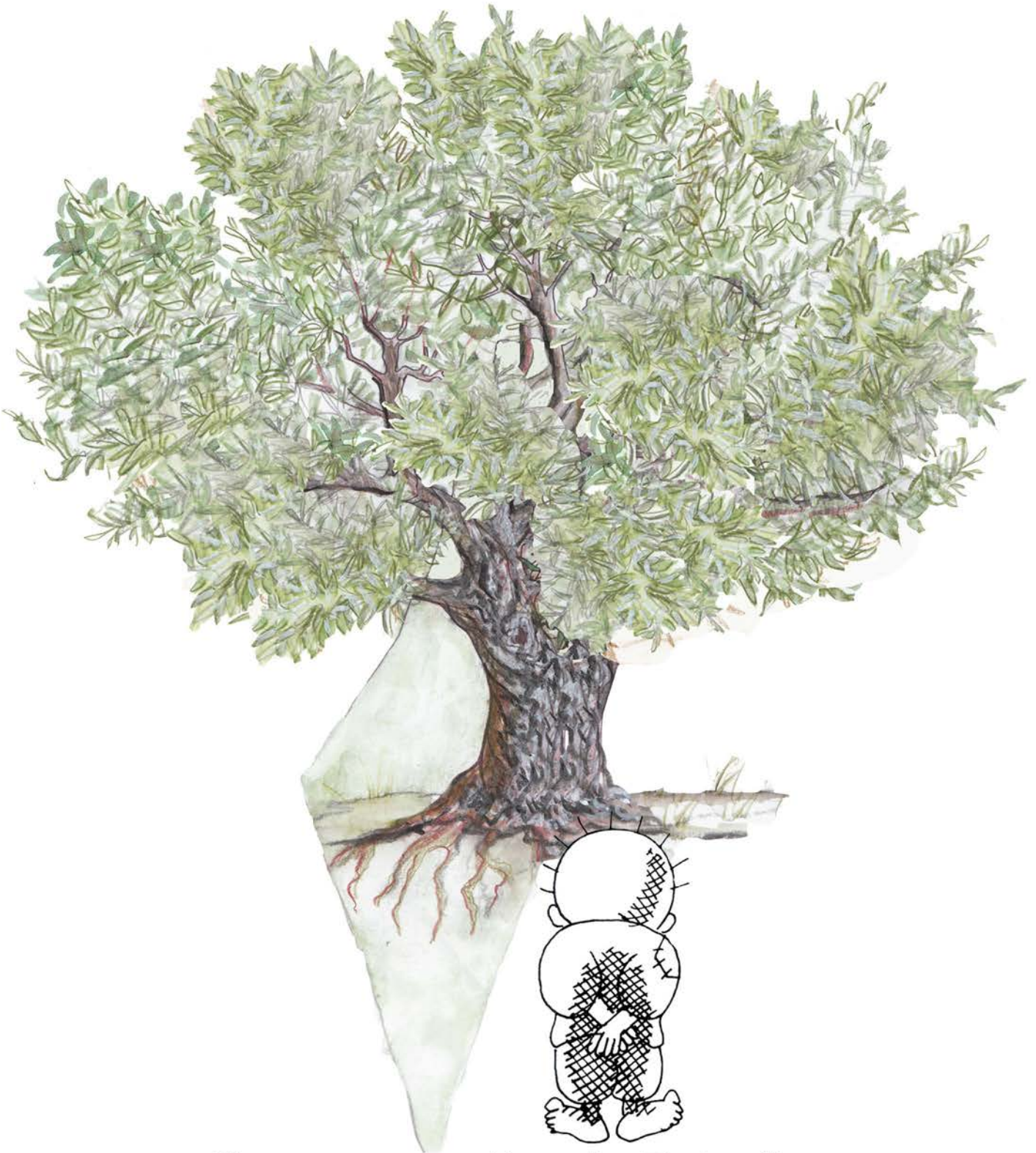


The Living Tree

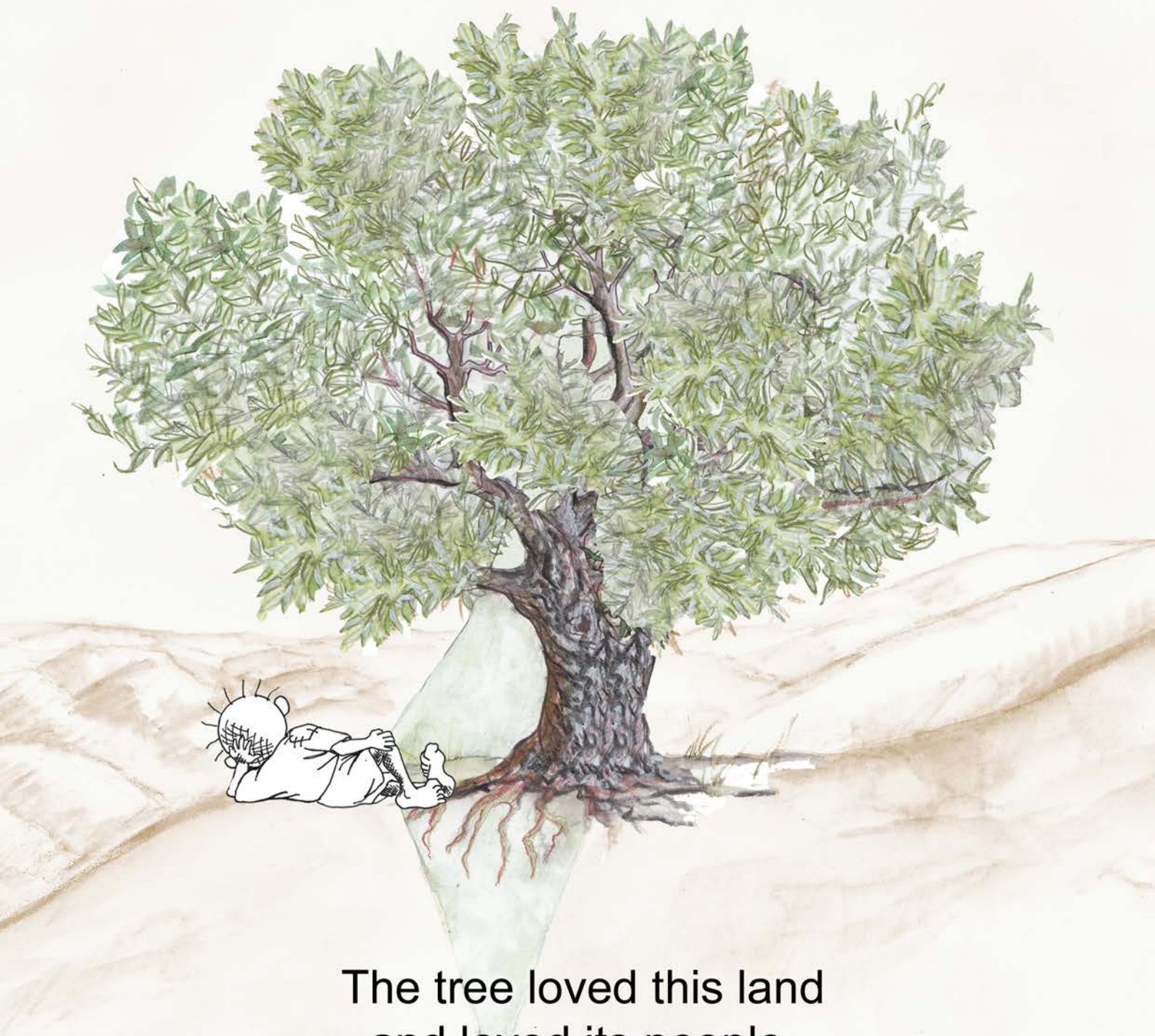


Written by Sonja Karkar and
illustrated by Dora McPhee

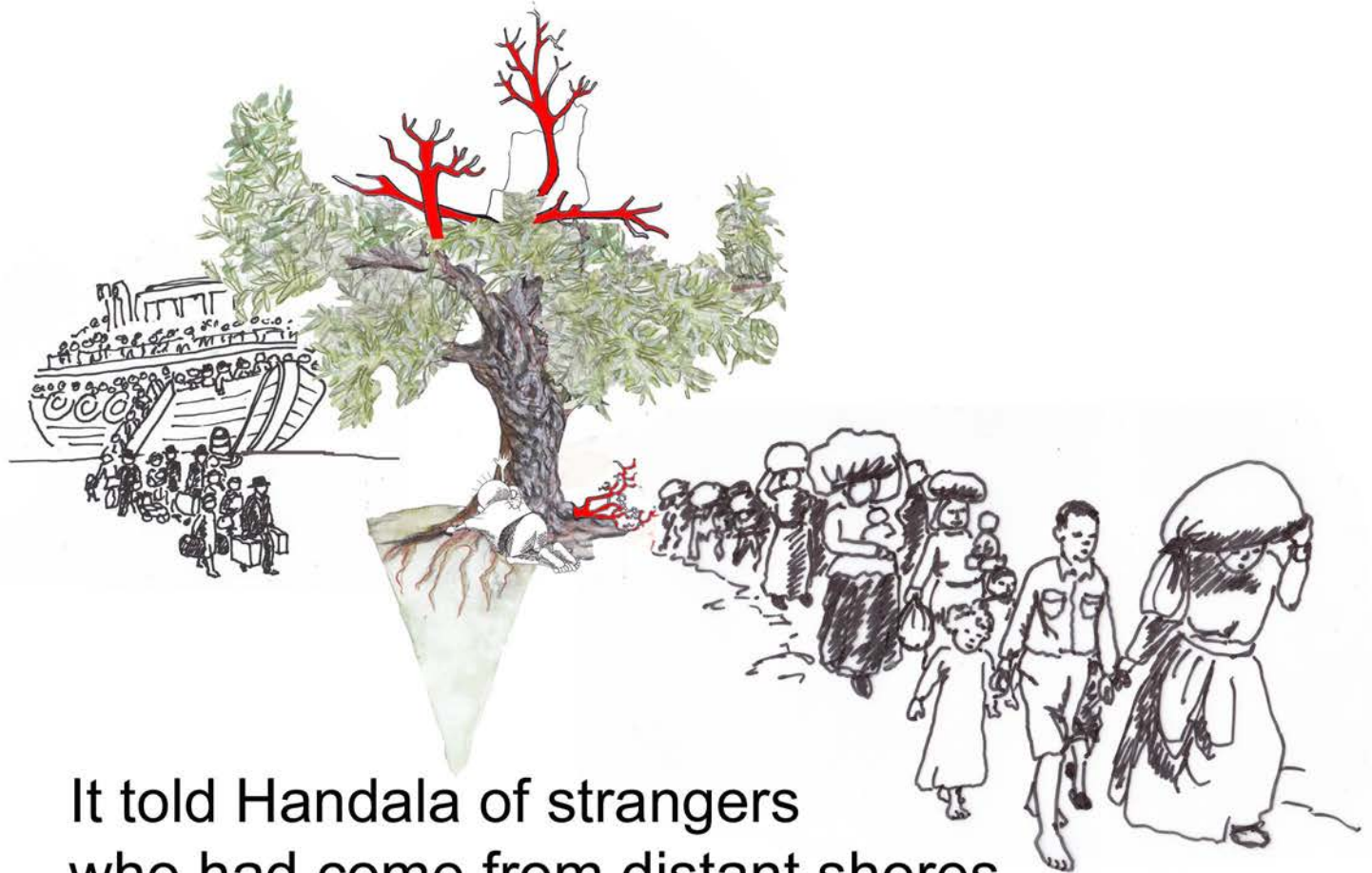
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www.palestinefund.org.au



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.

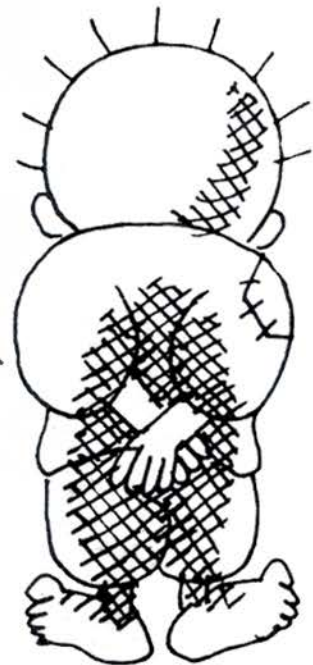


It told Handala of strangers
who had come from distant shores
to live their lives in Palestine
but not to share the land.

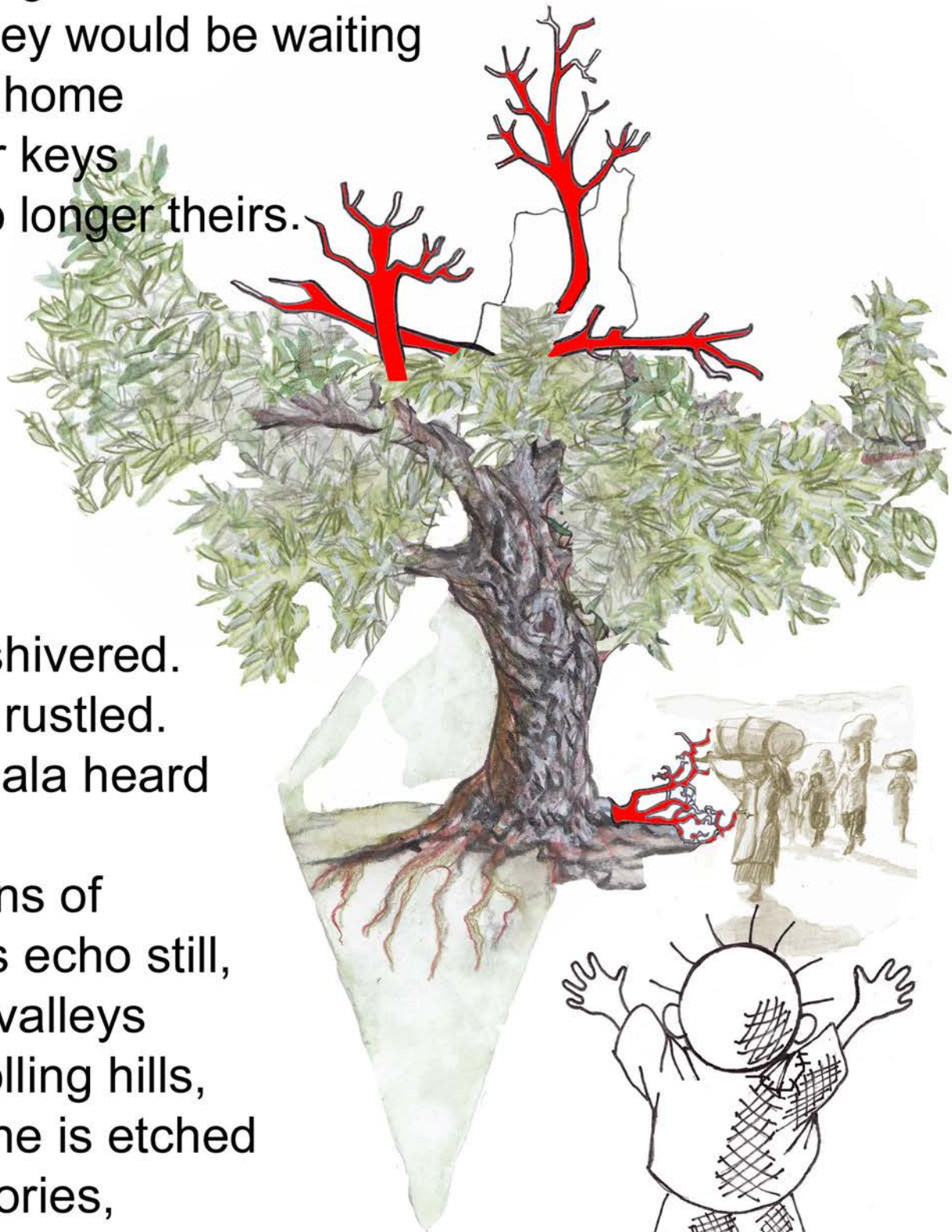
They said their God had given them
this land for them alone,
That they had found it empty
and were returning home,
That they had made the desert bloom
and grown the lemon trees,
That everything belonged to them,
despite the people living there
and the olive trees they'd planted
in the soil of Palestine.

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.



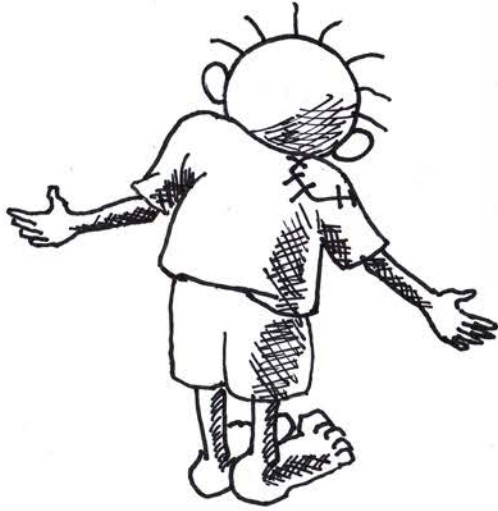


The tree smiled.
It curled its roots
into the deep, dark soil
and stretched its branches
to the sky,
it shook its leaves
and in the breeze
its words
were firm and clear:

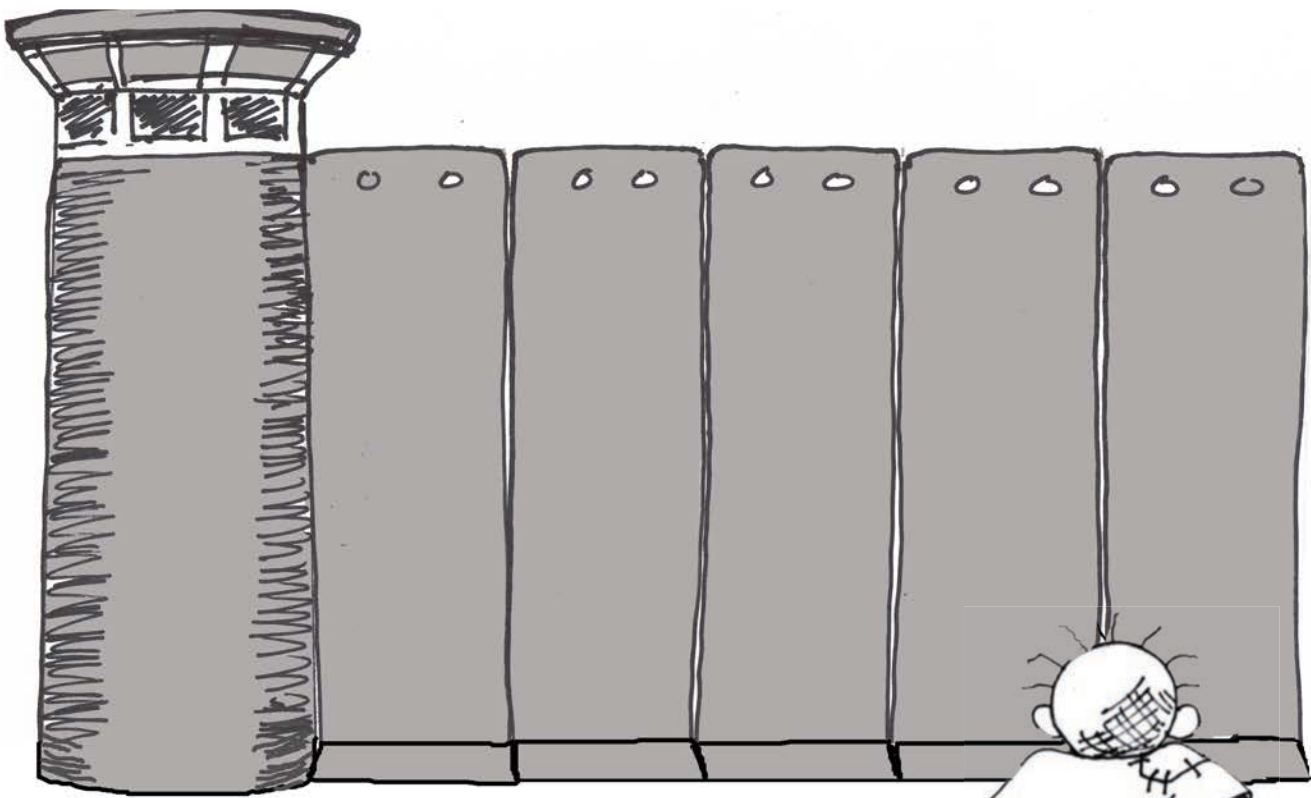
“Stand tall and strong,
Our roots go deep.
We’re joined as one
throughout this land.
Our people live,
Our trees still grow,
The seasons come and go,
Our seeds are scattered far and wide,
And where they land our roots take hold,
Waiting for the day to come
when we can say
that Palestine is free.”

And so it was that Handala went on a journey fraught with danger and filled with endless sorrow.

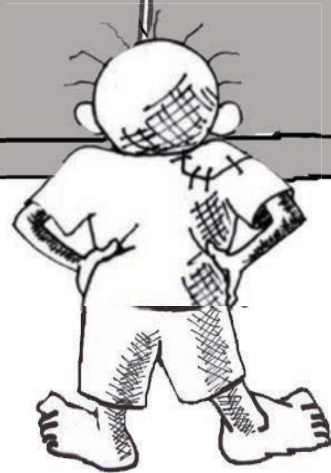




The things he saw
were cruel and bad
and made him want to cry -
Families stripped of all they own,
Friends and neighbours separated,
Young men bound and put in jail,
Children chased and beaten.
Lines of people forced to wait
at walls and razor wire,
While soldiers at the checkpoints
refused to let them 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.



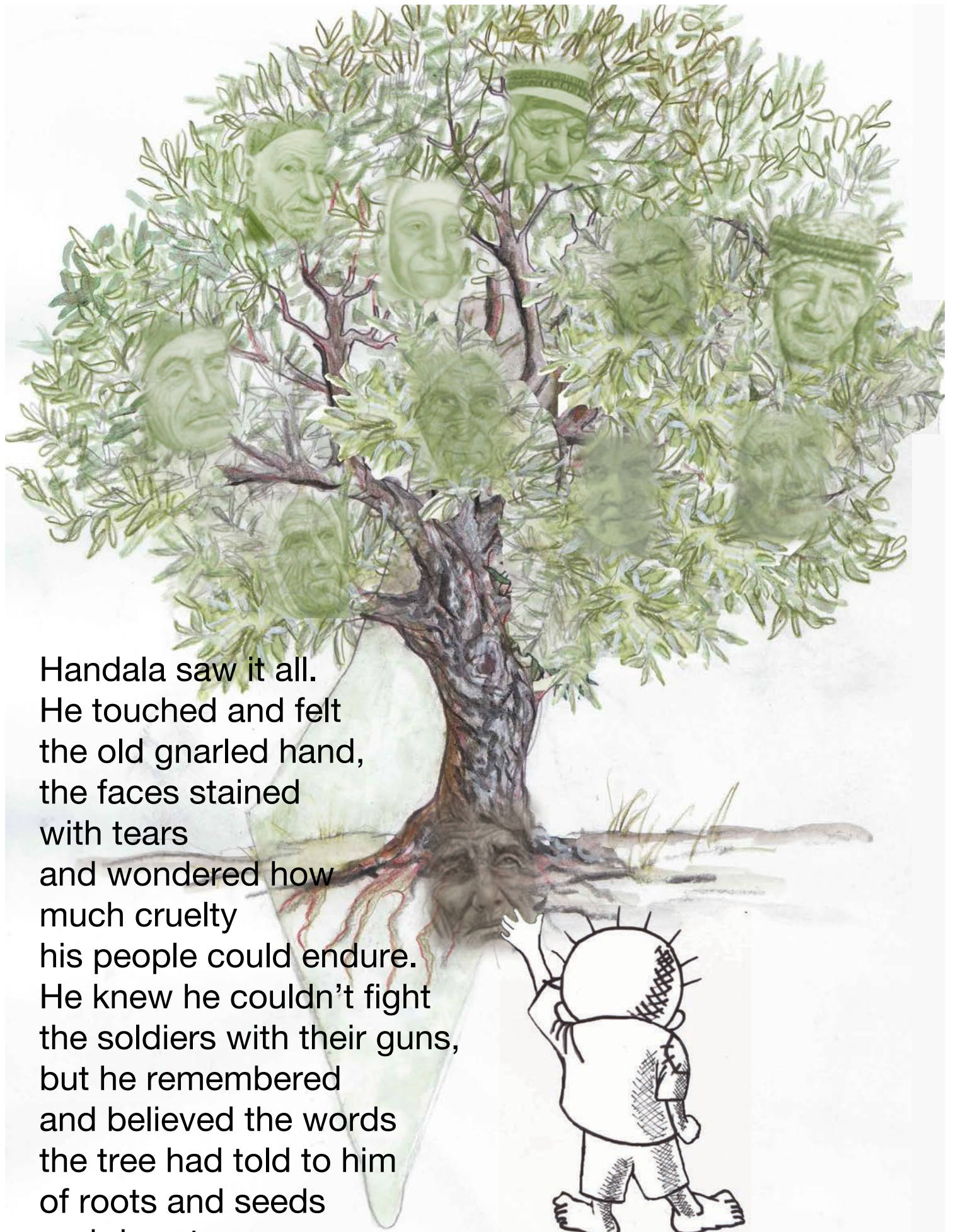
And everywhere that people went,
A Wall was being built,
Making life for them a prison
by shutting out the world.



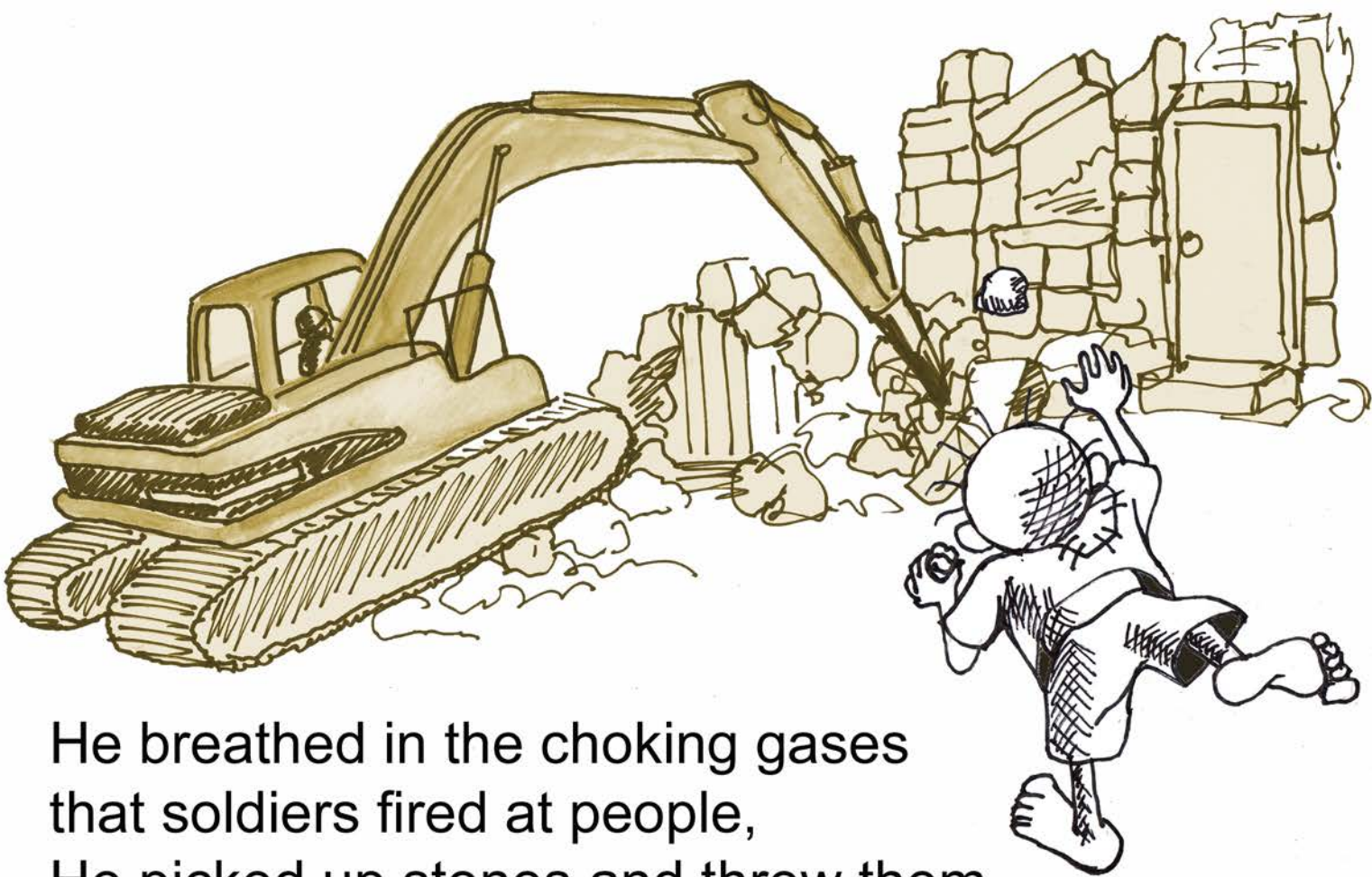
And Handala could clearly see,
There was no way of knowing
how one could pass or when.

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.



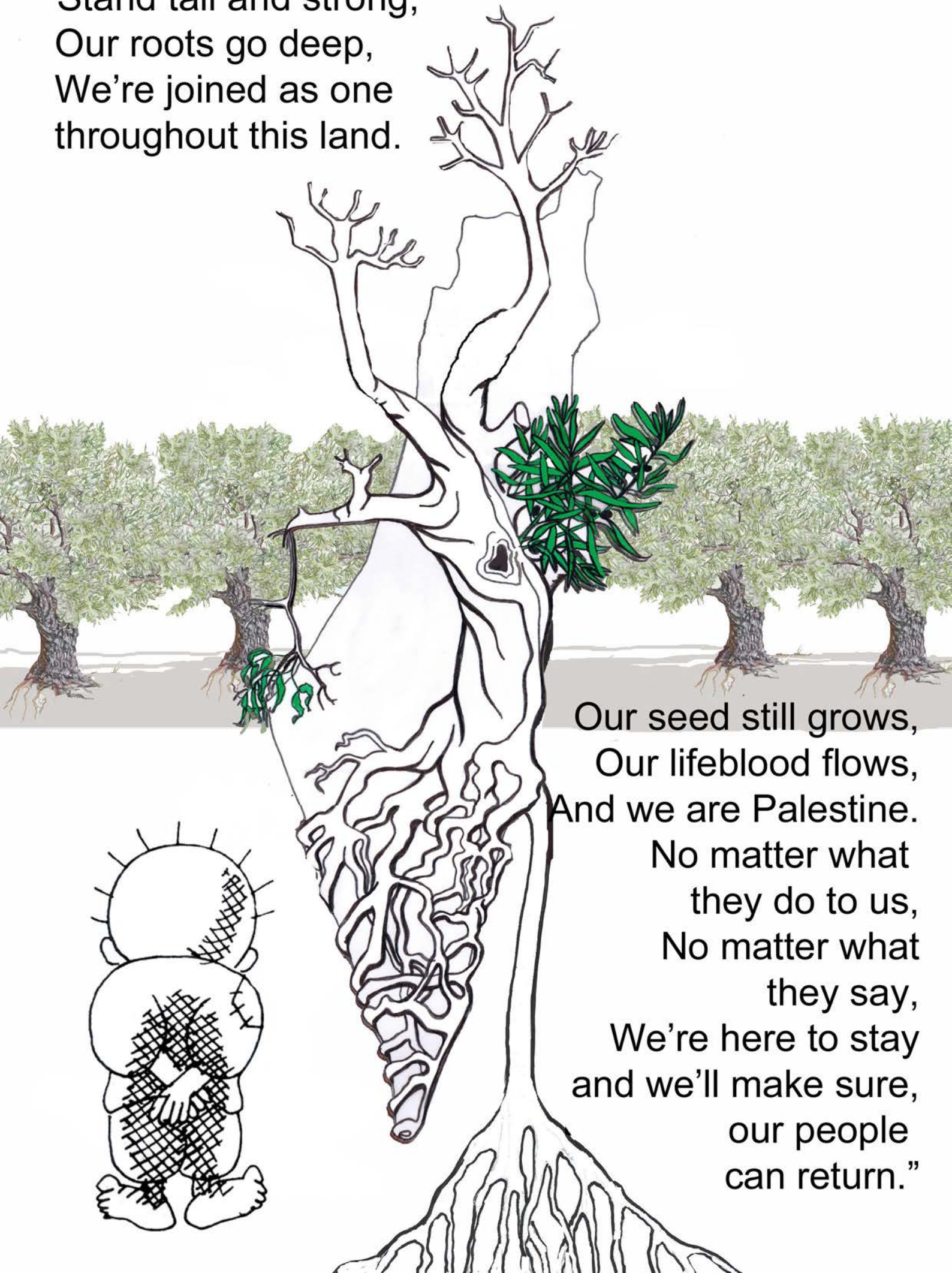


Handala wept.

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:

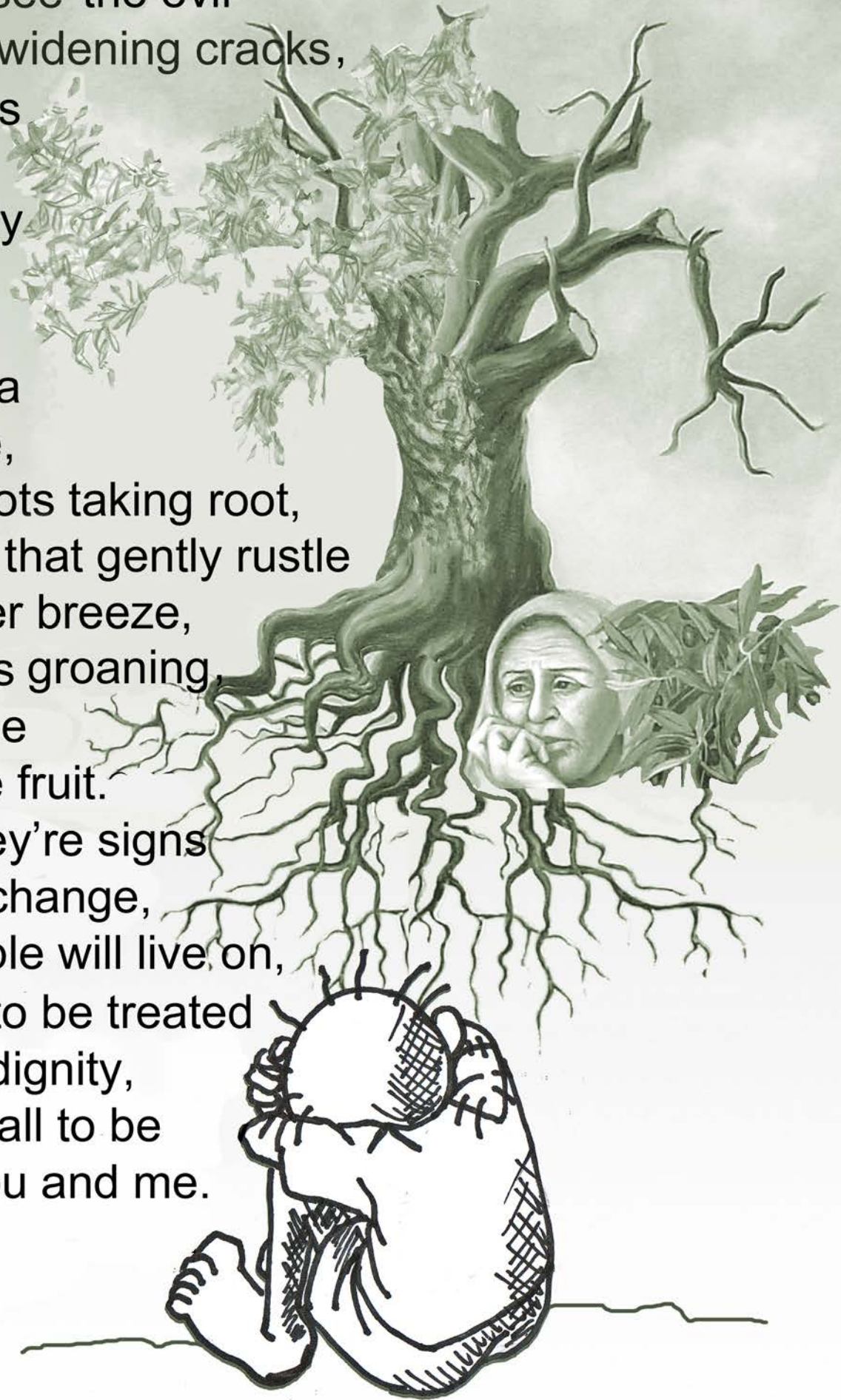
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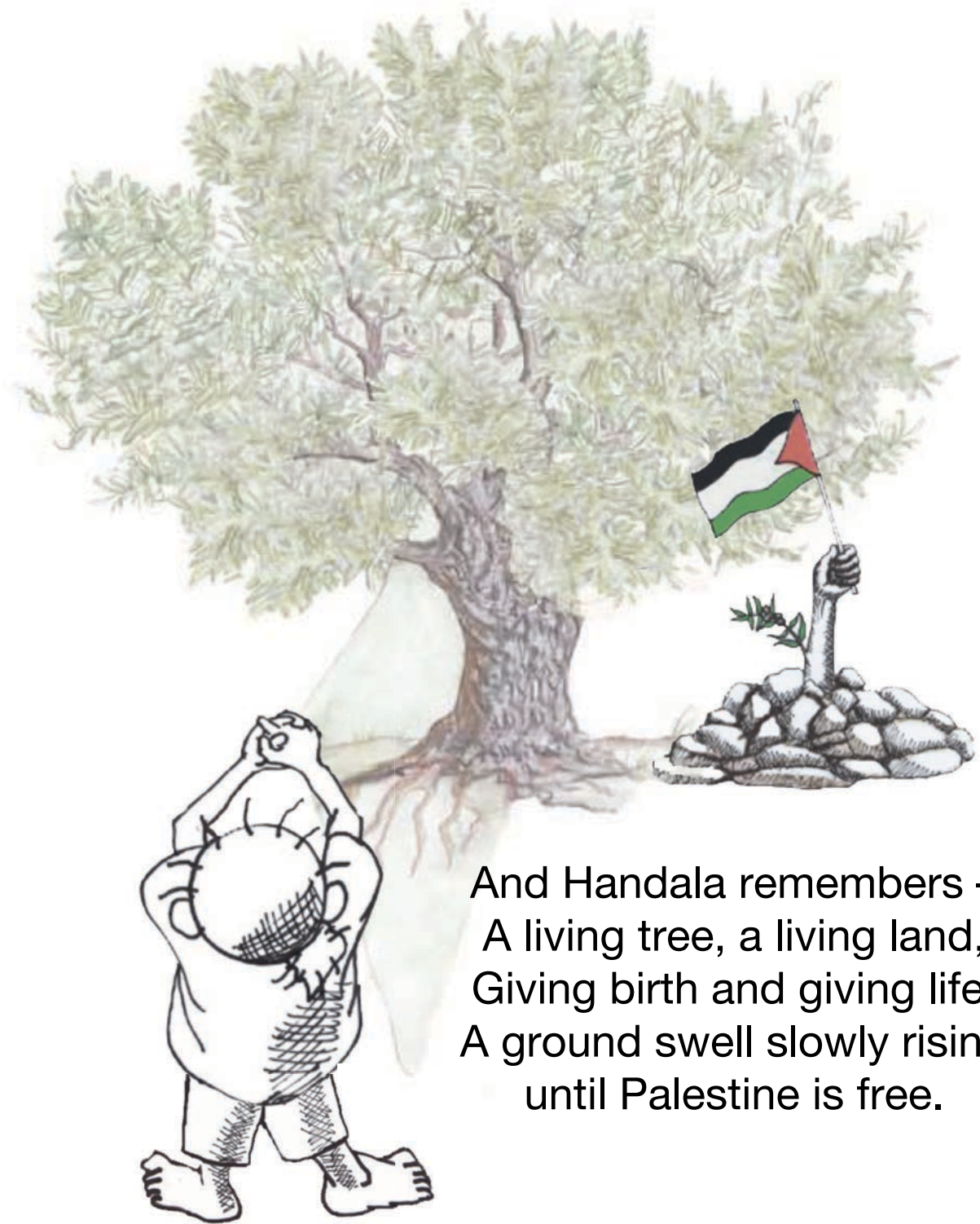


Our seed still grows,
Our lifeblood flows,
And we are Palestine.
No matter what
they do to us,
No matter what
they say,
We’re here to stay
and we’ll make sure,
our people
can return.”

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.