've called a 'warning missile': it is a password ushering me through a gateway into the daily hell of Gaza."⁵

Turning the warning missile into a password, a piece of violent language,

Mourtaja ushers her body, and the reader, into daily hell:

daily as in the normal and extreme; the continuity of the exceptional,
the exceptional continuity of war,
the chronic crises of Gaza.

Hell is where bodies burn. Daily hell is where bodies are constantly conditioned by fear.

An everyday emergency.

SES: "Is 53 seconds long enough to gather my soul?"
When you read that a seventeen-year-old girl writes this, what can you think?

She wanted to collect everything she loves and needs to keep in her life in 53 seconds. The time between the warning rocket and the attack. Attacking the house to destroy it completely.

She is aware of the fact that material things can be collected.

But what about soul, what about memories, what about the room where you read your first book, or wrote your first letter. Many, many things you can't take with you if you are suddenly forced to leave your house and you only have 53 seconds.

What time is this time which leaves you with no choices.

To die or to die.

Because when you lose your beloved things and memories you are also dying.

3. Writing Time

JT: Rana Mourtaja writes:

"Forgive me, but how do I go back to my life, loaded with the guilt of still being alive, of still breathing?"

Note that, while asking the question, I seem to have relegated the possibility of me dying in the next few days of this."⁶

While asking the question. Or rather, while *writing* the question the possibility of dying is relegated,

postponed. The writer writing her body out of wartime and into a different time, writing time.

To write is the opposite of dying.

The language of literature re-establishes the severed ties to continuity.

SES: When I write I feel like a normal person,
I still have this,

I am still writing.

"I'm still alive because death is the easiest way out of war, and life is the hardest way of all."⁷

(Rana Mourtaja)

4. Method

HH: Somaya, we have translated in wartime, and in times of non-war. I am not sure if one can call it peace. I am not sure what you would say. More peaceful days? In the summer of 2014, and during war, we translated again. This time not only your poems. You, Jenny, my friend Serin and I started to gather materials written by women—writers and journalists—in Gaza. Texts written during war. Texts in English or in Arabic. As a method in war.

I am not sure how to define our method, its causes and effects. To me it became a strategy to handle life, to master at least something, and trying to get the texts published as a means to let voices from Gaza be heard.

What is a method in war, or alongside war?

To collect testimonies? Witnesses?
 To collect fears and hopes?
 Trying to create some kind of normality?
 And everyday life in a timeless time?
 The relief in the evening when I heard your voice.
 The despair of knowing what you all went through, its causes and effects.
 The despair of not knowing, as in understanding, what you all went through.
 Knowing your voice became my hope.
 Not knowing what to do.
 To be able to do almost nothing.
 To eat your voice as a bread.

*

Live through this with me.

We tried to keep words fresh, not to swallow death.
 It was a work of translation.

*

We are
 Forgetful as leaves. In a common garden I never saw
 with my own eyes, smells I
 never smelled, children I never held. We call it the
 blue window of hope, one we first opened
 in Ramallah in 2011. Our common threshold.

4. Now Is a Narrow Room

SES: "How normal these texts are: an everyday life, it is not strange for us but *it will be strange* for the others who read."⁸

JT: The temporality of the diary: notations, speed, immediacy.

The temporality of the prose poem; a dense, super-saturated time:

All this writing,
 with a very short life expectancy.

What are these texts during the war? What are they after?

How do I, my unmarked body, become their imagined reader, and if I do, how do they address me?

As an other / it will be strange for me / when I read.

Do these texts address bodies outside of war?

Does a writer during war address bodies after war?

SES: For me I was writing just to feel I am still alive.

This war does not kill me, it does not kill the hope inside me.

Writing for the writer herself and then for the others.

5. The List / Being a Mother

JT: Mona Abu Sharkh writes:

SES: "Being a mother in Gaza means spending more time imagining the death of your children than planning for their future. Being a mother in Gaza means that you might see your son die in your arms without having the right to mourn. Being a mother in Gaza means you have to sow your son's wounds together with a needle to stop his bleeding and give him some more time. Being a mother in Gaza means finding your daughter's hand on top of a cupboard after her funeral. Being a mother in Gaza means hearing your child cry out for help under a collapsed building and not being able to save him because you are stuck a few metres away, under the same rubble. Being a mother in Gaza means your house collapses as you are unconscious and

when you wake you find your children's limbs around you. Being a mother in Gaza means a deadly bullet hits you while you breastfeed your child, you die and the milk pours from your chest, rich and life-giving. Being a mother in Gaza means you and your children are safe targets for death."⁹

JT: Life expectancy: 53 seconds, 51 days
This is biopolitics.

53 seconds
51 days

6. Stolen Time

SES: No one will think that time can be stolen, but it is in Gaza; the moment that you want to spend with your friend, the hours of travelling, the laughter after a joke. It is stolen from you because you simply didn't get the permit to travel from Gaza. This happened to me last year when I was invited to a conference in Sweden. I prepared everything. My friends Hanna and Jenny also prepared to spend beautiful time with me, and Hanna even booked a restaurant to celebrate my birthday in. We had lots of dreams to meet, talk, work on our translation and many other things. But all this was stolen from us by the Israeli refusal to let me go. We were all shocked. And this is what I mean by stolen time.

This is not the only time that is stolen: many times all our lifetime is stolen. When a sudden rocket destroys a house and kills all the people who live in it, this family is no longer alive, its future has ended and all this for no reason.

The time we wait as Palestinians living in Gaza is also stolen time. When we wait for electricity to come on after long hours of darkness, when we wait and wait for a permit to leave Gaza in order to go to a hospital in the West Bank, and if you are lucky you will get this permit before you die from your bad illness.

Our childhood is also stolen, because the children of Gaza have no right to play freely, they have to perform many adult duties and they will always see playing time as luxury.

7. The Poem / The Address

HH: "Eight O'Clock"
a poem by Hind Juda

"It's seven o'clock on a Friday morning /
Will the war continue? / Will we keep on
Looking for the children's smiles / after
every missile / trying to find out who is
Missing and who was not heedful
enough / Who got replaced by a
surprised gaze
Tearing the heart apart

Indifferent time / I wait for you to walk
like an uncommon loving woman does
in an
Uncommon country / when she tries to
find out if the missiles have ravished her
beloved
He who said he would be there at eight /
Time doesn't move anymore

At eight o'clock / I am silent / my senses
turns to a distant void / my
Ears get ready to descry the grenades /

8. Quote from one of many Skype conversations between HH, SES and JT.

9. Abu Shark, Mona. "Being a Mother in Gaza".

Are they coming here? / Are they going away?
My throat will eventually dry while I wait for the
clock to become eight!

Next hour / who will stay in the remote port of
Gaza / to point out the city's sleepiness
Gaza yawns, she doesn't reach out the wounded
hand / to cover her mouth and to live
Yet an ordinary morning / Doesn't get ready for
prayer, and patiently purify herself
Before it."

There is a certain time, one may call it marked
It differs from unmarked quotidian time, since its
seconds and hours
Simultaneously weigh too little and too much
A marked time, presenting life as a fragile urn in the
sand,
Presenting voices as screams, or voices as mute
witnesses,
Seconds and hours are torn apart, ravished,
Abducted time and pointless pointers, a sore in the
clock face
Where time runs out

There is a certain time, one may call it: of uneasiness
When all you can do is to check your mailbox, the
news, updates
On Facebook, and work with translations as means
to
Be, become, sustain and connect
Cyborgs of hope and despair; are you online
tonight? Are you OK?
The pointers swarms in a face, sharp pointers, pierce
Waiting for the wound to fester

A clockwork of drones

A generator when time does not move

Radical closure, surpassing disaster:
How long is that night, how hard is that darkness?

8. When You Become the News¹⁰

JT: Mona Abu Shark writes: "The scene from the
outside is the same scene we watch every day on
the television screen, with only small differences
in the details, for example that what comes out of
the ambulance is only human body parts, or a child
with a hole in its stomach or head. Did you get used
to this scene, or does it bore you, do you switch
channels to find the series *The Seven Command-
ments?*"¹¹

Rana Mourtaja writes: "Will we remain just figures,
added or subtracted, after the war ends? Will jour-
nalists, bloggers, social media users ever understand
that those who died weren't merely numbers and
names, but were stories that were being told and
that continue to be told? The same goes for those
who lost their limbs, and those critically injured
who wait to join the numbers of deaths in the next
few days or months. Will people ever understand
that a demolished home isn't just four walls? When
will I stop hearing 'Heaven sent, and heaven stole',
or 'Better to lose money than lives'? Those homes
carried the sweat of fathers and the sacrifices of
mothers, the laughter of children and the rebellion
of teenagers, the sleepless nights of adults and
the dementia of the elderly, the family dinners on
Fridays and the whispers of prayers on Sundays."

SES: "Wars are not similar to each other. Each war
has its
whine, its pain, its black memory that digs into us."

"No one can get used to this way of living, each day
a new
day with its own set of rules, surrounded by the
souls of martyrs
rising to heaven."

"Today, tomorrow, the following day.
The coming days, the same fear in all the forms you
know
and yet not know."¹²

This night

An ordinary day / the sea

9. An Ordinary Day / The Sorrow

JT: Several texts address the lack of a language to describe the war.
A lack connected to time.
The now overshadows the past and the future. There is no experience, only sensation.

The question becomes important.

HH: The news images replacing language.
The pace of images replacing the slowness of poetry.

SES: The speed of the news. The speech of the news.

It takes such a long time to live, to mourn.
51 days and nights. 1,224 hours. Approximately.

JT: Is that the length of summer.
Is that the length of surpassing disaster.¹³

HH: No.
Is there time in disaster? Is there withdrawal of time?

SES: No. There is time. No. There is no time.

JT: To translate the number of hours.

HH: To translate the number of bodies.

SES: To translate the bodies into names.

JT: To translate the bodies into words.

HH: To translate the names into stories.

SES: Too many stories, too little time.
It would take hours and hours and summers and summers.

HH: How long does war take?

JT: "Gaza longs for life /
wants to caress her shattered houses /
wants to kiss her martyrs one last eternal time"¹⁴

SES: Gaza longs for time.
Time to mother, time to mourn;
because mourning is to be in the living body,
mourning is to have time
to connect the living body to its loss.

10. "When you become the news" is the title of a poem by Somaya El-Sousi, translated by El-Sousi, Tunedal and Hallgren and published in the Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* on 14 July 2014.

11. Mourtaja, Rana. "A home isn't just four walls".

12. El-Sousi, Somaya. "It does not end".

13. "Surpassing disaster" as in Jalal Toufic's notion of "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster". Toufic, Jalal. *The withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster*. Beirut: Forthcoming Books. 2009.

14. Juda, Hind. "Gaza longs for life".