

Children of God

Program Note

Children of God is dedicated to young victims of political violence.

Rachel Corrie was a college student and peace activist who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer while guarding a Palestinian home. Portions of the text are taken from her emails home.

The second song portrays a former child soldier who is now at a rehabilitation camp, listening to word games played by other children and remembering his past.

The final song is a tribute to the four girls killed in the 1963 Birmingham church bombing. It depicts their last day, as they make their way to Sunday school, and closes with a paraphrase of the hymn words, "There is a balm in Gilead."

Commissioned and premiered by Alexis Tantau.

Children of God

Texts by Francesca Soriano Hersh (Rhyming texts by the composer)

Rachel Corrie

There is too much blood to water
The orchards of Rafah.

I see orchards and greenhouses and fruit trees destroyed - years of care and cultivation. I think of you, how long it takes to make things grow, what a labor of love it is.

Beautiful child, turned to the wide world.
How do we write you, how do we sing you?

*In Palestine for two weeks and one hour now,
still have very few words to describe what I see.*

Words only echo, a pale picture of
Love or the rumble of bulldozers.

*An eight-year-old shot and killed by an Israeli tank-
the children murmur his name to me - Ali ...*

The word "bulldozer" does not mark its size,
The steel blade. How small you look, how delicate.

We are all kids curious about other kids.

The word "courage" cannot summon the strength that held you there
Minute after minute, just you and your beating heart.

We cannot leave you lying there, Rachel,
Crushed in the earth. We gather you up,
Carry you with us across a thousand streets,
Into a thousand homes, held in a thousand hearts,
But no matter how we breathe on your picture, you are still,
Silent.

(The verses in italics are quoted from Rachel Corrie's emails home to her family.)

The Game

Djeng djeng
Djanga djeng
Djeng djeng djanga
Neka Ranga
Rang Nek Planga
Plang Nek Danga
Tik Tak Deka
Nosur Reka
Nale Chembo
Pleka Tempo

I gave you my gun for some bread
A cot to sleep in, meat twice a week.
But bread tastes like dust and I cannot sleep
Without dreaming.
Bread blood meat sleep

Djeng djeng, etc.

They came for me on a hot afternoon.
My mother told me "go, or they will kill us all."
At first we were apprentice killers. Homework:
Tear the child from her womb. Rape the smallest.
Learn to close your heart to suffering.
Rape kill take steal

Djeng djeng, etc.

Every day for three years I went to war
The way other children go to school. I can clean a gun,
Carry a pack, shoot a stranger or my neighbor
The way you might sign your name or wave goodbye.
Shoot loot gun run

Djeng djeng, etc.

At night I lie awake and still, listen to the other children sleep,
Then I march the fence line,
Ghost soldier, the weight of my gun still drags on my shoulder.
No bullets now, but I gather stones to fill my pockets.

March torch stones bones

La, la, etc.

My stones bring sleep, two clutched in my hands, a dozen
Under my pillow, pulling me down for the last hour of night.
Each night I dream I am dead. Or is that called a nightmare?
Night fight dawn gone

Djeng djeng, etc.

The children swarm around me.
They are so loud in their games, their fights.
I count my stones while the others play,
Measure and weigh them, see their loft, their target.

Four Girls

Four girls
So strong, ready
For anything, chalk
In their pockets, hopscotch
Anytime, math problems,
First pair of high heel shoes.

Warriors born in a tangled time,
Child soldiers, battles everyday
But peacetime too, so much laughter.
So tender, four girls, alive
In a world without mercy
Full of grace.

Made their way through thick heat
Braids all done up and Sunday best
Made their way slowly, drew
In the dust with a polished toe,
Found something new under every leaf
On their way to church,
On their way to church.

Four sweet girls woke up that day
In the eye of the storm

Big thoughts on their minds
Of a Sunday afternoon quiet and sweet
Cool shade on a front porch
And the singing in church
And the singing in church.
Glory

Four lost children
Never came home.
Held in that singing,
wrapped in the cloak
of that day.

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There is a balm in Gilead
That makes the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead,
That heals the weary soul.

(Paraphrased from the traditional hymn.)