

Image of an incomplete body*

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I was pushing the wheelchair along the edge of the street toward the house as the rain was pouring down profusely. We were approaching at midnight, me and my crippled uncle, whose flabby body was seated in the chair. From the mid-eighties earlier that day, it had changed to a wintry night, with drizzle and violent downpours of rain. I was used to accompanying my uncle to wherever he wished to go, but I was completely unaware on that night of how annoyed he was at my bad driving of his wheelchair, and of the pain I sometimes caused him in his right leg, which was encased in platinum, in my effort to shorten the nightly stroll to the minimum time possible.

His right arm, amputated from the top of the shoulder, and his right leg, which would have been amputated from the very top of the hip if it weren't for a complicated surgical procedure, were two aspects of an incomplete body, and granted me a first glimpse, from this close distance, of one of the cruelest results of the war. This war which I had never understood because of my youth, but whose final outcome had formed the predominant image of my entire childhood and the greater part of my subsequent life.

In this image, the daily ration of corpses on the TV set formed a kind of spectacle, seeming essentially like any other material that one might see on TV. We use to look upon it, we children, almost as though it were simply cartoons, without finding any sharp separation between the two, haphazardly associated though they were, and without finding any meaning in what we saw, simply because we were accustomed to it. We were disconnected from the reality that these were images of actual Iranian corpses who had been killed by Iraqis and left on the battlefield to draw flies, unburied, awaiting the cameras of the TV program, "Images from Battle".

The sort of death we expected from watching nothing but cartoons – the impermanent kind – didn't seem to be the same as the death which exploded in a maelstrom of tears and wailing in the alleys whenever we heard news of the fall of a "martyr". We were never

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[†]Iraqi, 1973-present.

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invited, as children, to discover the truth about death, whether it was the kind we saw on TV, or the kind that crept into our alley, often at a distance of only a few meters from our own door.

But we, perhaps naturally, were aware that a corpse used to be a living person, and had converted to death, or had entered into it somehow. We knew that death changed things, such that one could no longer point to the body when one meant to indicate the person who used to inhabit it; that in spite of his being placed in a coffin among his family and loved ones, his conscience is actually not there, and that what we see is only the remains of departed joys. Someone points out to him the source from which his life originated, the place to which he must return, and afterward no one can bring him back.

But a cripple seems to be a person in the middle of the road. A person part of whom has entered the world of death, and the larger part of whom has remained behind in the world of the living. Often, cripples speak of the parts they've buried themselves somewhere on the field of battle, or which they've left behind at the military hospital shortly thereafter. They speak of those parts as though they had become independent selves. One will say, "My arm," knowing that it's no longer under his control and has simply become a lifeless thing out there in the world, thinking of it as something noble, or as though it were the strongest part of his body and the war had forced him to abandon it.

He's still a person chained to life, this cripple, but he thinks about that part of him which died, and knows that his relationship with death is more serious than any relationship other people, whole of body, have experienced. He still preserves a crisp memory of that encounter, the pain of which will not easily be erased, when part of his body, and possibly part of his soul, disappeared between the jaws of death.

Each of these mental associations has been forged by an intimate closeness to a body which has continued to suffer at length from the effects of that losing encounter with death. That's what happened to my paternal uncle, Ali Abbas Saad, on one of the crossroads of the war. That encounter dropped him and the life he was stuck with onto a road he had never planned on traveling.

In cartoons, a hero might lose a body part, and the story's plot would then involve him going on a voyage to recover it. Something like this happens in the cartoon series, "Khumasi," for instance, where the principal hero eventually has two artificial arms attached, after having lost them in a battle with one of the bad guys. By degrees, the new arms become better incorporated with the hero's body, until at last they become completely indistinguishable from the arms he lost.

The hero's arms in this cartoon – which appeared on Iraqi television for the first time in 1988 – have a more dramatic counterpart in real life. The dream of regaining one's lost body part becomes an obsession for cripples without any mental power to curtail it, to curtail

their dreams or their imagination, under the compulsion of the mental and emotional image that the cripple retains of his “true” self, which has accompanied him for the greater portion of his life. The collection of photographs in his closet, for example, or hanging on his wall. Then there’s the simple forgetfulness, when he’s sitting at the table and tries to pick up a glass with the lost arm; or when a mistaken nerve impulse from the brain commands the missing hand to grab a towel in the bathroom.

The greater part of these imaginary selves arise spontaneously, and unconsciously, on the part of most cripples. I pondered how this distorted self-image is reflected in behavior by considering my uncle, Ali Abbas, and my other paternal uncle, Abdullah Abbas, who lost his left foot in a land mine explosion during the same war.

Ali was unable, it seemed to me, to forget how graceful and good-looking he had been. He had many photos taken with an instant camera, where he was sitting with his friends around a drinking table in one of the hotels on Abu Nuwas street, and the arm which he later lost appeared plainly, white and whole, protruding from a short shirt-sleeve. There’s a black and white photo of me as a small infant, after I had arrived from the hospital, and on the right of the picture Ali’s arm appears extending from the sleeve of a tight shirt with a large, high collar, after the Prince Charles style prevalent in the seventies.

The war which came afterward with a sweeping strength was just a serious mistake as far as the concerns of a young man like Ali, not even twenty yet, who was confident in his gracefulness, and living in the hopefulness of the beginning of a life full of promises of joy and excitement, disinterested in the furious political fighting of the time, and immersed in the life of the youth. Ali wasn’t a part of anything. The heat of political foment didn’t entice him, not because he took a clear position with respect to politics, but because he was a simple person and not exposed to the limited degree of culture which encourages the youth to get worked up over political action. He possessed nothing other than his gracefulness and the promise which all young people bring, not to mention his health. Therefore the loss of his arm and the serious wounding of his leg, which placed him in the wheelchair for many long years, was naturally an unexpected development, a painful burden, and a test of his faith in everything.

In the summer of 1988, less than a month after the end of the Iraq-Iran war, I was conscripted into the army for training. Also around that time, my uncle Ali moved with his wife to live with us in a room of our rental house.

I was carrying a small transistor radio in my bag when I signed up at Nahrawan training camp, and listening on the FM wave to the end of an episode of “Khumasi,” which Iraqi television had begun to air in the morning during summer vacation. I was scrawny and small, and I couldn’t find any boots my size in the training camp storehouses. I think I must have still been a child, because I was on the point of crying about not being able to keep up

with the cartoon series. I listened to many episodes of the show through the radio, and until the end of the training period I continued to suffer from a spiritual rift, between the image of myself which was reflected by my interest in cartoons, and the image of myself training to use weapons and running across the outdoor training square at 6 a.m., enduring the insults of training instructors and drill officers.

The two months which I spent in that camp were a nightmare which has continued to haunt me over the years. I came to know what it meant to be a soldier, and what sort of life was awaiting me when I enlisted that day in the actual army, and entered true combat and war.

It was also a cheerless opportunity to get to know close up what I had seen on “Images from Battle” on the TV set, to see how the troops suffered throughout the eighties. At least I now knew the smell of military life and war.

I understood that the exceptional and peculiar members of the herd could never live in the army, nor would their suffering lessen over time. Such was the situation with Adnan, a soldier and student in the second intermediate rank, who was excessively fat, and served as the butt of the officers’ insults and sarcasm. He was always at the end of the pack racing past the cement poles in the marching square. He was punished with an extra lap of running more than once because of this. And one day, while running his extra lap, he fell unconscious. The water which they poured on his face failed to wake him, but mixed with dust and formed a red clay paste that soiled his hair and clothes. Finally they dragged him by the feet to the sleeping quarters, surrounded on all sides by the laughter of the superiors and some of the student-soldiers.

Adnan was unnaturally fat, in such a way that his body was also somehow crippled. He didn’t have the measurements of a normal person, and he would have to rid himself of his fat in order to become a soldier suitable for use.

I was excessively thin and scrawny, and suffered from anemia and chronic low blood pressure, so I was also a kind of cripple, and like Adnan was often at the back of the squadron in foot races and repeatedly punished for it. But sudden unconsciousness never came to save me from that torture, as it had with Adnan, and I was too afraid to fake it, so I kept running in misery, though my spastic feet never did manage to get any faster. I discovered that my body would rebel against my commands, and that it couldn’t give any more than it had. And as my knowledge of this fact grew, my suffering seemed to abate. I responded to my body, and I understood its limitations. As long as the strong, athletic bodies of my peers were going to beat me in races, anyway, the pressure and effort of keeping up with them seemed foolish. Thus I went out for exercises in the morning entirely certain that during that day I would run many times as far as the other troops ran. I planned to run less quickly than usual in order to save my energy, and because of this the distance between me and the pack of runners widened greatly. The instructors’ disgust over my body increased, but that was no longer a huge problem for me, as long as those instructors were unable to force me, whatever they did, to run faster.

At that point, I gave up my idea of the perfect body, and reconciled myself with my physical weakness and imperfection. I was proud of how different from the cartoon heroes I was. Childhood had unexpectedly passed, and I was heading into the dark tunnel toward early maturity, and the forceful change into manhood, at a time when there weren't really enough men around.

The principal thing in the experience at the Nahrawan student training camp was that I kept being sent back for multiple periods of service in the Iraqi army. My body was always behind those of the others. I was insufficient and unsuitable for soldiering. I could never really find, at the beginning of each new period of service, any boot to fit my foot. The toes of that funny little foot grew accustomed to freely moving around inside the cavernous space at the front of the boot, and I eventually noticed that that foot would no longer tolerate being confined in a shoe of that size. But this was merely the perception of the fact that my body was already abnormal or less than ideal in some way, a discovery which pales in comparison to the shock that others face when they experience a sudden change in their bodies.

The most profound problem doesn't usually relate to this sudden change in the body's form, but on the nature of how people interact with the handicapped individual, and the lack of respect society has for people with abnormal bodies. In a culture with rural roots, this attitude derives from the glorification of the perfect physical specimen, and the worship of roughness and violence in physical performance.

The owner of a crippled or weak body would ask, openly or not, that others not remind him of his deficiencies, and that people interact with him without any exceptions, distinctions, or special treatment. Society seems unable to comprehend this, or to interact with the handicapped person according to his limitations, except within a very narrowly defined domain.

Meanwhile the handicapped individual himself will often overexert himself trying to perform the tasks he used to perform, in order to prove, to himself first and foremost, that he's able to live in the manner to which he was accustomed, without the use of the lost body part. Others tend to be unaware of this fact, and they ask the handicapped individual to reduce his activity, sidelining him according to what they imagine are the difficulties of life when one's body is incomplete.

Materializing in my mind now is an image of those long evenings, at the popular café in Thawra City (the largest of the residential neighborhoods of Baghdad, known today as Sadr City). I used to struggle against sleep on one of the benches at the edge of the café, waiting for my uncle Ali to finish his game of dominoes with his friends, so that I could conduct him back to the house. I was almost oppressed by serving him. He would inevitably want to rush around from place to place, wandering everywhere he had liked to go before being

crippled, playing dominoes for long hours with one hand. He would even sometimes risk gambling, losing a lot of cash, simply because he desired to play, and to be one with the the image of his usual way of living, which was lost when he was crippled all in one blow. He was completely oblivious at such times. I wasn't suited to dealing with or understanding all of these things very thoroughly. I used to study on the café benches, amidst the hubbub of those sitting around me, perhaps preparing for a biology test the following morning, waiting impatiently for my uncle to get tired of being away from home and let me drive him to the house, where I would pawn him off on his wife and then devote myself to my own affairs.

After some years of personal setbacks, Ali was able to recover some balance in his life, and started to do freelance work. In the nineties he recovered his ability to walk on two feet, with the aid of a crutch; eventually, he was even able to get rid of the crutch. I still remember the startling image of my visit to his workplace in the famous Marīdī market in the middle of Thawra City, when I witnessed him counting and tallying a large bundle of cash with the fingers of his left hand at an overwhelming speed. It seemed to me at the time, at least on the surface, that he had finally been liberated from the effects of the loss of his arm, and I would go on to believe that he no longer needed that lost arm, and that he would probably do without it even if by some miracle it was possible to recover it.

My experience with feeling weak before the image of the exemplary or perfect body made up a part of the subject matter of my explorations as an author later on. My attention turned to a man with a quickly degenerating body, which let in disease with penetrating speed. This gave me an inside glimpse into the personal experiences of many imperfect bodies, among which those that underwent amputation or dismemberment during the war. This is what led me to a first ontological truth, namely the non-existence of the perfect body in the first place. Every body which moves in the realm of reality deviates on various levels from the so-called ideal or perfect body.

And all of us, to some degree or another, look out from a damaged or diseased body upon the outside world. Faith in the absence of the archetypical body, that's what prepares us for the knowledge that our partial imperfection is the greatest component of our personal view of the world. That's what pushes us to accept and to get past the truth of imperfection and defilement: that it's a fundamental human condition.

Of course we should not simply accept that illness and injury exist – nor should the sick and the injured themselves simply adjust. Like everyone else, they must get past the taboos of referring to their infirmity – like this man with the giant nose, and that man with the toothless mouth, and this bald guy, and that one who stutters, and all of humanity with their many physical and spiritual infirmities, big and small; for it is one of the most common infirmities to be tongue-tied when it really matters.

As long as mankind continues to look upon infirmity as something imposed upon him from the outside, by fate or accident or bad luck, and as long as he continues to see himself as suited to bodily perfection, then the defects that he will perceive to afflict the human body are almost limitless. We start with the crippling effects of war, where parts are severed from the body once and for all, and we end with the temporary or the invisible afflictions of that body.

These days I roam destitute through the streets of Baghdad, in pursuit of work or of something from which there is no redemption, and I see that I never in my life disliked being exposed to numerous kinds of suffering as I strolled through the streets, as much as I do now. I never disliked these streets and the sight of people hiding behind their unknown intentions toward me, as much as I do now. I look upon the bustle of the street, with its cars and its humanity, and upon its perennially hazy horizon, where an unseen cloud is blowing this way, full of smoke and dust and car bomb shrapnel. I look upon the robes and the colored head coverings, upon the cautious women as they hurry across the pavement. I look upon the vendors in kiosks built of tin sheeting, and upon the barren glass façades. I look upon all of this and I sense the immense cheerfulness of this world, which is supposed to be stronger than any individual. It protects the individual, or it frightens him – there's no difference. I sense its cheerfulness, this world's, in the face of an individual act undertaken by a single person. Like what happens on the field of battle, when a person pushes a button and launches a rocket, killing a huge number of people.

What are the limits of possibility? How badly can fear cripple one's life or one's body? One could surely find out by walking through the streets of Baghdad.

Here you can reach out and touch the delicate and ephemeral truth: You might be as cheerful as a butterfly, but your soul cannot save your body whenever it would like.

Here the soul trails behind the body's cries, without any desires except those which are tied to a being's existence, those deep-seated natural instincts in the remote depths of a human being, which push him to survive before all else.

Mere existence, just keeping the body alive. No one really thinks about the soul, for the most part. It's a triumph, and what a triumph! In a battle raging on all fronts, and at all times, too. This is what they call the life of an Iraqi.

Hiding or fleeing, or trying to deceive oneself that the weapon-fire and the car bombs will only ever hurt someone else – those who we see on TV every night, their body parts severed, soaked in their own blood or the blood of others ripped apart in their vicinity. We always see this death as happening "there", and it has been ongoing for more than three decades now. The members of my generation were born to this sort of life, and they have known no other. It's always the death of other people – that's the notion we cling to, as we shrink away from human compassion. The sensation of one's own body, and the assurance that it's safe, has become our principal preoccupation, before all else.