GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

Intimacy of War

Article by Ofer Waldman
August 4, 2026

How can one truly grasp the experience of war – “the omnipresent, everyday, tangible, arbitrary possibility of a battlefield, of a destroyed house, of flight, of famine, of abduction, of a violent death” – without witnessing first-hand its violence and devastation? Through memories, recollections, and speaking to the families of Israeli victims of the 7 October attacks and Palestinians trapped under Israel’s bombs in Gaza, Tel Aviv-based musician and writer Ofer Waldman searches for help in words. An edited excerpt from the book *Verkämpftes Land* (2025).

Here I end my days, helpless, and nothing, nothing I could have done or not done, willed or thought, could have led me to a different goal.
– Christa Wolf, Cassandra

I would much rather tell you something else. To write something down – something proper – and then search out the life that matches the written words.

Poet Lea Goldberg believed that in times of war, it is the poet’s duty, above all else, to write about flowers and children’s laughter. She wrote that in Tel Aviv in September 1939, just after World War II had broken out. Tanja Maljartschuk, the Ukrainian poet-in-exile, says that she no longer trusts language: language that is suited both to writing down poems and writing out orders for war and murder. Somewhere between these two extremes, I would have liked to tell you something else.

What story, then, am I to tell you?

I have not been on any battlefield. My house has not been destroyed. I did not have to starve, I did not have to flee, and I was not abducted. And yet life here knows an intimacy with the thoughts of war. And it is not because one spent countless hours in a shelter, surrounded by children, family, friends, even complete strangers, thinking of the people in Gaza who have neither houses nor shelters, or of the Israelis in the Kibbutzim whose shelters on 7 October could not protect them and rather became gateways to hell. All of us here will, as Serhij Zhadan once said, never again be able to look at the sky as we did before. For war – that is, the omnipresent, everyday, tangible, arbitrary possibility of a battlefield, of a destroyed house, of flight, of famine, of abduction, of a violent death – leaves behind certain traces. It is of these traces that I want to tell you. To search for them through words.

These are not words of courage, nor are they words of self-torment. Had I been in Gaza, I might not have written a sentence such as: “One cannot distinguish the smoke of the intercepted rockets from the autumn clouds.” Instead, my eyes – had I raised them to the sky – would have brimmed over with concrete dust, with ashes, and become blind. I would have written about undrinkable water and the

stench of death. But I am not in Gaza. I direct my gaze there – not to please you, or to please myself, but because I know that all other gazes, including the gaze turned inward, are conditioned by one another. That is, also by this gaze toward Gaza. But I am not in Gaza. No more than you are.

In Terry Gilliam's film Twelve Monkeys, which is based on Chris Marker's short film La Jetée, a time traveller is sent into the past to prevent an apocalyptic pandemic. The entire plot revolves around one key scene: the moment when the protagonist, James Cole (played by Bruce Willis), and his partner, who are trying to find the source of the pandemic, run into a boy, who is in fact Cole's younger self. At the very moment they meet the boy, they realise that they have been following the wrong lead all along. But before Cole manages to warn his younger self of what is to come, the police, who have been pursuing them, shoot him.

The climax of the scene is the moment when Cole's partner, a young, bewildered woman, holding Cole in her arms, stares at the boy with pleading terror as she grasps what is happening: Cole is bleeding to death, and it is too late to warn the boy – the young Cole, who will later be sent back into the past and will fail again and again to avert the dystopia – about his future.

(Time travel, anyhow: the drift into the surreal, a pause in the presumed logic of reality, the escape into an imaginary world to shut oneself off from the real one. To confront the insane through insanity itself, to name it. That too – and of that as well – I want to tell you.)

We all constantly try to trace the seeds of dystopia through poems, plays, essays, novels, and history books; and then, once we have found them (too late), we try to call them out. Our frequent failures make us no less secure; quite the contrary, we are sometimes bowled over by an omnipresent, almost brazen self-assurance as the sky around us darkens. These words are not self-assured. They are the gaze of the woman who knows she is doomed to fail. They are the gaze of the boy peering into his own future, fated to grasp it too late.

And yet these words are also the brief lingering over the gaze between the woman and the child. A lingering ascribed with the possibility – also arbitrary, painfully arbitrary – of recognition. Thus, along with every stratum of war laid upon this land, clinging to its people, the layer of this arbitrary possibility is laid. Lingering. Creating space, sometimes almost surreal, but nameable. Visualisable. Describable.

Stuttering

I start over again.

"I'd like to hear my new work read aloud," says S. from Berlin, and asks me to read it together. I'm in Israel, so we start a video call. Before we begin, S. asks if it might be too much for me right now – that is, if I can read, write, think at all about literature at this time.

"Why would it be too much?" I ask. "I thought the play was about the war in Ukraine, about family history, about your grandfather."

"It is about my grandfather, too," S. says. "But it's also about 7 October. About Israel. About Gaza."

I wave it off. When is it a good time, anyway?

"Let's read."

I start over again.

It’s a beautiful spring day. My brother sits in front of me on a rickety garden swing, rolling a cigarette. I hold his lighter, hand it to him.

“I thought Y. wasn’t in Gaza,” I say. Y. is my brother’s eldest son. “I thought he was at a base near the border. He’s not a combat soldier.”

“He’s a medic, serving the battalion commander. When the commander goes in to assess the situation, he has to go in too.”

The things he saw in Gaza. The air there. The sounds.

My brother looks at his hands, as if searching for words. He spreads his fingers, and the cigarette falls on the ground.

I start over again.

The moderator has just introduced me. I’m on stage in Frankfurt and am supposed to read from letters I wrote to a friend in the first weeks of the war. I take the microphone and look out at the hall again, at the expectant faces, at the tense faces.

Pronouncing the words becomes more difficult with every sentence. I draw in breath, shape my lips to speak the sounds I see before me: “child,” “air,” “sound,” “ashes”. But hardly anything comes out. I have to thrust the words out between my lips with increasing force. I have to tense my diaphragm with a direct command from my head, to push the air out through my mouth. At some point, it doesn’t matter whether it comes out as words, or as barking, or a scream.

I recognise this feeling from my time as an orchestral musician. Among brass players, it’s called “airlock”. Breathing in and out in time with the music, you place the mouthpiece on your tensed lips, position your tongue just behind your front teeth, and wait to play the note. As you’re about to play it, the tongue must retract to make way for the flow of air generated by your breathing muscles. But sometimes the tongue baulks at the command from your head and sticks, creating an airlock that leads to a kind of stutter when you start playing. Or the tongue does not move at all, and you have to skip the passage in whole or in part because the orchestra does not wait, it cannot wait, it must play on. Your eyes track the unsounded notes on the paper, your ears register the void of your own missing notes amidst the orchestra’s onward playing. In your mind, the world shrinks to the tip of your rebellious tongue, to the pressure building in your lungs and throat, to the blood flooding into your face. To the onrushing feeling of failure.

You want to join in the music, to fall into its rhythm. But sometimes you have to pull the instrument away from your lips. Breathe out. Try anew.

Start over again.

So I start over again.

* * *

“The music – the music helps,” says A. from Kibbutz Kfar-Aza. “The singing.”

Three of us – A., her husband, and I – are sitting in the lobby of a Tel Aviv hotel. She’s about to tell her story from 7 October to a group from Germany, but we still have a little time before she starts. For now, A. sits across from me, a glass of cold water in her hand, and repeats a few times that music helps.

“I have been asked,” she says – and now her eyes, her faint smile, try to break free from her face, pressing themselves as if through crusted earth – “I have been asked,” – that crusted earth around her eyes and mouth begins to show cracks and long, deep wrinkles – “I have been asked how I felt at my son’s funeral, my mother-in-law’s funeral, my brother-in-law’s funeral, the funeral of…”

Her husband gently interrupts her, placing one hand on the back of his other hand and rubbing them: “At the funerals,” he says. “Just say: ‘At the funerals’.”

Her objectivity lies in counting off; his lies in reducing to the essential. One feels their connection, their love.

“Yes.” The encrusted earth around her mouth cracks open. “At the funerals.”

Speaking was difficult for her, A. said, but singing came more easily. And so they went from one funeral to the next, her daughter playing guitar, A. singing. I did not dare ask what she sang.

“I played music myself for a long time,” I tell her.

“What instrument did you play?”

“The French horn,” I say.

“Netta, our son, played the violin,” says A. “He loved Peter and the Wolf, and always wanted to hear it again and again as a child.” The torn, crusted earth wrinkles and cracks; the backs of the hands rub together. “He wanted to be Peter, and that’s why he chose the violin.”

I search for words in my head, what to say now. “It’s interesting,” I say (stupid word). “It’s interesting, which instrument people choose – that is, what character from the fairy tale: Peter, or the wolf, the hunters, the grandfather, the duck, the cat, the bird. What these characters say about us.”

“So you’re the wolf?” A.’s husband repeats the word again, “wolf”. I want to utter my standard line: that, as the wolf (a character whose music is played by three French horns), I have frightened many children already. Thankfully I remain silent and risk a smile.

“Netta was definitely Peter,” says A. “The hero of the story. He didn’t always follow the rules either.”

Embarrassed, I hum Peter’s melody: tam-tam-ta-ta-tim-tam. Hebrew has only one word for “protagonist,” “main character,” and “hero” – gibor. A. uses this word for her son only when she refers to him as Peter from the fairy tale. She does not use it when she is recounting the moment he threw himself on a hand grenade to save his fiancée, as she will soon tell the group from Germany in the same gentle, matter-of-fact voice. The cracks in the encrusted earth close, leaving delicate cobweb-like patterns around her mouth and eyes, trapping the sounds within them, tam-tam-ta-ta-tim-tam.

* * *

I experienced for the first time what is called an “airlock” while speaking at a solidarity event in Berlin. I was joining remotely from Israel and was supposed to say something, read something aloud. My reading included a poem by Yehuda Amichai: *El male Rachamim* (“God Full of Mercy”).

El male Rachamim,

ilmale HaEl male Rachamim

haju HaRachamim BaOlam WeLo rak bo.

God full of mercy,

were God not full of mercy,

there would be mercy in the world, not only in him.

I drew breath, shaped the first sound – "E" – and stalled. The words caught in my throat. I tried to clear it to get the air flowing again. It did not help. The audience in Berlin flickered on the screen in front of me. Had they noticed anything? Were they already irritated? I was slipping out of the rhythm of the words. Trying to counteract, to fall back into the rhythm, I started tapping my foot, an old musician's exercise.

1, 2, 3, 4.

1, 2, 3 (breathe out), 4 (breathe in), "*E*".

"*E*"

"*E*".

El male Rachamim. God full of mercy.

1. 2. 3. (Breathe out). 4. (Breathe in).

* * *

Scarcely to be found in the Israeli newspapers are accounts of what life is now like for the people in Gaza. I know the figures – the number of dead, wounded, starving; the number of destroyed houses. I see the images of endless landscapes of ruins and dust. Yet everything feels secondhand, far away. I search for a voice behind the images and numbers; I want to hear such a voice, within my own four walls, to face it.

The few people I know from Gaza now live in Germany. So I ask a Palestinian friend from Nazareth to connect me with M., an acquaintance of his from the Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza that he has spoken about many times.

M. is an English teacher. He and his family are now sheltering in Khan Younis – their fifth stop since the outbreak of the war. Each time the bomb strikes draw closer, he tells me later in conversation, they flee further. But the Gaza Strip is narrow. There is no real escape and no safety.

M. sounds like someone describing what it is like to be trapped in a cage with a predator. It is about constantly trying to anticipate which corner the predator will move toward next. But beyond pressing oneself against the bars of the cage (pulling one's own children close), there is nothing one can do.

My first attempt to arrange a conversation with him fails.

"We'll talk tomorrow, Wednesday," he writes.

"Tomorrow is Thursday," I write.

“What time?” he asks. “What time is it where you are right now?”

And I think: But we should be in the same time zone – he’s only 170 kilometres away from me in Tel Aviv (I wanted to know exactly how far away he was. At first, the app responded: “Route cannot be calculated.” I switched to the straight-line function, which gave me 170 kilometres).

Later, during our call, fighter jets fly over my head, and I wonder: how long does a fighter jet take to cover a straight-line distance of 170 kilometres? How long before the thunder stops over me and starts roaring over him?

I write to him: “Same time as Gaza.”

He does not reply.

When we do finally talk, I first ask him about the sense of time. He thinks for a moment.

“It took me 15 years to build my house. It took only a few seconds to almost completely destroy it with a single artillery shell.” 1, 2, 3, 4.

I scroll through my messaging apps. Every day, dozens of appeals pile up there – for donations and acts of solidarity, for Jewish-Arab gatherings, for wounded Israeli soldiers, for protecting aid convoys to Gaza from attacks by radical settlers, for the families of the hostages, for dispossessed Palestinian communities, for internally displaced Israelis, for the bereaved, for children, widows, for lonely elderly parents.

In the evening comes a call for a rally in the north of Israel to end the war and release the hostages. It’s not too far from where I live. I put on a black shirt that says “De-Mo-Kra-Tia” (a relic from earlier times) and drive there. Since the outbreak of the war, GPS jammers have been deployed across the entire region to make it harder for enemy rockets to locate their targets, and I find the place with difficulty.

The last kilometre I cover on foot. The closer I get to the demonstration, the more people I see heading for the same place. Some wave flags, some carry banners with anti-government slogans, and others wear shirts with anti-war messages. There aren’t many of us. Onlookers in cars and on street corners follow us with tired eyes; some curse us, insult us as traitors, wish us death – but they do so with weary gazes and hollow voices. They receive no response and expect none; everything feels like a compulsory exercise, like a ritual worn thin and emptied out.

Later, at the rally, an elderly man stands at the edge of the crowd, leaning on a cane to which a limp Israeli flag is tied. He is weeping to himself, silently. He cries throughout the entire demonstration, never once looking toward the stage or at the angry speakers. Instead, his eyes, reddened by tears, gaze into the crowd without fixing on any particular point. Only when the mother of a hostage begins to speak does he briefly straighten up and turn his face toward the stage. He listens to her speak, in short sentences, of her days and nights. The demonstrators at the rally fall silent almost at once and stand as if frozen. The only sound to be heard is the flapping of flags in the light wind. The mother’s voice, carried by loudspeakers, is scattered and absorbed by the low walls enclosing the square, breaks against shop windows, police cars, and the huge billboards. She reaches the end of her speech. Around me, people open their mouths to shout. I open my mouth too, again and again, not knowing myself whether I am trying to shout or gasping for air.

* * *

Mohammed Al-Rimlawi was one of the students in the English club that M. had founded in the Jabalia refugee camp. A few weeks ago, Mohammed's mother went with his youngest sister in search of one of the increasingly scarce power sources to charge her phone. When they returned, their house was no longer standing. Mohammed, his father, one sister, and two brothers lay buried under the rubble.

Once more a factual, objective listing. Again I search for words.

I enquire about the English club. The students in the club (boys only) are between 10 and 14 years old.

"There are hardly any foreigners here in Gaza," M. says. So, to offer them a window onto the world, he has built an international network of mentors who practice English with the students over video calls.

"All they know is Gaza," he says about his students. "I don't want that. That's not good."

In the meantime, the school has been partly destroyed, and the students have fled with their families to sites throughout the Gaza Strip. He keeps coming across them, by chance.

"What questions are they asking right now?"

"They are not asking any questions," he says at first. The sunburned faces of the children – the majority live in tents run by aid organisations and spend most of their time outside – remain expressionless, their mouths closed. I press him. This cannot be; after all, children ask questions; that's what children do: they ask questions. (What questions do my children ask.)

M. thinks for a moment. Then he says:

"When."

That is what they are asking.

When.

Exhale. Inhale.

1,2,3,4.

This text is an edited excerpt from Ofer Waldman's book Verkämpftes Land (Wallstein Verlag, 2025). Translated from the German by Anton Baer | Voxeurop.



Ofer Waldman was born in Jerusalem and moved to Berlin in 1999 as a member of Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. He studied at the Berlin University of the Arts and performed with leading orchestras in Germany and Israel. Following his music career, Waldman earned a joint PhD from the Free University of Berlin (German Literature) and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Jewish History), and worked as a freelance author and journalist. In 2021, he won the ARD German Radio Play Award for "Adolf Eichmann:
Ein Hörprozess". His books include Singularkollektiv. Erzählungen (2023), Gleichzeit. Briefe zwischen Israel und Europa (2024, with Sasha Marianna Salzmann),
and Verkämpftes Land. Beobachtungen (2025). He chaired the New Israel Fund in Germany from 2016 to 2019. Since August 2025, he has headed the Tel Aviv office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Photo credits: Bernd Brundert.

Published August 4, 2026
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/intimacy-of-war/

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