**Tax Dollars**

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I saw thousand-year-old olive trees wrapped with chains and dragged out of the soil like resisting bodies. They *were* resisting bodies, and we were too, but it didn’t matter. Have you ever stood in front of a bulldozer twice your height? I dodged tear gas canisters that broke bones and suffocated children, labeled “Manufactured in Pennsylvania.” I couldn’t dodge the steel-core bullet that lodged in my forearm and shattered an inch of bone, which likely came from Pennsylvania too. I was twenty then.

It’s written earnestly on highway repair signs and facetiously everywhere else: “Your tax dollars at work.” But most people who were born in the U.S. never see our tax dollars at work, outside of road crews, politicians obstructing each other, and Obamacare.

The Arabic word for gringo is اجنبي *ajnabi*. People ask where you’re from on the bus, or at the market, or when you’re waiting outside of a courtroom for someone’s sentencing. ٥ن أمريكا *Min Amrik*a: The place that is paying for this. I always want to lie, but I always want to tell the truth: say that someone came to see the wreckage, say that someone cares. I waited with an entire village to know if a boy would live or not. He had a steel-core in his skull. I waited. And I saw my tax dollars at work.

My Arabic was not good enough to console someone after their loved one was killed or jailed or spit on. My Arabic was not good enough to say anything while I sat with the village whose boy hadn't died or lived yet. What do you say then, anyway? I was a body; I was a white *ajnabi* body, and everything I couldn’t say piled up inside, a heap of words nobody back home would understand.

After *min Amrika* came a predictable response: go home and tell your family, tell your country, tell your president. Don’t they know they’re paying for this? صح صح *Sah*, *sah* I think I said. Right. I know.

The folks I spoke with in preparation for going there warned me: it will only get worse. After you leave, things always get worse except now you know the people and those places and just how bad it is. And you’re banned so you can’t go back and nobody here cares and it just gets worse; so, eventually, you’ll have to stop caring too.

The folks said, you go because international observers are needed. You go to sit in front of the bulldozers to be ripped apart, to stand in a barrage of tear gas and steel-cores knowing they can’t fire live ammunition when your American body is there.

Honest to god—it’s a law.

You go there to see. To get the most horrible education about how the world really is. How your country really is. You go there to know exactly what it is they do with that war budget. Sometimes your blood hits the soil too.

But you can’t stop it. Not with the dawn time sit in the olive grove. Not with the daily press releases documenting human rights abuses that no one will read. Not even an American getting shot can change this.

I am witnessing the outcome of “military aid:” this particular line item running close to four billion dollars a year. But people here really believe I can talk to my president. Wouldn’t you? Want to believe that?

After few years back home, I tried to forget them. I stopped reading the press releases, stopped nightmaring war.

Before that I wrote, I wrote and wrote. I wrote an entire book I had so many stories to tell. Stories flashing across my peripheral vision all the time, inescapable. Stories that wouldn’t leave my body, wouldn’t leave me alone and I kept waking up at the window, staring into the night. Stories lodged somewhere between Arabic and English in the language of war. I talked anyway; talked to anyone who would listen. I had blackout anger, screaming at the bar. That big heap of words slowly emptied out.

Before that, my passport was stamped with a number 6: Banned. The passport got me out of that place where violence does not ever stop, and kids doodle detailed AK-47s on their bedroom walls—where nobody leaves. Eventually, I’d stopped sleeping and stopped eating and stopped making sense, and it was time for me to leave with that blue passport.

Before I went home, I passed an unexpected evening with one of the families I’d grown closest to. We smoked hookah under a bright moon and laughed into huge wedges of watermelon. For a moment everyone was safe.

From the hilltop we could see out in the silvery light: hillsides rippled with dried grass, farmers’ crops in the valley. We could see the settlement gleaming white on the next ridge. We could see down to the gully where I and others had been cornered and shot. We all know it will get worse. We know it always gets worse.

Those people from the garden have mostly been imprisoned now—kids and adults—though not without protest. The teenage daughter has been made an icon of the resistance. When their faces glow in my social media feed, I scroll past. Can’t look them in the eye. What have I been doing all this time, exactly? Not talking to the president.

It would be easier to forget, some kind of *ajnabi* amnesia. To say I never went there and smelled wild oregano mixing with pepper spray in the dust of a village. After all I’m banned, and no one here cares, and I was only twenty then. But the folks warned me. Once you know, you can’t *not* know where all the tax dollars go—the bullets and the bulldozers, the people and the olive groves. Even when you try to stop caring, you will always remember. You will always remember Palestine.