

Thea Lim

*Rascal Children*¹

At Sunday bedtime, my four-year-old chooses his pajamas himself, his black polyester basketball shorts, like what uncles wear to the laundromat. Then he dances, the crouch-and-twist move universal to under-5's. "Why are you dancing," I ask. Tien steadies himself, hand on my shoulder. "Because it's time to put on my shorts." Every night, after I close the door to my children's bedroom, I walk two steps to the stairs then I sit and scroll.

Here is a picture of Iyad, wearing a pink shirt, long sleeves rolled to just above the elbows.² It would be hard for a five-year old to roll sleeves so neatly, he must've stood still while someone did the rolling for him, a process. He's put on both straps of his backpack, he means business, he's doing the thumbs up. Iyad was killed in October 2023 when Israeli fighter jets attacked Jabalia Refugee Camp.³

Jamil's got blue aviators on, already pulling them off at four years old. His older sisters, Huda and Kinda, not much bigger than him, are holding him tightly, hand around his arm, another on his shoulder, because they love him, because he was trying to do a runner, or both. The three of them are in matching outfits: blue palm trees and hibiscus on white. A t-shirt for Jamil, halter dresses for Huda and Kinda, dressed for a party. When Israel ordered an evacuation of Gaza City, Huda, Jamil, and Kinda fled, but when Israel bombed the border crossing to Egypt⁴ they went back. They were killed by Israeli airstrikes in their home, with their parents Heba and Ayman, on October 16th 2023.⁵

The first photo of Suzan that crosses my screen: in her school uniform, sweet flyaways around her crown, about to smile, but not yet.⁶ She was born forty days before Tien, on the third day of the third month, "special in everything," her mother says.⁷ In the next photo, Suzan is glam: a filter

makes the pink of her lips and her lace dress pop, and she carries a prized possession – white handbag with a circle handle. One more picture, seated in dad's lap: she still has her baby fatness, her face no bigger than your palm. If she was your child, on the day of her birth, you'd picture her carrying that special date all her life, far past the point where you could see. Four and a half years later, on another mirror date – the tenth day of the tenth month – she was killed with her father Ahmed by an Israeli airstrike⁸ during Operation Swords of Iron.⁹ They are survived by her mother.

Beirut is such fun. In the news photo she is wearing a pink sweatshirt with a face printed on it – big cartoon eyes, rosy cheeks, laughing mouth – and she matches its expression of delight, she is cracking up. Her hair travels in any direction it pleases. Her hands are open in her lap, like she was clasping them then they parted from excitement. She was born the day of the Beirut explosion and her parents named her to remember the two hundred who died that day. Beirut was killed in an explosion “when an Israeli missile struck her home in Khan Younis, a city in the southern Gaza Strip, which had been designated as safe by Israel,”¹⁰ at the end of last October.

Monday morning, my seven-year-old Yung and I walk to school. In the yard, the kids line up in their classes, making long snakes that wriggle with nerves. I never noticed what children are really like, until I had my own: how serious they are, how hard they try. Children one grade below Yung look tiny, their backpacks the size of houses. Photos I took of Yung only a few months ago surprise me, I can't believe she was ever so small.

Hind is growing, changing. At first, she is probably four in her photos: shoulders back, chin forward, smiling like she has a fantastic secret, pearl barrettes. Later, she is six, but she looks seven or eight. She's experimenting with clothes in sneakers and a plum-coloured tracksuit. She looks with love at whoever is taking her picture, but her smile is quieter.¹¹ On January 29th, Hind, her uncle, her aunt, and her three cousins

were fleeing Gaza City in a Black Kia when Israeli tanks fired on them. Her uncle called the Red Crescent for help, but everyone was shot but Hind, a 6 year-old, and her 15 year-old cousin, Layan; then Layan was shot. The Red Crescent operator, Rana, told Hind to hide under the car seats, then Rana stayed on the phone with Hind for three hours, reading her the Quran, until after the sound of the car door opening, the call disconnected. For two weeks, Hind's mother, Wissam, waited at the hospital for her every day. "Every time I hear the sound of an ambulance, I think, maybe it's her."¹² Hind's body was found on February 10th, still in the car. Close by, in an ambulance destroyed by Israeli shelling, were the bodies of the paramedics trying to reach her, Ahmad Almadhoun and Yousef Zaino.¹³

Baby Ayool has that classic look of baby consternation. A little cabbage, wrapped in pink clothes and a white eyelet blanket, with a pom pom tie. She is dressed for her mother Ahed's funeral. Ahed was shot in the head by an Israeli sniper while looking for her husband, in January 2024 in Dura, six months after giving birth. She was 21.¹⁴

This one playing in the waves, Sabrina, is a toddler. May 2024, the caption on the video says she is wearing her favourite dress.¹⁵ It's a black tank dress with white stripes, what a posh empty nester would wear to the beach, so funny to see in child-size. Sabrina investigates the water's edge, unsure if it is safe. She gathers faith. She walks out, her feet stuttering, she is three. Then, very carefully, she plants her palms in the wake. The splash, the cool. The video ends. Sabrina is buried three days later in her dress.¹⁶

In the afternoon, I scroll on PetFinder. Last October our family dog was killed. There are rubber marks on the road where the car tried to stop. The slap-in-the-face shock of it: one moment she was alive, a second later, not. When I told my children, they screamed, mouths gaping, eyes shut. I kept thinking they would get tired and stop. *A dog. I'm talking about a dog.* I can't shake lines from the poem "Animals" by Hayan Charara, about his

family pets, killed when Israel bombed Lebanon in 2006.¹⁷ *Look. They're animals. Which is to say, there are also people. And I haven't even begun telling you what was done to them.*

A mum, Asmaa, writes a poem to her children. *How lucky I was to have had you so beautifully so fully. I questioned myself, what stroke of luck having you was, which filled me with so much love and gratitude.* She posts a photo of her brown-haired girl holding a kitten to her cheek, wearing a black party dress with an elastic waist, and her boy in his blue jeans and a navy hoodie, eyes down.¹⁸ All these photos of these children are so ordinary, you forget their occasion. Then you remember Asmaa's children have died.

On the same August day in 2024 that Muhammad Abu Al-Qumsan returns home after picking up the birth certificates for his three-day old twins Asser and Ayssel, to find them and their mother Jumana murdered by an Israeli tank shell, dropped on the house where they'd been displaced,¹⁹ the X account @GazaMartyrs writes, "This will be the last post we share here. We believe there is no point in telling our human stories anymore; everyone has grown accustomed to seeing us killed."²⁰ Then, twenty-one minutes later, the account starts again.

Making dinner, I get a notification: it's a photo of Yung's art, from a workshop where we made paper birds to remember a child killed in Gaza. Yung chose two names from a list, I read out the letters and she printed them: Mariah, 12, Mariam, 4. After, Yung said, "it's sad but I don't really get it." Adults say the same: a friend gently explains that he doesn't care about Palestine. "I can't connect to it." Posters go up in my neighbourhood, against the Palestine rallies "blaming and shaming citizens for events that are happening a world away."²¹ Why do you look, my spouse asks, because I'm not one for scrolling; I turn off the radio when the news is grim.

Sure I get it, a friend who reads this essay says, you have children, they are children. I'm like a politician who says "as a father to daughters, I care about women." Another friend cautions this essay and these deaths "come across as something that just happens because that's what is considered

normal for ‘them,’ Palestinians. All these dead children haven’t moved politics at all.”

But these issues, of my usual habits, why I in particular look, and how I in particular appear to the reader, usually so important in a personal essay, now do not apply. Neither do other essay rules: don’t use someone’s story without permission, hide the identities of children, show don’t tell. The bald facts have torn a hole, exposed our physics, like when you fall: the unreadable number of civilians dead, proof of their non-combatant status the fact that they are under ten years of age; “620,000 have not been to school in six months...Over 17,000 are alone without any family to care for them”²²; photographs of a toddler’s hollow cheeks the day she died of policy-engineered starvation,²³; “Benjamin Netanyahu rejected a deal for a five-day ceasefire with Palestinian militant groups in Gaza in return for the release of some of the hostages early in the war...rejected the deal outright...soon after 7 October”²⁴; the bombing of all the hospitals²⁵; the bombing of all the universities; the bombing of a tent camp for refugees in the safe zone²⁶; the cratering of a tent camp for refugees in the safe zone²⁷; the burning of a tent camp at a hospital²⁸; and if you are reading these words which are written in English it’s likely the government you voted is enabling this, and because it’s in our nations’ muscle memories to wipe away children’s bodies, your body too remembers.

Look, because it is the barest that is asked of us. Look, to absolve ourselves through our caring, and it doesn’t work. Look, and it is not enough, not even near.

Al-Jazeera maintains a list of the names of Palestinian children killed in Israeli attacks in the past one hundred and eleven days. Abdel, Basil, Eliana, Rose, zero years old. Canada, Hala, Judy, Moaz, two years old. Farah, Kenan, Sarah, Tala, nine years old. It is January 25th, 2024, an hour past dinner. The list was last updated this morning. It takes one hundred and twenty-one rotations of my scroll wheel to get to the bottom, where it states, “These are the names of only half of the children killed.”²⁹ Now it is February 12th. Now it is March 14th. Now it is May 26th. I want to stop looking. Now it is September 9th.

Yung has a long phrase she repeats to say goodnight. She reels it off with the droning rhythm of a prayer: I love you more than anything but not more than papa, you're the best mama in the world and the universe and outer space, I give you infinity hearts. Sometimes Tien tries to say it too but he can't remember all the words. I cannot, or I do not, watch the video of Khaled Nabhan, gripping the body of his three-year-old granddaughter Reem, the day she was killed when Israel bombed Nuseirat refugee camp nearby, in November 2023. But I know he tried to open her eyes because the video has become famous. I know Reem was wearing her curly hair coiled in two buns, because there are illustrations of her; I think about the hands that parted her hair that morning and fixed the buns in place. I know what Khaled says to Reem, because it is written on placards when I march with a thousand other families, my children beside me telling me about their tired feet. Khaled says, you are the soul of my soul. Later he says, my heart, my two eyes.³⁰ The way it comes to him: it must have been something he said to her all the time, every goodbye, every night before sleep. Four weeks before my first child was due, a test found something wrong; the doctor said the risk was stillbirth. I kept saying to the baby I was carrying, I thought we would have more time together, but this was all we got. And then Yung was born, weighing less than a bag of sugar, but alive. Khaled Nabhan must've said it a thousand times, you are the soul of my soul, my heart, my two eyes. But he doesn't say it anymore.

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