

Haifa Abu AL-NADI

On the Body

Once upon a time, there was a little girl. A teenager. She was the youngest, the most fragile, and the only invisible child in her family. One day, she got strangely sick, and she had to stay home. She was afraid, and her fear seemed to synchronize with her sickness. Her mom was out to the grocery store, so the girl spent almost two hours waiting for her to come home. As she waited, she wondered what she was going to do about the thick black blood gushing out of her body, drowning her underwear. Those two miserable, confused, painful hours seemed like a century. She could not sit. She could not move. The moment she realized that the blood was not only black, she tried to use tissues to scrub out the varied shades of red. She realized that red can come in different colors, and that she was no longer the same child anymore. She, the girl in red, was older now.

“You are a big girl now,” she was told by the authorities at school, where she used to sing. “Big girls are not allowed to sing in public, in front of men.” She was forced to quit.

While she was being silenced by force, her body did not stop growing, speaking in its own way. It felt like she was growing up in the body of a stranger, a bigger-breasted body she could not recognize or make friends with. Being in a conservative school made things harder. Hiding in loose clothes seemed to be the simplest, quietest solution for the shame and embarrassment that had somehow become the truth she lived.

That long period of silence was about to break. Her body was looking for a medium to embody. In search of this medium, she began her journey of reading in both Arabic and English. She read almost every single book in the school library. Then, after a period of charging herself with the energy of the printed word, followed by adequate think-time, a spark deep inside of her was lit and she started writing.

Writing for her became a ladder. Each rung of the ladder became a realization of (rather than a solution for) the problems created by her growing body. Her body, formerly an obstacle she could not overcome, blossomed through writing and became synonymous with the inner strength that would pave the way for her second book of short stories, entitled *Propositions*.

The following is an excerpt from a story in *Propositions*, entitled “Bodies”:

She believed that he liked the bodies of strong women, such as Diana Krall. She sensed this the minute he sent her a link to one of Diana Krall’s songs. Her many curves aroused his desires. She was utterly white! Utterly blonde! With compact, luscious lips! Her green eyes were the color of his tie. Two bobwhites lived in her breasts. They never stopped singing! Her hair was loose and flowing.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 14, 2018

Al-Nadi (Jordan), Ali (Pakistan), Goldberg (Venezuela), Pachyan (Armenia)

For electronic texts, please visit: <http://iwp.uiowa.edu/archives/iowa-city-public-library-presentations>

For video archives, please visit: <https://www.icpl.org/video/series/international-writing-program>

A fine figure she had, replete with expression. Her arms were intimate with the emergence of light coming from his eyes, when he recalled the beauty of women’s bodies he once saw in a picture one of his girlfriends emailed. They were a group of naked women whose exposed breasts had the letters of the word “freedom” written on them. He was allured by the word and how it was written more than the nudity itself—that’s exactly what he wanted to convince her of, that he wasn’t at all interested in the nude bodies he saw!

She tried to inveigle him mischievously so he would describe for her all the details he saw in the bodies in that picture. She wanted to know about the kind of curves he liked and those he didn’t, because his comments about the picture and his extreme admiration of the naked bodies in it irritated her. She became absent-minded as she followed the sparkling light in his eyes every time he repeated “bodies, bodieeeeees” with seductive intent. Surely, he did not literally mean to seduce her, though he often admitted to his non-purity of intention.

When she returned home, she flew to her room, locked the door, turned on her laptop, and googled Diana Krall’s pictures...

(If you would like to know what will happen in that story, you should attend my reading at the Prairie Lights on the 14th of October.)

This girl’s state of being transformed into a sense of becoming. Writing made her balanced. Now, she often writes women who long for the child inside, women who want to glow, thrive, and be transcendent.

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who grew up to become the woman you see today: the woman whose truth has moved beyond being ashamed or embarrassed about her body.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 14, 2018

Al-Nadi (Jordan), Ali (Pakistan), Goldberg (Venezuela), Pachyan (Armenia)

For electronic texts, please visit: <http://iwu.uiowa.edu/archives/iowa-city-public-library-presentations>

For video archives, please visit: <https://www.icpl.org/video/series/international-writing-program>