

Nisma Alaklouk
Her, Him, and Gaza

Translated by Julia Schwartz

Translator's Reflection

Gaza is a cause of nostalgia, a source of trauma, and a place to which the narrators have no plans to return in Nisma Alaklouk's "Hiyya, huwwa, wa-Ghazzah" (Her, him, and Gaza). The story's two narrators reveal disparate relationships with their shared birthplace over the course of the narrative, as they intersperse reflections on their past relationship with each other with vignettes of life in their respective adopted cities of Brussels and Antwerp. For both the unnamed male narrator and Baysan, the female narrator named after her grandfather's village in Palestine, the past and present take turns occupying the foreground of their imaginations. Baysan describes her balcony in Gaza in vivid detail: the green tea she would drink there, the way the air felt in the summer, and the precise amount of light in the streets. Memories of Gaza are inextricable from Baysan's life in Brussels in the form of both nostalgia and trauma. The lackluster view from her house in Brussels pales in comparison to the comfort and pleasure of her old balcony; fireworks on New Year's Eve induce vestiges of the terror brought on by explosions in Gaza. For the male narrator, Gaza interposes itself on a tram ride in the form of a sleeping child who strikes him as unmistakably Gazan; his reaction to this boy is the entry point to describing his longing for the scent of Gaza's air and soil.

The male narrator's second vignette also takes place in transit, on the Brussels metro, where he unexpectedly finds Baysan. The setting of his narrative on public transportation contrasts with Baysan's narration of her portion of the story from her house in Brussels. While Baysan has just moved from a studio apartment to a larger apartment and is contemplating what sort of couch to buy, the male narrator describes his house in Antwerp primarily as the site of his intrusive memories of Baysan, the place where he imagines her looking out at him from his mirror, closet, and box of books. His use of a box for book storage evokes a living space in flux, one whose inhabitant has not entirely settled in. Baysan, meanwhile, cites her expanding library as a reason for needing more space; she is determined to cultivate a home in Brussels that accommodates her belongings and needs.

Baysan is equally resolute in her efforts to extricate herself emotionally from the male narrator. She describes herself as standing halfway along a tightrope in this process, paused in a linear trajectory. The male narrator, in contrast, meanders. His narrative begins on a tram ride with no set destination, and the end point of the metro trip in his second vignette is determined by the past's imprint on him: he is traveling to an event for an author whose work Baysan introduced him to.

The male narrator's motion is stalled in the final image of the story, when the crush of passengers boarding a metro car prevents him from getting on before the doors close in his face. He is separated from Baysan, who is on the train, by a partition that is thin but nonnegotiable. For this separation he blames "the jealous metro," a machine whose scheduled route does not yield to his nostalgia. His nemesis is the brutal imposition of spatial and temporal distance.

Her, Him, and Gaza

Half a Woman

How often I savored a hot cup of tea with fresh green mint, spread out in front of the TV or on the balcony of my room on the floor there in Gaza. How often I would fling a handful of sorrows off that balcony. The sorrows would fall on their head sometimes; other times they would stick out their tongue, gloating: “You’re not as clever as the others who have tried to kill me—it won’t be easy for you.”

These sorrows have a real mouth on them.

Here in Brussels, the houses all look alike on the outside and are all about the same height, usually no more than three stories.

I have been half a woman lately, standing halfway along a tight-rope. I can’t move forward in my new life or go back to him. He is waiting behind the curtain, dressed in pride and refusal. However much he exasperated me, I still did what would make him happy without even thinking about it.

When I managed, once, to crack open the sorrows’ head, I stood in my place, pleased with my victory. I didn’t want to go to sleep, afraid my taunting sorrows would wake up from my attempts to kill them.

How hard I tried to forget you, and couldn’t. I tried to extricate myself from you many times, when I had gotten tired of longing. I started to realize then that the colors have gray and purple in their arsenal—they are not limited to black and white.

I am still myself. I love romantic TV shows. I long for my warm bed in the winter and in the summer. I am still stubborn and maybe “abrasive” by some people’s standards. But I love my newfound discretion.

My old habits are decked out in deceptive new clothing. They are still lurking somewhere inside of me, waiting for their chance to come out in public.

Life is not calculations with a ruler and pen. Life would be you wearing me underneath a cloak of happiness and me fitting there comfortably, without irritations.

Nostalgia extends his hand straight toward my heart so that I breathe in his scent. I am coated in a stinging longing, on which a bath has no effect. I sense him around me everywhere; I pick up his scent and feel his touch on me all over again. I see him saunter ahead of me, then lose everything that pointed me toward him in an instant. This longing that revels in my arteries—I don't know anything like it. I have forgotten, with it, how to write a beautiful text.

My desires contradict each other. My life has become easy and difficult and has started to blend together.

Life is the way it is; it doesn't pay attention to who keeps up with it and who stands still, waiting.

This time, I won't go back. I have grown and my feelings have matured, and they are no longer satisfied with a handsome boy who struts and swaggers, or a handsome man who takes pride in his masculinity. Memories still get the upper hand and push me over where I stand, like a nail in the earth, very wary. I have finally learned how to resist my longing. If I fell in love with him again, I would fall on my head, not on my feet. Forgetting would become impossible. Love would take up residence in my blood, I would become addicted to its presence there, and I would need a long period of recovery to rid myself of this addiction.

So I won't go back to him again.

Father with a Suspended Sentence

A man who looks like me, who was born in Gaza and didn't know any other city for a long time. For thirty years, he saw nothing but its north and south. He didn't know any city besides it. And now here he is, blending into another country.

Perhaps I am betraying Gaza through my presence outside it, in that I am free here while they suffer there. They suffocate under siege; it embarrasses me to enjoy my electricity day and night while they aspire to a few hours of lighting. This doesn't stop me from enjoying my recently recovered freedom. But my happiness is incomplete and my joy is temporary, and this freedom doesn't fulfill me anymore.

Here I was, boarding the tram in the streets of Antwerp. Bore-

dom comes over me sometimes, so I kill it by exploring places I haven't seen yet. I ride the tram with no particular destination in mind, inviting it to lead me on an expedition to a place I haven't visited before. I let it do as it likes, and I shift my sights between the inside and the outside.

He was just dozing, on the seat reserved for children or the elderly. He looked very peaceful in his sleep, which made me wish I could lean his sleeping face on my shoulder. His neck was twisted so that a twinge of pain showed clearly on his face, while the depth of his sleep kept him from opening his eyes. I would have done it, placed his head on my shoulder, but I was afraid he would wake up and be scared to find a strange man getting close to him while he was unconscious—even if it was only to prop his head up so that he could sleep more comfortably.

I felt a need to belong to someone or to let someone belong to me.

Here he was opening his eyes, heavily, when the tram stopped to let on a girl with bronze skin and pretty eyes. Her cheekbones were on the high side, which added to the beauty of her features. She was wearing a blazer with long pants, without a trace of makeup on her face. She didn't need it, with her naturally radiant complexion. She seemed absorbed in serious thought. None of the riders paid attention to her beauty. The eyes of the women and the men turned instead to the girl who got on the tram wearing a short skirt, above her knees, and a shirt with thin straps that showed off the smoothness of her shoulders and the roundness of her chest. Her eyes weren't honey-colored or dark and neither was her hair; still, she piqued everyone's interest. But she didn't pique mine, because she didn't look like my city. She didn't look like my love. I was enthralled by this small, beautiful creature closing his eyes and falling back to sleep, because he reminded me of Gaza.

I heard two girls whispering about a boy who was standing by the back door, stealing glances at each of them in turn without showing any preference for one or the other. Or maybe he hadn't made up his mind yet about the girls' crush and their competition over him. I felt that I resembled him in his hesitation. My little one was still sleeping easily in his seat, paying no attention to either of the whis-

pering girls or to the beautiful brown-haired girl who was kissing her boyfriend, their kiss untroubled by the commotion of the tram. They were weaving their worlds together, showing off their love, and I wondered, “Will their love last, or will they grow apart?”

My story with Gaza is a lot like their story. As much love as I shared with her, publicly and to this day, Gaza is still under punishment while I am free here. The name “Gaza” would suit a beautiful girl punished for the lust her God-given loveliness inspires. Accusations are thrown at her, and looks full of doubt and suspicion. And if her accusers realized their mistake, they might admit, “Some assumptions are sinful.” I didn’t realize until this moment how forgiving they had been with me and how harsh with her.

Almost every corner of the world was represented in the nationalities here. I could identify most of the languages spoken on the tram just by hearing them, even though I didn’t understand the content of the conversations. Here, I have learned how to tell languages apart without understanding them—a skill that Brussels taught me, and later Antwerp.

This beautiful creature was shifting in his seat, and I could almost detect the fragrance of Gaza in his scent. An unfamiliar shiver of rapture came over me, drawing me into its consuming embrace. As for Baysan—she was a different story. I used to love listening to her speak. I was drawn to her Ghazzawi willfulness, one of the causes of death for our story.

When the tram stopped, two girls quietly speaking French got in. Antwerp is Flemish-speaking but prefers English for dealing with its visitors. One of the girls was blonde, and the other had dark hair. They were beautiful and mismatched. Their whispered conversation was interrupted by the ringing of a cell phone, which the dark-haired girl answered in her Moroccan dialect, “Right?! I’m not that ‘open’ for him to ask me. He should ask the Belgian girl—she might be down, if she’s okay with having an Arab boyfriend.” The word *open* was in English.

I didn’t mean to laugh. I was like a crazy person, wanting to go up to her and ask her out in an effort to cheer her up. I wouldn’t ask her for anything in return and wouldn’t ask her to be “open” either; I was no longer tempted by young girls who fall in love easily. She

would mature beyond her twenty years and would learn how silly she had been to cry over ruins whose landmarks would later disappear. And now here was my little one, opening his eyes; I wished I could get closer to him, enfold him in my arms, and stamp his face with a kiss. Why did he, specifically, bring on this emotional malaise in me? And why did I feel like he was related to me? Here he was, spraying the sea's mist in my face so that I could almost taste its salt in my mouth. Our eyes met for a few moments, but he didn't focus on me; I almost lost my mind. He had simply gone back to sleep. It was as if he were wearing Gaza, as if he were anointed with the fragrance of her harbor and perfumed with her earth. Why was he acting like he didn't know me? Was Gaza angry that I had reclaimed some of my freedom outside of her walls? This anger reminded me of Baysan's anger, which I didn't understand, whenever she decided to break up with me without even scolding me or giving our story the slightest chance. She would make this decision by herself, in her reckless stubbornness. I'm usually preoccupied when I get on the tram and don't look at any of the other passengers. I had decided today to observe what I had ignored before, and so I found Gaza here. And I started to notice things that I had gotten used to seeing, that had lost their foreignness and become part of my daily life.

Here was my little one, who looked like he might be around four, still in his slumber. Those same four years had passed without my seeing Baysan a single time. The motion of the engine rocked him. I was still unsettled by his innocence, which drew me toward him as if he were my own flesh and blood, as if some woman I had slept with in absentia had given birth to him and hidden him from me.

He's my child! He has the features of Gaza and the scent of Gaza and the pride of Palestine. He could practically be my child, whom Baysan kept from me with her distance. Why, woman, why did you hide my child from me?

I looked over at his mother, who I guessed was Hispanic based on her facial features, her bronze skin, and her prominent curves. She was pretty and had a nice figure. I tried to remember if she had ever slept in my bed. I racked my brain to find her there—this child had something of me in him!—but my memory betrayed me. I started to wonder: Had there ever been a Hispanic woman in my life?

This would have been our son if we hadn't split up, but splitting up was our fate. We tried but lost our love anyway. She ran away without leaving a single thread that could lead me back to her. She was hell-bent on separating, with her stupid hardheadedness.

The Hispanic woman was caught up in conversation with a woman in her sixties with beautiful pale blue eyes. The passage of years showed clearly on her face, but she had kept her beauty and the gleam in her eyes. She seemed very kind and was saying sweet things about my son, calling him a handsome boy. How could Gaza not be beautiful? It couldn't be any other way. It's a compound of divine beauty, the beauty of paradise mixed with the fire of Hell on Earth. That is the situation in Gaza.

The tram moved, and I was overwhelmed with the urge to take back the son who had been stolen from me for several years, during which time I had been deprived of my legal rights as his father. The other riders glanced covertly at the girl in her twenties with her hair flowing freely over her bare shoulders, while I peered furtively into my years of celibacy and tried to jam this child's mother into my life, as if I were inserting Gaza into my freedom.

I want her son to be my child, and I want him to be free.

The tram stopped again so that the "control" team could get on to check our tickets. Surprise campaigns that they undertake from time to time. It was only a matter of seconds until some young man tried to flee into the street, but luck was not on his side because the ticket-checkers flocked to arrest him, giving two other young men the opportunity to escape without anyone noticing. The poor guy started crying, hoping for compassion. Maybe he was living in Belgium illegally, and being arrested without papers would be catastrophic for him. Either prison or forced return to his country of origin. I lifted my head and my attention was momentarily captured by the scene in front of me. Then I looked down at the seat where Gaza had been sitting, in the form of a beautiful being. I couldn't find the boy; his mother had gotten off the tram without warning and kidnapped Gaza from me all over again. I still couldn't remember: When had his mother come into my bed? Maybe she had never come into it at all.

Fireworks

I sit on my green couch to welcome in 2015. I drink green tea alone, relaxed, in my element. The couch that's barely wide enough for two people. One of my plans for the New Year is to buy a bigger one in a feminine color. Maybe a pink or yellow couch, or maybe a bigger one with a neutral color this time to match my new living room, which has room for more visitors.

Two thousand fifteen will start with me in my new place. I feel entitled to steal a little happiness now, after living for a year and a half in a small studio where I was forced to host friends in the room where I slept and ate, which ceded more space day after day to my growing library. So don't be surprised by my delight in my new apartment, with its separate bedroom and living room and its 32-square-meter area. Having this kind of space is considered a feat in Brussels. As usual, I've gotten bogged down in details and forgotten why I started this story. I was talking about the New Year, which has come early, or maybe it's just that we used to forget to wait for it in the middle of the destruction plaguing us . . . but anyway.

I decided to welcome this year with extravagant laziness and turned down three invitations from friends to spend New Year's in their company. I felt an overpowering need for some calm and serenity. I won't lie to you, it was an eccentric choice, but I felt assured in it. I went to bed early in protest of the New Year's approach, which had always taken us by surprise and never brought a respite from our confusion and fear. This was my way of ignoring things. But this son of 60 bitches was determined.

At around 11:00 p.m., I woke up to the sound of fireworks going off. I tried to ignore them at first, but they got louder and forced me to get up.

I remembered standing in front of the window contemplating the far-off lights on one of the hot evenings in Gaza. Even though I was standing at the window on the tenth floor, I still wished for a breeze and invited it to tickle my cheek and my arms and neck. Its caress didn't stop the drop of sweat that was trickling down toward every part of my body. Despite the humidity, I enjoyed the nighttime calm and the beautiful view in front of me, where the houses were

lined up side by side, embracing because they were stuck together so tightly. They were dimly lit, despite the randomly dispersed streetlamps. Even with many of the streetlights broken, Gaza looked beautiful.

It wasn't out of the ordinary for Gaza to wear this dark outfit—sometimes as funeral garb for the multitude of martyrs, sometimes because there wasn't enough diesel to fuel the manual electricity generator. It was routine for the power to go off, and we had gotten used to it then, to the point of missing the blackouts when the electricity dared to stay on for a whole day. We missed the clamor and the polluted dust. In Gaza, we had gotten used to the blockade . . .

Mish kalaam! How can I say that?

The sky lit up suddenly with bright colors, mixed and radiating light with a rumble that made my heartbeats vibrate along with it. “They’re just fireworks.” They felt like a trick, the beautiful prelude to an air raid; that was what I thought the first time I saw fireworks in Gaza. I remember them going off in abundance to send off the second millennium. These are just ghosts that drift through my memory, nothing more.

I kept sneaking peeks at what was happening. I was waiting for the end of the trick, for some house to blow up before my eyes. The noises stopped and the lights went out and then some leftover smoke floated up without any explosion.

“So they set off fireworks in Gaza too.”

I pulled myself out of these memories and returned to my new reality: my street at the edge of the city, near the Brussels airport in Zaventem. The way people celebrate New Year's is wild here too. Usually these customs were limited to the city center, so I hadn't expected a small neighborhood to spend over half an hour ringing in the New Year with this much noise and carrying on.

I lifted my gaze to the sky. The plane disappeared. My Belgian neighbor in her fifties noticed my terror when a plane flew close by above us and asked me,

“What is it?”

“These planes circling above me bring back difficult memories.”

“We've gotten used to the sound of planes circling here.”

“When I hear them, my senses stop working. I’m always waiting for them to be followed by an explosion somewhere.”

“Don’t worry, these are safe planes.”

“I know, but it’s not easy to get rid of my fear. You can’t blame me for that; I didn’t have safe planes in my country to get used to.”

“I suppose you always lose something in war . . .”

She doesn’t know war, of course. She patted my shoulder, smiling, and then ambled into her house next door to mine. It’s not that easy to shake off a habit of fear that has kept us company for many years.

The New Year had conspired with the neighborhood kids to ruin my peace tonight. I decided to go to them. I went down to the street in my pajamas, which I hadn’t changed. I didn’t wear a jacket to shield me from the biting cold outside. Maybe the memories hadn’t left me so easily; every time fireworks went off near me, I shuddered as if they had activated something inside of me. I knew that these fireworks were just recreational, but in Gaza we don’t have this luxury. These noises are linked in our memories to explosions and blood and martyrs. It’s not easy to free ourselves from our memories, even though this is my eighth year in Belgium. I was born in Gaza while the war was going on, and lived years of my life there while the war was still going on, and will most likely die here as an immigrant without the war in Palestine having ended. I lived in Gaza as an immigrant and will die as an immigrant in Belgium. How many times I heard my grandfather’s anecdotes and stories about his village, Baysan, when I was little. I was his favorite, even though there was hardly a single household in my extended family that didn’t have a child named Baysan in it, at least in the first generation. I was named Baysan after the village, in honor of my grandfather’s wish. Until his last breath, he still dreamed of going back. Sometimes I hate my name, which I love, because it reminds me that I’ve been displaced in my own country. My father has never been able to visit our village, but he loves it and dreams of returning to it. This love of his was transmitted to me. But life in Gaza is very hard, and immigrating to Belgium was the only solution.

The celebrations continued from midnight until dawn. My plans

to go to sleep early so that I could wake up early, refreshed and ready for my appointment, had failed, and I had failed at not thinking too much this year. But it's not easy to shake off our habits. I wasn't ready to meet the New Year in my apartment, so it met me in the street.

Still, my plans for 2015 hadn't changed: buying a new couch and a new bed. Paying more attention to some friends I had neglected without meaning to and deleting some numbers I had no use for from my phone. And holding on to the wishes of last year.

Within two hours, movement and traffic would spread through the area; I had to decide if I was going to sleep a little or be two hours early for my appointment. I put on my black-and-white checkered dress. I don't know how I pulled it out of the closet after swearing never to wear it again; it was his gift to me for my 26th birthday. Why, on this particular day, did I feel ready for its softness to touch my body, when before it had felt like a needle pricking my skin? This dress prodded at my memory.

The Jealous Metro

I went into the metro station heading for the center of Brussels. I still had plenty of time before the evening, when I would attend an event for the Turkish writer Elif Shafak at the Bozar Centre for Fine Arts. I was coming from Antwerp just for this. A fear of nothing in particular was trying to get the better of me. A silence had come over the station, despite it being crowded with people. They walked quickly, not paying attention to their steps. I kept up with their speed even though there was no pressing task waiting for me at this moment. I got onto a metro car quickly, before the doors could shut in my face, and stood next to the door, barely seeing who was standing next to me because the car was so packed. The metro stopped at Place Sainte-Catherine, and I decided to get off and take a break from this stifling atmosphere. When the doors opened, I saw her approaching the metro car. I was sure. Her posture, which I had once loved. Her quick footsteps. And even the slight absent-minded movement of her head despite the business-like atmosphere around her. The black checkered dress that I loved on her—how often I told her that!

She got on through a different door, in a car parallel to mine. I was separated from her by a small partition. If I got off the metro I might lose track of her completely, so I got closer to the door separating our two cars once the train started moving on its way to the next stop, De Brouckère. She was hard to find in the throngs of people, but I finally spotted her, standing as if she were waiting for me. I don't know how she turned toward me and noticed me. Our eyes met. I was walking toward a question inside me that was becoming more insistent: Why had our separation stretched on so long? Why had I lost her the last time?

How many times we argued and then came back together to savor the sweetness of love, the way it had been in the beginning. How many times I started fights between us so that we could come back from them loving and longing for each other more. Right after our last fight, I lost all contact with her. Which one of us turned their back on our great love to run after delusions and mirages, her or me?

A void chases me that no woman could fill after you. My shadow mocks me by reminding me of the girls besides you who have knocked on the door of my life, some of whom did more than that. You were disappearing from me, little by little.

I forgot her, or at least that's what I thought.

You were far away from me, and I didn't bring you back into my love. I left you and let you master the game of separation while I let the curse of distance overtake us. For a while now, you've been peering out from my dreams. You look out of my mirror when I'm shaving my beard; out from my closet, where you pick out my clothes for me; and from the box of books, you remind me of the novels we argued about. The reason I've come here today is your love for this writer, whose books you were always pushing me to read. I hadn't even understood this covert dimension of my interest in the event until I saw you in front of me now, upright with pride, as usual.

Your sleepy voice still tickles my memories, reading to me from Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*: "The lover who is nowhere to be found, you start to see everywhere. You see him in the drop of water that falls into the ocean, in the high tide that follows the waxing of the moon, or in the morning wind that spreads its fresh

smell; you see him in the geomancy symbols in the sand, in the tiny particles of rock glittering under the sun, in the smile of a newborn baby, or in your throbbing vein.”

I was living with you in every woman I knew after you; I was kissing them but was really kissing you. I missed you while they were in my arms. I would repeat your name when my desire cooled off, until I got caught repeating it once in a voice I thought only my body could hear. Your name left my lips, and the blonde woman sleeping next to me heard it. The spark of love in her eyes went out, but she didn't comment on it or ask me about you. The strange thing is that it was a relief for your name to leave my mouth, as if I had desperately needed to call out for you. To taste your name between my lips. I was hungry for you; I wished she would slap me or walk out. I felt a desire to talk about you to her. To tell her about us, about our fights and our stories and the kiss I stole from you by force, which put out fires inside of me that no woman who has come into my bed since has put out.

Could you have tasted that different from them?

Even my mirror reflected your face this morning, when I was surveying my features and saw yours. You were returning to occupy my imagination. And here you were now, returning to occupy my life—my imagination, infected with you for a long time, wasn't enough for you. I lifted my phone to ask for your number before I lost you again. You smiled in that way of yours that I know. You tried to form the numbers' shapes with your fingers, and despite the difficulty of this motion, you managed to get a few numbers across, and then the train stopped. I got off, with difficulty, to change cars and join you; I hadn't caught your full number, to call you and cut through the distance that sprawled out between us. I was almost to the door, standing in front of you without you noticing me, waiting my turn to get on.

You were standing in the car, leaning on the occupied seat next to you and looking for me in the car ahead with a longing that made me shiver. I wasn't used to seeing your face open with your emotions clearly on display, you who were so good at hiding them. When you left me and distanced yourself, you didn't leave a single thread

behind to lead me to you. Had our chance meeting today softened your resolve?

How beautiful your unguarded face was!

How had my anger at you disappeared so completely? When had I forgiven you?

The metro betrayed me, issuing its warning that the doors were closing. The door snapped shut in my face and in the face of our return. I hadn't gotten your phone number; you could be waiting there for my return, not knowing how close I was, that I was standing next to you with only the metro door separating us. The metro started to move and got farther away, having snatched you away from me. It hadn't let me pierce through your weakness; maybe this was our beginning all over again.

I didn't run away in a rage like you might have thought. I had forgiven your long absence. It was the metro's fault, the jealous devil.