Once upon a time in Palestine
There was an olive tree.
As far as people knew,
It had been growing
a thousand years and more.
The tree loved this land and loved its people, especially Handala - the boy who learned to swing on all its branches, who rested from the midday sun in its cool embracing shade and listened to its rustling leaves sharing all its secrets.
It told Handala of strangers who had come from distant shores to live their lives in Palestine but not to share the land.

They said their God had given them this land for them alone, that they had found it empty and were returning home, that they had made the desert bloom and grown the lemon trees, that everything belonged to them, despite the people living there and the olive trees they’d planted in the soil of Palestine.
The tree said no one really thought such lies would be believed, Or really that these strangers would cause his people pain. After all, they too had suffered many cruel and awful things because of other people in places far away.

He told Handala the story of what happened to his family. How his father and his father’s father were killed because they would not leave. How his mother and his mother’s mother had kissed the earth and wept.
How people fled in trembling fear
Taking only what they needed.
Never once imagining,
That years would pass,
That they’d grow old,
That still they would be waiting
to go back home
to use their keys
in doors no longer theirs.

The tree shivered.
Its leaves rustled.
And Handala heard it say:
“The moans of thousands echo still,
Haunting valleys
and the rolling hills,
Every stone is etched
with memories,
Every trodden path is sodden
with people’s blood and tears.
Handala listened broken-hearted. He said he would not rest until the tragedy was over - the Nakba, the Catastrophe - the stealing of his land, his people forced to live in camps, in places far away, waiting, waiting, always waiting for the day to come when they can go back home.

He said that he would watch and listen and record all that's being done, That he would never let the young forget after all the old ones die, That the struggle would continue with courage and with hope until Palestine is free.
The tree smiled. It curled its roots into the deep, dark soil and stretched its branches to the sky, it shook its leaves and in the breeze its words were firm and clear:

“Stand tall and strong, Our roots go deep. We’re joined as one throughout this land. Our people live, Our trees still grow, The seasons come and go, Our seeds are scattered far and wide, And where they land our roots take hold, Waiting for the day to come when we can say that Palestine is free.”
And so it was that Handala went on a journey fraught with danger and filled with endless sorrow.
The things he saw were cruel and bad and made him want to cry -
Families stripped of all they own,
Friends and neighbours separated,
Young men bound and put in jail,
Children chased and beaten.
Lines of people forced to wait at walls and razor wire,
While soldiers at the checkpoints refused to let them pass.
It didn’t matter what the reason, how old or sick the person, how hot or cold the weather was, or how distressed the mothers holding hungry, crying babies
There was no decency or kindness, The soldiers felt no shame.
And everywhere that people went,  
A Wall was being built,  
Making life for them a prison  
by shutting out the world.

And Handala could clearly see,  
There was no way of knowing  
how one could pass or when.

It could be not today  
or “yes” today,  
or maybe even now,  
or then again tomorrow,  
or maybe not tomorrow,  
or maybe even never.
Handala saw it all. He touched and felt the old gnarled hand, the faces stained with tears and wondered how much cruelty his people could endure. He knew he couldn’t fight the soldiers with their guns, but he remembered and believed the words the tree had told to him of roots and seeds and days to come when Palestine is free.
He breathed in the choking gases that soldiers fired at people,
He picked up stones and threw them at tanks and army jeeps and tried to stop the bulldozers from crushing family homes.
He went on hunger strikes in sympathy with prisoners refusing food.
He marched in silent protest against the great dividing Wall.
He helped rebuild demolished homes and counted all the wasted lives.
He saw a world that didn’t care despite all the talks of peace.
He saw his country vanishing and leaders doing nothing to stop the growing evil in all the corners of the land.
What would the tree say now thought Handala, after all this misery and death? Maybe the tree knew more than him, Perhaps its faith was stronger.

And so he went to tell the tree And saw his people grieving He knew at once the reason why: the tree he loved was gone, except for burnt remains of branches that once stretched to the sky.
Handala wept.  
He felt as if his heart would break as tears fell on the tangled roots, the limbs and severed trunk, and sunk into the still warm soil from burning trees the strangers lit.

Then from the earth below he heard the words he’d heard before:
“Stand tall and strong,
Our roots go deep,
We’re joined as one
throughout this land.

Our seed still grows,
Our lifeblood flows,
And we are Palestine.
No matter what
they do to us,
No matter what
they say,
We’re here to stay
and we’ll make sure,
our people
can return.”
Handala is waiting now, 
His people struggle on, 
as slowly an uncaring world 
wakes up to see the evil 
amongst the widening cracks, 
the rottenness 
implanted, 
decaying daily 
from within.

Soon Handala begins to see, 
The new shoots taking root, 
Silver leaves that gently rustle 
in the summer breeze, 
And branches groaning, 
heavy with the 
ripening olive fruit. 
He knows they’re signs 
of hope and change, 
That his people will live on, 
Determined to be treated 
with human dignity, 
And most of all to be 
as free as you and me.
And Handala remembers –
A living tree, a living land,
Giving birth and giving life,
A ground swell slowly rising
until Palestine is free.