

in ramallah, running



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Here follow five of the seven highly condensed ‘running’ texts which chart my habitual explorations of Ramallah’s interiors – within city limits. In the book itself, they interleave much longer essays at the archipelago of hills and linking *wadis* or valleys of Ramallah District down to the plains in the west and Jordan valley in the east. The latter texts run up to the Occupation’s limits, along those limits, venturing off-limits as well as beyond limits to compose a uniquely intimate portrait of the place – viewed by an outsider.

Running connotes many things: my hope was to find ways to experience and record something of the interior life – times and places – of everyday Ramallah, beyond the interdictions and overt presence of military Occupation. That intention was extended to the place beyond or without the city in an attempt to relay something of the Palestine that was and will be again. In this sense and despite the imprisoning grip of a peculiarly brutal Occupation that is now visually familiar, even over-familiar, these texts convey something of the rhythms and small details of a ‘liberated’ Palestine.

In writing about Ramallah, the pseudo ‘capital’ of ‘Camp Palestine’, in the second decade of the twenty-first century I am also recording its exception: the ways in which it condenses the world that we have generated, how it works and what it has become. I don’t expect it to speak well of us when read back from the future.

In the book itself, the texts are accompanied by artworks made by Jananne al-Ani, Francis Alys, Emily Jacir, Paul Noble, Khalil Rabah, etc., in response to my writing. The intention was to generate a series of relations with other voices and ideas which would test my own writing and keep the work of the book ethically open.

Images by Guy Mannes-Abbott, 2010
 Top: Ain Arik to the plains of Palestine
 Middle: Surda to Ain Qiniya wadi with qasr, Roman spring, settler road (463) and Palestine development on Surda ridge
 Bottom: Bili’in and I Within Limits and tear gas cannisters

am running in Ramallah.

unning through, around and on Ramallah; hill of
od, god of hills. Running almost 1,000 metres above
Mediterranean Sea level, almost 1,000 feet further
bove Dead Sea level. Running on the seven hills
hat Ramallah is said, with radical understatement,
o inhabit. Everything in Ramallah is a hill or hills
n apparent infinity; up and down and up, sharply,
everely, steeply, gently, deceptively, constantly.
verything between hills is becoming Ramallah,
reading, forging, declaiming the old and new, for
ow, forever?

unning connotes residence; a home being run from
r to, one nearby. I'm making Ramallah homely
y running here, leaving some of myself out there,
rawing into myself whatever is here. Shortening
nd lengthening my time. Running is a proof of my
xistence, my proof that, as the poet wrote, "I exist."
he essence of running involves "exerting yourself
o the fullest within your individual limits" which is
lso a "metaphor for life" — according to the novelist.
t doesn't sound like much, until you do it.

unning in Ramallah, I encounter things that are
onflicting even contradictory but little I could describe
s paradoxical. Despite its sweetly sophisticated humours
his is not a place that can afford paradox.

m running in Ramallah and it is painful.

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m running in Ramallah, but not for long.
unning extends my residency; it works slowly by taking
ne to places I would not otherwise go, repeatedly. It
orks fast by taking me to many places as quickly as
oogle, but concretely. I've been there, been back and
an go again in no time. Running discourages thinking
r conclusion, concentrates on the present. The present
s what is, how things are for now. I'm running in the
resent and peculiarly alive to the details of what is
round me.

unning down I pass teams of builders arriving on site.
run out on the main road into yellow taxi-busses or
rvees, UN-badged 4x4s, mothers driving children to
chool and again on our return loops. Running through
at'n al Hawa, the road is up; work not underway until
return, an object of mirth, recognition and warm
ncouragement. Westerly panoramas once began here
ut the view is now of trench work and substrata, the
praying of sticky tarmac one day, a smooth new surface
nother. At the end is Zamn, beacon of up town
amallah, which opens at downtown hours but their
offee is weak, expensive.

On deluxe al Tireh Street I settle into my rhythm and
watch police guards changing shifts along the newly
ransioned ridge which leads to the city's north-west
xtremity. I pass them standing armed in groups of four
t junctions along the way, offer greetings, share smiles.
assing me they do the same. When I reach the city's

new panoramas at the end of the ridge today, four
soldiers stand guard with muscles, big guns and a
matching jeep. We amuse each other before I step aside
to look out myself, begin the run back in to town.
Overtaking me on al Tireh's incline, each waves an
individual greeting to the cliché I embody, the joke
that I get, the ambiguity of the fact that it is me
that is running.

When I am not running I'm thinking, details stack
up. The present acquires depth and dimension, things
become complex. They change; everything. I am one
of very few people in Ramallah who can prove their
existence merely by running in the hills. One of few
here who don't need to exert themselves to the utmost
just to prove that they exist.

I'm the only person I see who is running in Ramallah.

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In Ramallah, I'm running within bodily limits; the
muscular fruits of midnight runs along the river in
Central London. Here I run from the centre to its
limits, as far as I'm able. Within my limits means
running for twice as long if not twice as far as in
London. Ramallah is small and so am I.

I'm running within the limits of what I understand of
what I can see in Ramallah. I pass Edward Sa'id Street
which is easy, though repeatedly Mahmoud regrets its
modest scale. Down past al Raja'a (Hope) Street which
is less easy but surely always involves the same deal?
In any case I keep running far beyond Hope Street
and back again. "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional",
the novelist points out, "whether or not you can stand
anymore is up to the runner (her)self."

Running takes me places I would not otherwise go;
past the end of Rachel Corrie Street, for example. It
takes me along the ridge past the beginnings of Dalal
Mughrabi, Nile and Nativity Streets and out to George
Habash Square. On my return I concentrate on the
writers who seem even more arbitrarily heralded in this
way; streets named after Lorca and Louis Aragon, for
example. I circle back to Edward Sa'id Street, just as
I did to him and his work.

In Ramallah, nobody recognises or cares about al
Jihad Street or the tarmac of George Habash Square.
The game of naming is the oldest colonial trick, paid
for this time by USAID. Yet seeing the names going
up intrigues me in ways that seeing traditional stone
houses or refugee apartments take on a number does
not. Stories of love or hate attach to names in ways that
they don't to the number 21 or 118.1 Everyone here
blames Occupation and official Palestinian weakness
for the cancelled memorialising of Dalal Mughrabi
Square. The same, apparently, happened with George
Habash Square. Perhaps I've "seen the name on a map".

I stop running at Lorca Street halfway up a long hill
where the road bends beyond sight of friendly guards
outside the Chinese Embassy. I can't help laughing

out loud when I realise what I've done again. While Dalal Mughrabi was too controversial for a square to be named after her, the signpost I run past seems overlooked or unseen. As I approach Rachel Corrie Street I think of older 'sisters' met here who are finding ways to turn protest into substantive commitment. Near the bottom of the road named for her a big Caterpillar digger is at work, making for complications. It is me that is running.

Walking or climbing the final steep stretch home, habit etching residence in these hills, I understand better an elliptical phrase of the novelist's. Long term projects, he wrote, involve both concentrated focus and endurance. They involve "continuing to breathe while holding your breath". Impossible seeming, it might be a potent enough paradox for how Ramallah is – at least for now.

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In Ramallah, I'm running beyond my own bounds. Running with a hard earned, slow building invincibility which is nothing but the joy of the run itself. The way my body feels; warmed throughout, muscles singing, stone in raining sweat. The capability lent me; the homeliness of that feeling, a muscular mastery of place. I just kept going, pushing beyond my limits to new heights of endurance and strength. A great feeling, can it last?

I've been puzzling past trees in the middle of narrow pathways. Fruit trees and conifers fill pavements around al Jihad Street. Along Bat'n al Hawa, holes are shuttered in new concrete for the coming trees. Mature ones fill the pavement along al Nuzha Street, named to signal a nice place for a walk. It leads downtown where traffic is lively, chaotic, jammed up but rarely aggressive. There's a rhythm to it; drivers allow for pedestrians – even runners – who steal along or across the tarmac. Space is Occupied but the use made of it is extravagant, improvised, negotiable. Underneath modernity's pavement is a place that is peculiarly Palestinian.

In Ramallah I'm eating and drinking in comradely circles. Coffee pots are ambushed, little cups, glasses relayed. Circles form around breakfast at 11; tahini tricks, zaatar omelettes, baby cucumbers and breads draw arms in and out under the vines, the poly-tunnel or olive trees below Silwad. For lunch at four in enervating Jericho, we surround a big hot pot of stuffed vine leaves, chicken and tomato sauce as it's turned onto a platter in the back-office. Hands dive, peck and revel. In al Jalazon refugee camp a beautifully prepared dinner on big round platters of things finely stuffed and sumac'd is eagerly consumed by similar means.

Running in Ramallah, I'm thinking of the resistance offered by fire. The Occupation has stolen the earth and air of Palestine. Even the water has been stolen and siphoned back for two hours a day into big black plastic butts crowding every roof top in town. When he showed me a photograph of himself at the Mediterranean coast, during an illicit visit to his ancestral home, "Abu Muhammad's" face wore the sea's open horizon again. Fire is something else. Venerated for millennia in India,

sages also liken the immanence of Brahman – their unrepresentable divine spirit – to that of fire in wood.

In Ramallah I am running on fire.

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In Ramallah, running to the last, I reach my physical limits.

Running concentrates a sharp pain in my left calf muscle, strained in a distant wadi two days ago. Blissed-out, I'd looked up from the terrace to breathe in the contoured rhythms and tripped on a loose rock. I winced and walked on for miles with only a badly grazed boot. Running is something else but I confront growing pain with even strides and calm constancy. What did the novelist say about pain and suffering? It's a hard run along al Tireh but I keep going to the end – and there it is!

Running in Ramallah has bound me to the place and set me against notions of space. Place is worn, freighted, complex. Space is seductive, abstract, dust-free. I'm running in an actual place, which is how I knew that George Habash Square exists. Many believe the sign has been removed, disallowed, banned but here it is: no-one surrendered. It's not marked on any map I own, except where I've written it myself. I half ran out here and there it was standing up against the settlements in the Palestinian hills. Square George Habash it reads and since there's no G as such in Arabic its got two J sounds. It's me that is running.

In Ramallah, I'm limping past a street sign. "Dalal Mughrabi (1958-1978) 'Born as a refugee in Lebanon in a family that was made a refugee from Yaffa in 1948. She joined FATAH and participated in a guerilla operation (Martyr Kamal Odwan Operation) with 12 others in occupied Palestine where she was killed.' Hoping to ignite an uprising, she invested heavily. I only know enough about her to understand why she breached the limits, wonder what other ambitious 20 year old refugees think of her now.

In Ramallah, running doesn't dissolve the pain but heightens and hardens it. I struggle to limp most of the way back, past the guards and Lorca Street but at least I get to pay witness. At the end of the ridge this morning it was clear enough to see Yaffa beyond Bil'in and the vast white cities below. It's almost as distinct as the view from Deir Ghassanah in the north, on the hill where their shahids are honoured. Words matter, everywhere.

Walking in Nablus, I admired the spontaneous memorials which have turned into a bureaucratic process in Ramallah. That is; a rehearsal for nationhood. Funny how a sign at George Habash Square is meaningless until it no longer exists. Funny again, altogether, in the coming Palestine. It's me that was running...

Guy Mannes-Abbott's visit to Australia and his participation in 2014 Adelaide Festival Artists' Week, is hosted by the Contemporary Art Centre of SA, Adelaide.