

Upon seeing the girl who survived the fire, before history may name her

Julia N. / May 26 2025

The room stills; the air retreats, leaving only emptiness. This, for the child unable to breathe as her oxygen is committed to flame, flames that may engulf her.

It is only through a screen that her silhouette—small frame and teardrop ponytail—is visible against a hellscape. I can only imagine the sounds. The screams and crackling and chaos and agonies uncounted. The smell is another thing altogether.

I, the viewer, feel sick. This photo has left a gutting, hollow sensation in my abdomen. It has stuck a marble in my throat. Every pore of my skin pricked.

I type desperately to find more about her: “little girl in the window aflame, Israeli bombing,” “Israel Gaza young girl fire,” “girl in flames, school, Gaza City.” Nothing of this photo comes up. There are so many cases like this, unnamed children. I type “Palestinian child burning in window,” and then delete it because it is so repulsive. This searching, so repulsive. It is only “Silhouette Palestinian girl flames” where I find a few articles who have written about her:

Ward Jalal Al-Shaikh Khalil, age five.

I read that she emerged from the fire that consumed her school-turned shelter. I read that her mother and her siblings were burned alive; either killed upon impact or subject to a gruesome death I cannot even imagine. Her family, turned to ash by American-Israeli bombing. Only she has survived, this small girl. Entering a new reality even more brutal than the nightmare she fell asleep to, now alone. I do not know what mercy is— if I am to feel relief.

I leave my bed and go to my journal that is stuffed with tokens from home. I have seen an image like hers before. In the pocket of the back cover of my notebook I keep a brown paper envelope. In it, there is a photograph of another little girl: fleeing naked in the street, crying in what appears to be excruciating pain after being severely burned by an American napalm strike. Nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc. I put the image back in the envelope and press it gently between my palms, as if doing so is some sort of prayer or means to soothe its content.

The photo was given to me by a sister and nonviolent peace activist of sixty years. It is considered a symbol, an iconic image depicting the brutality of the Vietnam war. It is titled: “Napalm Girl.” It won the Pulitzer Prize. She gifted it to me with intent to sustain memory. A prayer card in its own way, to provoke mediation.

I am not sure of the use of symbols anymore.

Is this image not enough to make us burn up, grief thick as smoke? I think of Aaron.

I imagine 4x6 photos of Ward Jalal Al-Shaikh Khalil, shared widely, perhaps in the not-so-distant future. The still that captures the moment she lost everything she has ever known, might one day be framed in an exhibit or a memorial to the Genocide of the Palestinian people. I cannot bear to think of it being named some clinical title: “Burning WCNSF-Wounded Child, No Surviving Family”—given awards by agencies that have or remain complicit or indifferent to inciting her slaughter.

I write on a piece of paper: *Ward Jalal Al-Shaikh Khalil, burned from an air strike by Israel and the United States. Loved. Innocent.*

There is an obligation to commit her to memory: the obliteration of her family, the boiling of her skin, the destruction of her school, the displacement of her people, the erasure of her ancestors, the trauma she is yet to endure. But her stolen air has not yet become a symbol, not yet ceased. Upon this hour this image is likely to be made again—her cousins, her classmates, her friends, her people—incinerated. There are so many photos. So many videos.

I place the note between my palms. I put it in the envelope. All I can bring myself to do at this hour, thousands of miles from you, is a prayer of sorts, a feeble attempt to soothe myself.