

# THE WAR ON GAZA: In the Company of Stories and Images

by **Tania Tamari Nasir**

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*Note by Vladimir Tamari: this text was written by my elder sister Tania who is a well-known Palestinian singer and writer. Her husband Hanna Nasir was the longtime president of Birzeit University, and she accompanied him into exile after the Israelis expelled him from his homeland together with other community leaders. In her singing career Tania introduced Western operatic arias and new Arabic songs to local audiences who thrilled to her beautiful clear voice and musicality. She sang several song cycles and art songs set to the words of Palestinian poets like Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Mahmoud Darwish, Fadwa Touqan, al Sayyab and Kamal Nasir. The music was composed by Amin Nasser, Rima Nasir Tarazi, Patrick Lama and Agness Bashir. Tania has been active in promoting Palestinian arts and crafts and has co-authored two books Spring Is Here on Palestinian wild flowers and Palestinian Embroidery: Traditional "Fallahi" Cross-Stitch. Her translations of Palestinian poetry into English have appeared in several publications.*



*We Shall Return To Palestine* watercolor by Vladimir Tamari. June 1982

This painting was made in response to the devastating 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which like the Gaza war was characterized by random bombing and mass murder of hapless Palestinian civilians. The Arabic slogans read "Palestine is Our Country" and "We Shall Return"

It is the 27th of December 2008 and the dreaded war on Gaza has just begun. Horrified, we are glued to the T.V. watching; I have to admit that I have always felt something a bit immoral in the act, in sitting comfortably in one's room eavesdropping, peeping, an uninvited spectator on what is screened in front of one. How much more so now when I am exposed to the intimate, almost private scenes of life and death, to pain and suffering, spread out for all to see. How much more so, now, when your own flesh and blood are in the battle field? With oscillating emotions I watch; I

cannot help it. It is the least I can do, regardless of the acute feeling of almost betrayal that permeates my being. I am here, in the West Bank, they are there, in Gaza. We should be together. We are Palestinians. We share the same fate. The unfairness is shattering, the reality cruel. In a state akin to a survivor guilt syndrome I decide to write, to find meaning, seeking solace, seeking forgiveness from Gaza, from myself, from all who are there, dying for Palestine.

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The early-morning ritual of making coffee brings some sanity to my heart. I stir the sweet heavy coffee in the pot and my thoughts wonder to a woman in Gaza. Is she making coffee too? I desperately want to believe that there is still a semblance of the ordinary in Gaza. That the normality of every day, is still possible. How dare I even think of that? Embarrassed, this morning's coffee tastes of pain.

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The War is raging. "Operation Cast Lead" they name it, product of a diabolic mind, a demented psychopath that has to sugar-coat his crime with civilized words, a selling ploy for infected merchandize. Does a camouflage make the murder any less murderous, the terror any less terrorizing, the immoral act a rightful one?

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I live in the company of images. I sit spellbound in front of the T.V. screen: live from the skies of the Gaza Strip unravels what could have been the grand extravaganza of an Olympic Games opening celebration, the fireworks for the New Year, the Cirque de Soleil in a brand new show choreographed in the skies or a Sound and Light spectacle like never before. But it is none of these things at all; it is the living inferno of the war on Gaza, one of the most densely populated areas in the world. It is the

bombs, the missiles, from land, air and sea, pouring down their wrath on everything: on men, women, children, on orange groves, on olive and palm orchards, on animals, birds and fish. The highlight, the crème de la crème of this Neronic feast, is the display of the white phosphorus bomb explosions; images that will probably haunt me forever, not only because of the horrors imbedded in them but because of how I find myself victimized by their bewitching formations. Daringly I succumb to the artistic streak in me and I see, mangled with the ugliness of the lethal weapon, dazzling images that shamelessly rise from its monstrosity: Tumbling from the belly of a war plane there came a giant dandelion, a sea-anemone, an octopus, all ablaze, like wedding tiaras, exploding into cascading petals and tentacles of effervescent gossamer ribbon, bridal veils that would soon enshroud the landscape below, annihilating everything in its wake. I shudder at the thought and yearn to pluck out the insane images from my mind, but they ferociously linger, kneaded with images of burnt flesh, gaping smoldering wounds still fuming where the shrapnel of white phosphorus continues digging, tortuously reaching down, to the bone, to the marrow, to the essence. Yes, they want to destroy the essence.

Phosphorus, when I look up the word means: In Latin – "Morning star", based on the Greek, "bringer of light. The adjective "poisonous" follows along with a list of complex chemical properties that the military arsenal establishment has developed to create this state-of-the-art white phosphorus bomb. Still under the cursed spell of convoluted aesthetics, I find myself thinking: in a pageant for weapons of mass destruction, the white phosphorus bomb will surely be crowned Queen, this ingenious instrument of death in the luminous garb of "morning star". Surely, Israel knows how to choose its weapons, Israel, a respected cultured democracy in the eyes of the world, knows very well how to blind them.

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The war goes on, and the numbers of the dead and the wounded rise with

terrifying speed. In a shocking image on the T.V. screen I see tens of bodies sprawled on what seemed like a sports field. Someone is insanely running, zigzagging between the bodies, looking for survivors. He is checking the bodies. Suddenly, I see him stop, bend down to a young man lying in a pool of blood, he must have sensed that the man was dying, and frantically, almost callously he shouts in his ear, ‘Say your last prayers, say your last prayers’. Intuitively he wants to insure the martyr a place in heaven, it is his way of honoring him.

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The ongoing live broadcasts are saturated with images of ambulances, hospitals, sounds of sirens, screams, wailing, and eerie silence! All are there on the screen in front of us; war crimes beyond description, a gargantuan human tragedy unfolding, day in day out. In the mayhem of a crowded hospital corridor I spot a little girl; she could have been my granddaughter. My heart reaches out to her. She is cradling a doll in a red patterned blanket in her arms. A lump rises in my throat as I shockingly, realize that what she is holding is not a doll at all but a child, of about two years, swaddled in bloodied bandages from head to toe, only his eyes and mouth are showing, his piercing screams of “mama, mama” echo all around. The girl is his sister, crooning to him, soothing him with the rhythm of her own trembling body, her face wet with tears, her eyes scared, so scared they had the numbed stare of approaching death. The commentator says that this little girl and her baby brother are the sole survivors of a large family. She would have no need for dolls anymore. He would have no mother but her.

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A man recounts to a T.V. reporter how his daughter of five has discovered a new game, a game she has perfected with her friends who gathered in the safety of a small room in their home, away from the vicious, indiscriminating attacks of tanks and warplanes, They play a game they call

" The Martyr". It is quite simple really; the children spread out on the floor and he or she who lies motionless the longest is the winner. Death, a game for the living!

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A Palestinian Flag torn at the seams takes center stage on the screen. It must have been a victim of a bomb or a missile. Colored swatches of red, green, black and white flutter separately in the gun-smoke polluted wind. Alone, yet still united at the pole which is still standing on the rubble of a once school building – I think of us, of Palestinians in the four corners of the earth, still held together at the pole, still united by Palestine.

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A flock of white doves scurries past on the T.V. screen. Sounds of explosives are heard close by, and walls of dense dark smoke rise to obliterate the horizon. The cameraman must have seen the frightened birds and is monitoring their nervous flight. It is certainly a change from filming human beings. Back and forth they fly and I watch them crossing the screen once, twice, three times, in a frantic race for safety, until sadly they do not return. For a moment the screen is filled with sky, then one lonely dove hurries past, at least one is saved, I happily tell myself, but alas, like the others, it too does not return.

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Again on T.V., a destroyed house, must have been bombed just now, I can almost smell the fumes from a still burning room. In the room a shelf, half eaten by flames, and on it I spot an emerald-green plate with round red tomatoes, or is it apples, holding on to the wooden charred base. The effect is stunning. Only a painter could think of such a dramatic setting for a still life. But of course I knew that it is not this at all. The next day, I see the same image in a newspaper; the same green plate in the same burnt-out

room, only this time there is a little girl, with a red sweater in the photograph, her hand holding on to a tomato or an apple, bringing it up to her mouth, a mouth worn out with hunger, in a face haunted by fear!

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Then, the Cease Fire, the warrior's respite I like to call it. Burdened, exhausted, life picks up its pieces again, gathers its despair, embraces its wounds and heroically goes on. Like in any war, in any situation of death, you wake up to what is real. Life is real, even under an agonizing forty two years of Israeli occupation. Life has to go on, there is no other direction it can take, and now in Gaza, in the aftermath of the war, where better to see life returning, than in the children, the children who have miraculously escaped the ghoul of war, who have defied the traumatizing experiences of their young lives and decided to listen to life once again? Once again they begin to smile. They comb their hair, wear their school uniforms, pick up their books and go to school. But the school, even if they find it, is barely there, the buildings are half collapsed, the desks destroyed, the blackboards and books burnt. They inspect the playgrounds, the flower beds, the trees, the sports fields all mutilated, all pulverized by the missiles, the bombs. When they finally settle down in the wreckage of their classrooms, they place placards with the names of their murdered friends on the empty desks near by. They will always be there.

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I call Atef Abu Saif in Gaza, the young writer who years ago wrote the brilliant text- Still Life: Scenes in Gaza Time. I remember that I broke in tears when I first read it. He is a master at intimate details that brought Gaza so close to me. I missed Gaza then and I still miss it. It has been years since I, in the West Bank, have been allowed there, prohibited by the Israeli military occupation forces that deny us entry. I am happy that Atef and his family are safe. He speaks of fear, his children sneaking to hide in their mother's lap at the tiniest of sounds. His two sisters' homes have

completely collapsed under missiles. He is keeping a diary of the war and promises to send me some entries. I cannot wait to read them. Atef also tells me the story of two friends whose whole neighborhood was erased to the ground. They went back to view the site and they could not tell where their homes stood or which plot of land they own. Nothing was left for a marking.

And I recall another story of loss which a friend, who has family in Gaza, told me. Two families were informed that both their sons, who were close friends, were badly hit by a bomb blast. Arriving on the scene they discover that, alas, one had passed away and the other was in a coma, yet both were so badly burnt and disfigured that the parents could not recognize one from the other. Devastated and heartbroken, they patiently waited for the one alive to recover, even for an instant, hoping he might be able to say his name, so that they might know whose son has survived.

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The papers are full of photographs of people aimlessly wandering in the wasteland, inspecting the ruins of what once was. They too are ruined. Yet they courageously seek the debris, hoping they might find personal things, precious only to them, things that will carry the memory of what once was, of better days, of happy moments: remnants of loved ones, of things, of clothes, of school books, of toys of paintings, of a prayer rug or an icon. A woman in one photo in today's newspaper catches my eye; half bent in the rubble, there is anger in her face, a grimace of utter disbelief, as she surveys what must have been her home, now a pile of mangled concrete and wire. Her eyes squint, searching. In one hand she is holding on to a plastic pot with red artificial flowers. Roses or anemones? I wonder. In her other, there is a ceramic coffee mug with faded line decorations of pink, green and purple. This woman in Gaza could have been me, for I too love flowers and a cup of coffee. Tears gather in my eyes as I imagined her joy, her painful joy at finding these pieces, these "souvenirs" of a once normal



life. I could hear her sigh, murmuring to herself, “where will I go now, where will I set my flower pot, where will I make my coffee?”

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Nothing but news of the war on Gaza in the newspapers. In an attempt to keep sane, I decide to take a break, to stop reading, to stop looking. I throw away every newspaper in sight. I turn off the T.V. This morning, as I was about to dispose of the newspaper, an image catches my eye, a photograph lures me on. I sit in the closest chair and stare at the black and white photo in my hands. It is not the best, professionally, a bit out of focus. However, the unintended fuzziness gives it a certain mysterious eerie sadness that adds to its dramatic impact. It is a scene of devastation, and also that of life. In the background looms a four story building half demolished, the part remaining leans to one side, the windows and doors all agape, black holes tattoo soot-covered walls. The garden is a wasteland, rubble, cement and scattered charred branches. A gigantic fire must have swept by, eating up everything in its wake; but, close to the edge of the photo, there is a palm tree, half a palm really, slit up from top to bottom, one half gone, the other miraculously standing victorious, true to its metaphor, saluting the scene of survival below.

For there, in the deserted courtyard, in a scene of tranquil domesticity sit two women. There is a round table nearby, and a chair with no one sitting in it. The women, the table, the empty chair are firmly anchored in the debris-littered ground. They sit in the garden of what must have been their home, eons ago, before the war of terror on Gaza. The table is covered with a patterned cloth. It seems heavy, like a blanket, and falls to the ground giving it a certain elegance that belongs to a salon, not in a battleground. On the table there are plates, utensils, two jars, could be pickles, could be jam, depending whether it was lunch time or breakfast time or maybe snack time. I cannot tell what time of day it was. There is certainly light, but there are also smoke clouds that cover the skies. It is a moving scene

and what touches me the most is the posture of the two women. They are sitting next to one another, half leaning, huddled in perfect harmony, probably talking, sharing experiences of the nightmares of the past days. They could have been sisters, mother and daughter, neighbors, or just friends. They must have needed this outing, a breath of air to celebrate the silence of the sounds of war. But they are not eating. They seem to be waiting, the chair is waiting. Could they be expecting a visitor, a loved one that has gone and not returned?

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In the lull of a fragile ceasefire a Gaza family gathers in what once was home. Only two walls remain, they create a corner, a shelter of sorts where the men, women, and children gather. They are cooking dinner, seeking warmth; the fire they have built is from the limbs of their destroyed furniture, chairs, tables, cupboards that once filled their home. I painfully remember that some time ago, writing about another war, in another location and describing other destroyed homes, Mahmoud Darwish poignantly named them "Murdered Houses".

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By internet I receive two consecutive messages, two videos from two friends. One documenting in intimate detail the carnage created by the white phosphorous bombs that fell on an UNRWA school in a Gaza refugee camp, the second documenting, also in close detail the beauty and elegance of a series of exquisite Ikebana flower arrangements at an exhibition in Switzerland. The contrast is overwhelming and the impact unbearable. I sob, sob, sob until my heart is about to burst. "A Place Weeping", of Palestine, and I am part of it.

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In today's paper I stop at a story: Gaza artists inspect their gallery and

workshop. The missiles have left them in ruins. They gather the remnants; burnt canvases, warped frames and insist on holding an exhibition in a room with no walls, a room determined, creative to the brim.

In the aftermath of the war and in the same spirit of defiance and survival, a T.V. commentator stands in the middle of a street; microphone in hand, he dramatically points to a landscape of devastation close by. "Israel was Here!" he says, then he points to another scene, on the other side of the street, where men, women and children are diligently cleaning up the debris from their war-torn neighborhood, "And, here" he continues, "the people of Gaza are saying--*we have remained, so that Palestine could remain too!*"

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What breaks my heart, what infuriates me to no end, is the image of tents in Gaza: tents, tents, tents, thousands of tents sent courtesy of UNRWA, of aid agencies and of good will societies. Once again the repulsive tents appear, a symbol of humiliation, of the unending suffering resulting from decades of Israeli crimes against Palestine. Once again the repulsive tents appear, in lieu of justice and the restoration of dignity, freedom, and independence. Once again the repulsive tents appear and become part of the Palestinian landscape. Like vintage fashion they reappear; 1948 revisited, always revisited: Gaza now. Where next? When next? 60 years of the "Nakba" continue, until when?

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