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The Missing Corpse in Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Muhsin Al-Ramli's *Daughter of the Tigris*

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the trope of the missing corpse in two contemporary Iraqi novels: Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) and Muhsin al-Ramli's *Daughter of the Tigris* (2019). Drawing mainly on critical work on the corpse and death studies as well as critical ideas on relics and hauntology the essay asks: What place does the *missing* corpse occupy in a body of contemporary literary outputs that have witnessed a significant engagement with the materiality of the dead body? How is the narrative of the absent corpse structured and framed? How is it experienced and accounted for? What forms and shapes replace the absent body? The essay argues that the missing corpse takes on an "absent presence" that haunts the narrative while the dead body's very disappearance is compensated for through relics, surrogates, replacements, and repetitions. In conclusion, the essay contends that this absent presence further signals a haunted futurity that is entangled in Iraq's history of violence but which, nonetheless, offers the potential for a radically new and democratic vision for the country's future.

Each head had a story. Every one of these nine heads had a family and dreams and the horror of being slaughtered just like the hundreds of thousands slain in a country stained with blood since its founding and until God inherits the earth and everyone on it. And if every victim had a book, Iraq in its entirety would become a huge library, impossible ever to catalog.

(al-Ramli 2017: 12)

In the opening scene of Iraqi Muhsin al-Ramli's novel *The President's Garden* [originally published in Arabic as *Hadaik al-Rais*] (2017), a village wakes up to the discovery of nine banana crates "each containing the severed head of one of its sons" (12).¹ To be sure, the dead body or corpse *remains* — in every sense of that word — a subject of enduring fascination despite or because of its historical familiarity: Jacque Lynn Foltyn, in an editorial on the corpse in contemporary culture, argues that it "has never been a more intriguing, important subject." It appears that this increasing attention to dead bodies is not simply the result of an "uneasiness with death itself in the contemporary secular world, but of a new wave of 'hard' news about natural disasters, terrorism, and ethnic cleansing, all of which have pushed the corpse to the forefront" (99). However, contemporary Iraq occupies a special place in the modern history of the corpse in the popular imaginary. In Western media representations of the events from the Iraq War to the Insurgency, the Iraq corpse has arguably remained contained by what Roger Luckhurst aptly describes as a "very restricted economy of images" of the wounded and the dead (359). Yet, we need only

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observe the persistent, enduring — indeed *remain-ing* — representation of human remains in contemporary Iraqi literature to witness a different and more general economy of images of the corpse.

If contemporary Iraqi literature has any defining figure, theme or locus, it is the corpse because the image of the dead body persistently haunts the narrative of many novels and short stories written by Iraqi writers inside and outside of the country.² From graphic depictions of dismembered body parts to the aestheticisation and memorialisation of individual and collective bodies, the corpse is everywhere in contemporary Iraqi fiction.³ It is plausible, of course, to see the plethora of corpse narratives as a response to what Jolene Zigarovich would call a “bereaved culture” (4) that is still confronting colonial and postcolonial histories of violence as well as regional conflicts.⁴ As is well documented, the modern history of Iraq includes the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), the Gulf war (1990–1991), Saddam Hussein’s oppressive regime,⁵ the UN economic sanctions,⁶ the US invasion of the country in 2003, and the post-invasion civil unrest.⁷ This is in addition to the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State that has caused further unrest, killings and displacements.⁸ So, in many ways, the narrative attempt to explore, open up, and even violate the dead body mirrors the larger attempt to dissect, reconstruct, mourn, and memorialize the wounded or dying body politic of Iraq itself. In what follows, however, I want to focus on one particular sub-trope within Iraqi corpse narratives, namely, the missing, absent, or lost corpse. What happens when the corpse — which is metaphorically everywhere in Iraqi fiction — is literally nowhere, absent, out of place?

This essay focuses on the trope of the missing corpse in two novels produced since 2003: Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* [originally published in Arabic as *Frankishtayn fi Baghdad*] (2013) and al-Ramli’s second-volume novel *Daughter of the Tigris* [originally published in Arabic as *Bint Dijla*] (2019). To read these two very different novels, we must negotiate a central or foundational absence at their center: both texts feature a corpse (or the body parts of a corpse) that remains permanently lost, fugitive, or missing even whilst corpses proliferate in the narrative more generally. Drawing mainly on critical work on corpses and death studies as well as critical ideas on relics and hauntology the essay asks: What place does the missing corpse occupy in a body of contemporary literary outputs that have witnessed a significant engagement with the materiality of the dead body? How is the narrative of the absent corpse structured and framed? How is it experienced and accounted for? What forms and shapes replace the absent body and how is absence itself configured? Finally, what does the absence of a corpse narrative signify within the text itself and within the broader context of the country’s long history of violence and systems of oppression? The essay argues that the missing corpse takes on an “absent presence” that haunts the narrative, while the dead body’s very disappearance is compensated for and displaced onto relics, surrogates, replacements, and repetitions. In conclusion, the essay contends that this absent presence further signals what we might call a haunted futurity that is entangled in Iraq’s history of violence but which, nonetheless, offers the potential for a radically new and democratic vision for the country’s future.

The Material and Immaterial Life of Corpses

In order to examine the trope of the missing corpse and its problematic position as a lack within literary narratives and the socio-cultural and political context of Iraq, it is necessary to start with the materiality of the dead body itself and its equally abstract and elusive signification. As Margaret Schwartz writes, “dead bodies are material things that bear a referential relationship to an absent subject” (1). For Karen-Wilson Baptist, the dead are “suspended within the living flesh” and “exhibit a material subjectivity that simultaneously exhibits both presence and absence, mass, and void” (304). In this account, the corpse is seen as grossly material and fully present at the same time as it is a signifier of a “spectral” person or history that we know was there and is now no longer anywhere.

However, notwithstanding this spectrum or tension between the material and immaterial life of corpses, we must not forget that the corpse has, throughout history, been imbued with multiple layers of symbolic power. In her work on the political life of corpses, for instance, Katherine Verdery notes that “bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time making past immediately present” (27). For Verdery, the corporeality of dead bodies acts as concrete evidence of past and present histories which, in turn, heightens its symbolic function. Julia Kristeva, on the other

hand, famously confers an abject status on the figure of the corpse, underscoring its multiple meanings and the ways in which it “disturbs identity, system and order” (4). For political theorist Jenny Edkins, the corpse is generally regarded as an “inanimate object:”

It has no feeling, no awareness of the dignity or otherwise with which it is treated. When one views the body of a relative, what is most striking is that the *person* is no longer there—there is a clear sense of absence. The body is not alive. It is not living. It is a dead body. And yet [. . .] the body may not be alive, but it is grievable. If there is no body, its loss is felt. (126)

Writing on the relation between grief and the dead body, Michael Sledge underscores the ways in which grief is connected to the presence of a body. If losing a family member is tragic, then it is all the more so when there is no body to bury. As Sledge argues, the reality of death is only made possible by seeing the dead (23). In a similar vein, Robert Pogue Harrison outlines why the dead “matter” to the living, highlighting the significance of the rituals that mark the transition from the world of the living to the domain of the dead:

The obligation [to the corpse] consists in an imperative to dispose of the corpse so as to liberate the person from its tenacious embrace. Funeral rites serve to effect a ritual separation between the living and the dead, to be sure, yet first and foremost they serve to separate the image of the deceased from the corpse to which it remains bound up at the moment of demise. (147)

If, for Edkins and Sledge, it is impossible to confront death without a dead body then for Jessica Auchter, on the other hand, “the material dead body and its role in memorialisation is not simply a matter of its presence or absence, but what it tells us about life and death itself, whether present or absent,” as well as a matter of the manner in which it “haunts us” (*The Politics of Haunting*, 29). In this respect, Auchter’s focus on the notion of haunting here is ultimately about “presence” or the different ways in which repressed or unresolved legacies, histories, and even bodies force themselves into the present.

In these various critical ideas around the corpse, the latter’s status is perceived as complex: it is human but nonhuman, subject but object, animate but inanimate, real but unreal. Yet at the heart of this ambiguity, we must not forget that the corpse remains bound to the social, cultural, and political context from which it derives its meaning. In this respect, and in the same way as their theoretical counterparts, the two selected Iraqi novels underscore the tension and ambiguity inherent in the material and immaterial life of corpses even as they draw attention to the symbolic meaning that the dead body takes on in specific socio-political and historical contexts. Thus, if the two novels construct their narratives around an absence they, nevertheless, lay bare the haunting presence of that which has been forcibly rendered invisible by sovereign and non-sovereign powers. Whilst these texts grapple with the absence of the corpse and the haunting story of the deceased, they configure various strategies to address its material absence at the same time as they assign various meanings and significance to this very condition of absence. As Zigarovich reminds us: “With no knowledge of the grave, no body to venerate, and no relics to touch, survivors of the missing are left with the most fertile imagination,” adding that “without a corpse, most often a spectral metaphor must immediately replace the absent signifier” (7).

Frankenstein in Baghdad

In order to answer the question of what happens when a corpse is absent and how this absence is embodied, we have only to examine Saadawi’s much praised *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. To start with, the narrative features a missing corpse that is, from the outset, cast as ambiguous, uncertain, and indeterminate in status. The novel, which was the first Iraqi literary work to win the International prize for Arabic Fiction, is a surreal tale of trauma and violence in Iraq after the American invasion. Its protagonist, Hadi al-Attag, collects body parts from the bombed streets of Baghdad and sews them together to form a complete corpse that can then have a proper burial. But when a hotel guard dies in a car explosion, his soul goes in search of its missing parts and ends up entering the stitched-corpse. This reanimates the corpse and drives it to seek vengeance on all those destroying the country.

Yet, for an elderly woman, Elishva, this reanimated corpse — referred to as “Whatsitsname” (*shesma* in Iraqi Arabic) — appears to her as her missing son, Daniel, who died twenty years ago during the Iran-Iraq war. While Daniel’s grave was in the “cemetery of the Assyrian Church of the East,” the “empty coffin” means that his body was never recovered or returned (2018: 8). So, in the twenty years since his death and in the absence of his corpse, Elishva’s mourning has remained suspended between a hope that the absence of a body is proof that Daniel is still alive and an inability to properly mourn, and obtain closure on, her son’s death. Writing on the significance of an empty tomb, Philip Schwyzer argues that “part of the function of the tomb or grave is to help us forget the dead body, both by concealing it and by providing a visible and material substitute for it,” or what he elsewhere calls “a surrogate social self.” For Schwyzer, “tombs both cover and cover for the dead.” Yet, conversely, an empty tomb is a constant reminder of a body and its loss, “a loss which is always felt as recent” precisely because the body is not in the place it is meant to be (35). This “paradoxical power of the empty to make the absent present” (35) arguably becomes one of the main justifications behind Elishva’s insistence that her son is not dead.

If Elishva persistently tells everyone that Daniel is alive, she also seeks to compensate for his absent body through an attachment to relics, mainly the picture of Saint George the Martyr “that hung between smaller gray pictures of her son and her husband, framed in carved wood.” Indeed, Elishva also owns and displays two other pictures of Saint George: “One of the Last Supper and the other of Christ being taken down from the cross, and three miniatures copied from medieval icons drawn in thick ink and faded s, depicting various saints, some of whose names she didn’t know [...]” The religious relics are scattered across every space in Elishva’s home: in the parlor, in her bedroom, in Daniel’s room, and in the other “abandoned rooms.” Each evening, the elderly woman conducts a “sterile conversation with the saint with the angelic face” (14). For Elishva, revealingly, the saint is no “abstract speculation” but rather someone who exuded full and concrete physicality and presence: “he was wearing thick, shiny plates of armor that covered his body and a plumed helmet, with his wavy blond hair peeking out. He was holding a long-pointed lance and sitting on a muscular white horse [...]” In his physical proximity, he even appears to her as “one of her relatives” rather than an ethereal mystical figure (14–15).

To this extent, the saint’s image that can be found everywhere in Elishva’s home attests negatively to the void of representation that is the missing corpse of Daniel. It is particularly striking that her focus on the physical features of the saint in the picture stands in sharp contrast to the absent, invisible body of her son. Of course, it is no coincidence that Elishva prays to the icon of the saint because he is deemed the only one with the power to bring her son back. However, at a physical level, the image of the saint also becomes a substitute for the invisibility and absence of her son’s dead body. For Elishva, the religious relics thus offer material restitution for the missing corpse and her acts of prayer stand in for the accompanying mourning rituals. In Kathleen M. Oliver’s words, relics often “replicate, replace, and displace disappearing bodies” so that “instead of the absence that marks the missing body [...] the relic (thing or person) becomes the missing body, the material and metaphorical reliquary for the psychic essence of the dead or absent individual” (15).

Nevertheless, the picture of the saint is not the only relic that Elishva draws on to compensate for the missing body of her son because there is also the figure she calls “Whatsitsname” who “speaks to different economies of relic-memory, or remembering via the visual meditation of bodily parts” (Heo 47–48). While much has been written about Whatsitsname in terms of its gothic or monstrous creation,⁹ one aspect of this figure has been largely overlooked: it becomes a new relic which testifies to the abandoned body parts on Baghdad’s streets as well as Elishva’s son Daniel. Perhaps it is worth recalling here that many religious relics in fact consist of (real or alleged) body parts of the venerated figure: the head, limbs, bones, hair, and so on.¹⁰ For Hadi al-Attag, the Whatsitsname is the product of a labor to suture together the body parts of anonymous corpses scattered across the city into one complete corpse which “would be respected like other dead bodies” (25). In this sense, the Whatsitsname is construed as a material reincarnation or resurrection of all the dead of Baghdad.

If Whatsitsname himself later becomes preoccupied with seeking justice for the various body parts that have become a part of him¹¹ – no matter the monstrous means – Elishva’s relation to the “Baghdadi Frankenstein” takes on a different meaning: he appears to her as her missing son Daniel or, more precisely, as the resurrected body of Daniel. In fact, it is Elishva herself who is symbolically said to bring this inanimate being into life: “With her words, the old woman had animated this extraordinary composite – made up of disparate body parts and the soul of the hotel guard who had lost his life. The old woman brought him out of anonymity with the name she gave him: Daniel” (51). She then proceeds to dress this being in Daniel’s clothes which now smell “strongly of mothballs” (52).

While Elishva recognizes that the being in front of her does not “look much like Daniel,” she refuses to let herself dwell on this inconvenient fact. After all, “she had heard enough stories to explain the differences and the changes – stories told by a succession of women ravaged by the differences and the changes [. . .] and by the realization that they would never again see the missing faces they remembered so well” (52). However, even as Elishva acknowledges all this, she remains determined to see the appearance of Whatsitsname in miraculous terms. Her need to have some form of contact with the missing body of her son is behind her firm determination “to see only what she wanted to see” (53). In short, Elishva chooses to see the Whatsitsname as the body of Daniel himself reappearing to her in both a tangible and perceptible form.

Meanwhile, “the new version of Daniel” is keen to inspect himself against the picture of the missing Daniel noting that “he looked almost like him” (53). This specular narrative brings into sharp play the ways in which the material and immaterial as well as the visible and invisible interact and collude. On the one hand, what we witness is the ways in which the spectral presence of Daniel in the photograph begins to inhabit or is reincarnated through the material presence of the Whatsitsname. This is what Sigrid Weigel – in her discussion of the grammatology of images – calls “a kind of “as-if-presence”” of the deceased son (108). The absent corpse of Daniel the son is rendered present through a surrogate or substitute body that, in itself, is a relic of the dead of Baghdad.

In the remainder of the novel, this ambiguity surrounding the *as-ifness* of the split image is further compounded by the narrative tension between the story of the reanimated corpse Whatsitsname and the story of Daniel’s missing corpse. It is clear that, despite Elishva’s attempt to see Whatsitsname as a surrogate or avatar of Daniel, Whatsitsname himself remains the main axis of the narrative rather than the missing body of Daniel. Arguably, this narrative dominance of the reanimated corpse means that Daniel’s corpse – which, contrary to our expectations, is never discovered – haunts the narrative. In a novel where corpses are not buried and mourned but walk and talk like living beings, Daniel’s corpse becomes all the more missed and missing.

Daughter of the Tigris

To turn to al-Ramli’s *Daughter of the Tigris*, we encounter the ways in which the narrative bears witness to the absent or missing corpse through a heightened focus on the materiality of other dead bodies that infiltrate the narrative and the landscape itself. The missing corpse makes its way into the text through the relational configuration that is evoked between this missing corpse and the other dead of the country. This invocation of the material and immaterial life of corpses and their dialogic relation allows the narrative to shed a harrowing light on the country’s modern history of violence and trauma.

Daughter of the Tigris is the sequel to al-Ramli’s novel *The President’s Gardens*, both of which were hailed by critics for their harrowing portrayal of life in Iraq amidst the Occupation and the Civil War.¹² While the first volume focuses on life under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, *Daughter of the Tigris* is set in the period after the American invasion of the country and follows the continuing stories of the different characters from the first volume. Central to the novel is the narrative of the young, widowed protagonist Qisma who – at the end of *The President’s Garden* – sets out in search of the missing body or body parts of her father, Ibrahim, whose severed head was (as we saw at the beginning of this essay) found in a banana crate. As Qisma travels with her new-born son to Baghdad, she is accompanied by her father’s life-long friend, the religious conservative Sheikh Tariq. In order to

facilitate her journey, Qisma agrees to become a second wife to her father's friend: this means that she can travel freely across the country and, more importantly, that she can investigate the disappearance of her father's body via Tariq's acquaintances.

Qisma's search for her father's missing corpse forms the basis of a narrative that highlights the chaos, violence, and insecurity that has gripped her country. It is clear, once again, that this absent body becomes a privileged signifier for all the other unburied, abandoned, or mutilated corpses in postwar Iraq. Qisma's journey to find her father's body is thus haunted by the surfeit of other corpses she encounters on her way: they cover the entire landscape including fields, on highways, in the sea, in fishing nets (2019: 17, 78, 69–170). The narrative describes corpses that are “thrown into rubbish heaps, into rivers, into gardens, along the sides of roads heading out of the city, onto pavements or into public spaces” (270). What is more, the “hospitals and police departments of the towns and villages [...] receive dozens of unidentified bodies on a daily basis” (78). This panorama of dead bodies scattered mainly in the open landscape – rather than enclosed in tombs, coffins, or graves – transforms the novel into what Allyson Booth calls a “corpsecape” (50). In her *Postcard from the Trenches*, Booth proposes this term to name the “disturbing susceptibility of [dead] bodies to becoming indistinguishable from the landscape of mud and objects through which they moved” (53). *Daughter of the Tigris* captures the “chaos of the occupation and the civil wars” (26) through a heightened focus on the ways in which the land itself has been stripped of all forms of life and all that is left are the throngs of corpses that have become entangled with the natural environment. These corpses also structure the work's emplotment, characterization, and themes. In other words, what we encounter are inner and outer “worlds constructed, literally, of corpses” (Booth 50).

This deindividualized portrayal of corpses is, at one level, indicative of the collective body politic of Iraq itself. For the dead become “a kind of ontological limit point for defining the unstable category of the living as well as a geographic device for marking their movements” (Sherman 49). As the conversation between the characters Bara and Abdullah underlines: “death is waiting for us at the door. It might push it open and come to us at any moment. Indeed, it is even found in this air that we breathe. Life is nothing more than a small margin running around the edge of the page of non-existence. Our lives are only a temporary reprieve from nonexistence [...]” (231–232). The excess presence of corpses is a constant reminder of the temporary or precarious status of those who remain alive. In a setting that has been annihilated by extreme violence, the line between life and death is no longer discernible.

Yet on another level, the deindividualized depiction of corpses in such large and unidentified numbers makes the individual story of the missing decapitated body of Ibrahim all the more present. To clarify this point, as Qisma encounters the heaps of corpses everywhere she insists on inspecting individual corpses to take in all of their material specificity and cause of death. This insistence on recording all the physical details of a dead body is a process of elimination that enables her to identify whether it is her father's body or not. So, in her first encounter with a dead body which was “intact” and could not possibly belong to her father, Qisma “insisted on getting out to examine it.” The reader is told that Qisma “stood staring at it [the anonymous corpse] for a long time, studying the holes in its chest and neck, and the patches of dried blood on its clothes” (17–18).

At the mortuary, Qisma uncovers the legs of another anonymous, decapitated corpse to determine if it belongs to her father. As she examines the different parts of the body – including its amputated “right foot” noting that the “scars from the amputation were long healed” – she is able to tell that the body did not belong to her father because “her father's leg had been severed at the ankle” rather than “the calf,” as is the case with the corpse she is inspecting (141). Despite the evidence suggesting this is not her father's body, Qisma persists. Her examination takes note of “a traditional tattoo of a heart pierced by an arrow with the Arabic letter ‘ayn’ in the middle.” She also studies the corpse's “severed neck without batting an eyelid” (141). She remains preoccupied with the material details inscribed on the corpse after she leaves the morgue as she recalls:

[.]the raw wound that was the severed neck, focused on the act of the slaughter, the moment of the slaughter, the sting of the slaughter, the edge of the knife as it passed over the skin, the way it plugged in, going back and forth through sinew and flesh, the spurts of blood, warm blood, the gurgling of the pharynx, what might be passing through the mind of the slaughtered man in those last seconds of his life. (142–143)

Qisma's re-animation of the anonymous corpse's experience with the very act of beheading marks an instance of intense sensory encounter (or memory) with the dead man's moment of death or dying. This sensory "memory" becomes a means to create an affective encounter with her father's own missing decapitated body and the latter's experience of beheading. In other words, the corpse in the mortuary stands in, and doubles, as her father's corpse through the identification with the wound of the beheading.

In and through her inspection of each corpse, the young woman renders the materiality of her father's missing body more tangible: the corpses become material substitutes for those dead bodies that are missing or unaccounted for (such as Ibrahim's corpse) in the same way that the evocation of their various scars gives material evidence to the scars of the absent dead.¹³ In this way, the traces of past corporeal trauma allow Qisma to see, and feel, the material presence of her father's absent corpse and to conjure his individual trauma. To recall Robert Matej Bednar's argument on scars as a form of material memory:

A scar marks the presence of a traumatic wound [...]. It is a [...] wound that leaves a material trace, which persists from the past into the present, like a relic. A scar is a physical reminder that serves as a reminder not only that a past trauma happened but also that it continues to be present *as* a trauma, not simply *as a memory* of a trauma. (15)

By the same logic, the hundreds of other corpses (and scar relics) in the text act as material substitutes for that which is missing, haunting the landscape and testifying to a history of trauma and violence. The corpses that are conjured render Iraq a place haunted by the political dead, especially since no proper funeral rites or burial can be or will be performed. As Auchter powerfully argues: "dead bodies are themselves traces of political hauntings" precisely because of the ways in which they are often the "targets of power" through various acts of necropolitical violence, for example. At the same time, they "insinuate themselves into the project of radical questioning" (*Global Corpse Politics*, 154–155) through what we might call postmortem resistance. In short, if dead bodies are the subject of various biopolitics and necropolitics, they are also the site through which these power practices are defied and resisted.¹⁴

Even as Qisma envisions a new political order for the country, she remains in the grip of the haunting force of the dead and their past experiences, whether these are visible or invisible. The nightmares, "hallucinations," and "bouts of hysteria" that take over her bespeak of experiences of rape, suffering, and violence. Yet it is not fully clear to the reader whether these hallucinations of being "in bonds, debased and defiled" as well as "blindfolded" are a figment of her imagination or real memories of other past personal, and collective, traumas. Still, Qisma is unable to separate her hallucinations and fears from the broader trauma of Iraq and the violence inflicted on her father's missing decapitated body: "I am like Iraq. That is what has happened to it. I am like my father, for that is what happened to him," she says (352–353). Qisma is here haunted by the violent legacies of the past and present to the point where the very purpose and meaning of her existence changes dramatically.

Qisma also becomes overcome by a nihilistic drive "to slaughter or be slaughtered like her father" (353). When, at the end of the novel, she is kidnapped and dragged to the river, she does not resist (367), submitting instead to her attackers and "stretching out her neck to make the task easier [...]." As one of the attackers "began to saw at her trembling neck with the knife," we are told that Qisma "did not react save for a murmur stifled by the cloth that gagged her mouth." Like the fate of all the other corpses in the country, her decapitated body finds its home in the wider natural environment merging and becoming part of it. As her body landed in the water, she "looked like a large seagull," while the "ragged red wound that was her neck resemble[d] a beak." And when her decapitated body sunk into the river, her severed head was carried away (373). In the meantime, a village would wake up to "find

a banana crate containing the severed head of its daughter Qisma” (377). The young woman who set out, at the start of the novel, to search for her father’s decapitated body encounters the same fate as her familial predecessor. She becomes the missing, decapitated body she herself was searching for.

The story of Qisma’s death, the details surrounding her beheading, and the discarding of her decapitated body in the manner in which it is done, suggests an uncanny resemblance to her father’s story. It is true that Ibrahim’s body remains absent but his story is made present and his death is reembodyed through the narrativization of the daughter’s beheading. The narrative structure and emplotment itself, thus, partake in the very condition of haunting that is evoked throughout the novel. In this sense, what we ultimately encounter is what Julian Wolfreys calls the uncanny relation between haunting and narrative: “it is the act of haunting which returns, insistently, as though haunting were uncannily bound up in the narrative act” (4). In short, the text itself is haunted by the ghosts of singular political trauma and injury.

The Missing Future

In both *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *Daughter of the Tigris*, then, the missing corpse becomes the absent center of a social and political trauma of loss, unrepresentability, and the impossibility of mourning. It remains – even or especially because of its absence – a spectral presence which can be evoked through relics, surrogates, replacements, and repetitions – be they objects, bodies, or even narrative itself. For both authors, the missing corpse’s absence is, thus, experienced as an unredeemable past that, nonetheless, remains in the present and refuses to be repressed or erased. In this final section, however, I will seek to argue that the unresolved status of the missing corpse in both novels not only haunts the present but summons up an ambiguous political future.

To begin with, both *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *Daughter of the Tigris* evoke the question of the future via a specific intergenerational figure: the young grandson of Elishva in the former and the young son of Qisma in the latter. It becomes clear that both characters are cast as fleshly or material symbols of the real or potential return of the missing corpse in and as the future. In a sense that flirts with, but finally avoids, sentimentality, the younger generation come to fill the unfillable gap or wound that is left by Daniel and Ibrahim’s missing bodies.

Firstly, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* culminates with the appearance of Elishva’s twenty-year old grandson to Baghdad. Also named Daniel, the young man makes his way to Elishva’s house to the bemusement of the neighbors, leading them to believe that the old woman’s missing son “really did appear.” This new Daniel “looked sad and romantic like a dejected lover. He walked with slow, hesitant steps, looking around as he went, like a stranger or someone who had left long ago and had just returned” (226–227). Revealingly, he “seemed to be looking for traces of distant memories of the place he came from” (227). When Elishva examines him closely, she also becomes convinced that “it is definitely him,” her missing son: “He had the same look, the same clothes and face, the same smile that spread across his face when his dark eyes met the old lady’s.” Finally, and inevitably, Elishva cannot help but believe that “Saint George the Martyr had carried out his promise after all:” he has returned her son to her “just as he looked that morning when he left the house reluctantly and in sadness, his heavy boots pounding the pavement till he disappeared from sight” (228).

Yet, of course, the young Daniel is not actually Elishva’s son but her grandson, who is accompanying his mother and aunt on their visit to Iraq, and the intention behind this visit is to convince the old woman to finally leave Iraq and live with them in Australia. To carry out this mission, the young Daniel is thus used as a kind of emotional pawn or substitute whose presence is designed to persuade Elishva that she can now leave the older Daniel behind. For Elishva, her son’s spectral “return” in the form of her grandson is even enough to make her destroy her icon of Saint George and finally break out of her melancholic circle of grief and leave Iraq. If this denouement could easily be a sentimental moment of recuperation – where the new child simply replaces the old – Saadawi’s narrative remains more ambiguous in its judgment: the younger Daniel could just as easily be read as the emotional bait in a (well-intentioned) con-trick or simply yet another relic in a long succession. In this sense,

Frankenstein in Baghdad's attempt to complete the work of mourning for the missing corpse both holds out the possibility for a new future which does not simply repeat the past (albeit a future outside Iraq itself) and, less optimistically, reminds us that this future may remain hostage to a past that will never be "over."

If *Frankenstein in Baghdad* focuses on the figure of the grandson, *Daughter of the Tigris* resolves this struggle over the future of the missing corpse via Qisma's son, who takes on greater symbolic resonance as the narrative progresses. It may be that the child's voice is never directly heard in the narrative, but his presence becomes increasingly linked to Ibrahim and to the search for the latter's missing corpse. As we learn early in the novel, Qisma even decides to rename her son by her father's name: Ibrahim. As she herself explains, "she was giving her father's name to her son as an apology for the way she had neglected him, and as a way to honor him and preserve his memory for future generation" (109). However, the relationship between the present son and the absent father becomes even clearer later in the narrative when Qisma is convinced – by different male tribal and political figures – to participate in shaping the country's future by forming a new political party together with her elderly husband. In the course of formulating various plans for the party's leadership, she decides to make her son Ibrahim "the leader of the party" even though he had "scarcely reached the age of three" (164).

Why is Qisma's son chosen as the "leader" of this new political party? For Qisma, the young boy's "leadership would of course be symbolic, and that this symbol was a way to honour her father, for the child bore his name." To be precise, however, the young child is really a way of standing in for its grandfather's *absence*, his missing corpse: Qisma notes that the main advantage of "installing [her son] as leader was that he would [...] be an absent leader, which would lend him an aura of reverence, just as with religious, mystical or even divine leaders and authorities" (164). She and her husband later discuss the possibility of using the identity card of Qisma's father "if it was necessary in the future for any reason," speculating that "they could produce a photograph of Ibrahim [the dead man] and refer to him as the party's spiritual founding father, or words to that effect" (165). If *Frankenstein in Baghdad*'s attempt to construct a future for the missing corpse ends in a moment of narrative ambiguity, we could say the same for *Daughter of the Tigris*: what could easily be seen as a moment of political sentimentalism or even cynicism – where the son replaces the grandfather but also mobilizes the latter's symbolic power for political purposes – might also be represented as a genuinely new political future based. In Qisma's decision to install an absent leader at the heart of her new political movement, she unintentionally echoes the French political theorist Claude Lefort's famous argument that modern democracy revolves around a constitutively unfillable "empty place" which belongs to no-one and can be occupied by anyone: "I have for a long time concentrated upon this peculiarity of modern democracy," he contends, "of all the regimes of which we know, it is the only one to have represented power in such a way as to show that power is an *empty place* [*lieu vide*]" (225).

Finally, however, the sociologist Avery Gordon also notes in her poignant essay on haunting and futurity, that "haunting raises specters." It "alters the experience of being in linear time, alters the way we normally separate and sequence the past, the present and the future," she continues, so that "one can say that futurity is imbricated or interwoven into the very scene of haunting itself" (2–3). To be sure, Gordon is elaborating upon Jacques Derrida's famous definition of the spectral here when she recalls that it is ultimately a question of "the future and [of] 'what's to come'" (6). For Gordon, this iteration of the "what's to come" is configured as "a case of rebellion, movement, a demand for a livable future" (4). If "haunting always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or being done in the present," she further argues, it refuses social or political melancholia: haunting remains "distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done" (2). In their introduction to a special issue on haunted futurities, Debra Ferreday and Adi Kuntsman reiterate Gordon's view, noting that the "future may be both haunted and haunting: whether through the ways in which the past casts a shadow over (im)possible futures; or through horrors that are imagined as 'inevitable,' or through our hopes and dreams for difference, for change."

In summary, then, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *Daughter of the Tigris* are (in their very different ways) works of haunted futurity which remain suspended between an inescapable spectral past and the possibility of a new and liveable future. To materialize this spectral or hauntological tension, they both focus upon the ambiguous figure of a child or intergenerational figure who represents everything from a simple repetition of the past, through a fictional recuperation, to a real “something to be done future.” In Qisma’s decision to make her small child the leader of her political party – which is to say someone who can never be leader or, better, can only be an absent or empty space which will never be filled – this “something to be done” even represents the chance of democracy or the dream of a democracy.

Conclusion

In Christine Quigley’s *The Corpse: A History*, the critic writes: “[T]here are corpses that are [...] at their death ‘larger than life’” (11). To adapt Quigley’s claim, al-Ramli and Saadawi’s novels represent a *missing* corpse – a corpse that never assumes the reassuring status of a present dead body – which looms larger than life. It refuses to remain in the margins of their texts, but insistently makes its own spectral remains present as an unfillable gap or lack within the narrative and within the social and political order. As this essay has argued, it is the missing corpses of Daniel and Ibrahim that testify most powerfully to the obscenity (from the Latin *ob-skene*, literally off stage) of the modern Iraqi corpseescape. To write the history of modern Iraq, in other words, it will be necessary to tell the story not simply of the dead body, but of the dead who are not permitted to be or have bodies, who are denied even the status of being a corpse (see Bradley). In the words of the renowned Iraqi writer Sinan Antoon: “Death is not the ultimate equalizer. Humans live very unequal lives and this inequality that structures their lives extends to their bodies, and beyond as well, to shape the way in which their death is perceived . . . processed . . . and that’s how their lives are grieved and mourned, if at all, or how their death is dismissed, ignored, unrecorded, or unnoticed” (“Rescuing the Dead”).

Notes

1. I use a general system of translation and only use the ayn (‘) and hamza (’). I also present all Arabic names and titles of people, places, and texts in the form most familiar to an English-speaking audience and/or the form used by the writers and the works under discussion. All quotes from the novels are from the English translations.
2. In a 2016 article for the *The Point Magazine*, Betty Rosen writes that “the word ‘corpse’ on the cover of an Iraqi novel confirms expectations that Iraqi literature will be little more than an expanded *New York Times* article, a tally of the faceless dead.” If Rosen here is referring to the ways in which translations of Iraqi literary works have strategically featured the word “corpse” in the title, the fact remains that contemporary Iraqi literature and drama have repeatedly drawn on the trope of dead bodies to narrate the history of violence the country has experienced.
3. Some examples of notable works that are also available in English or English translation include: Inaam Kachachi’s *The American Granddaughter* [*al-Hafida al-Amreekeya*](2008); Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* [*Wahdaha Shajarat al-Ruman*] (2010), *The Baghdad Eucharist* [*Ya Maryam*](2012) and *The Book of Collateral Damage* [*Fihras*](2016); Hassan Blasim’s *The Madman of Freedom Square* (2009) [*Majnun Sahat al-Hurriyya*, 2012] & *The Corpse Exhibition: And Other Stories of Iraq* [*Ma’rad al-Jithath*] (2014).
4. For a comprehensive study of Iraq’s history see Hanna Batatu (2004).
5. Saddam gained full leadership in 1979 and remained in power until 2003.
6. See Andrea Brady and Eliza Hilton (2000).
7. See Ahmed S. Hashim (2006) and Eric Herring and Glen Rangwala (2006).
8. See Fawaz Gerges (2021).
9. See, for example, Sinéad Murphy (2018), Annie Webster (2018), Rawad Alhashmi (2020), and Ian Campbell (2020).
10. For a study on relics and human remains see Cavicchioli and Provero (2020).
11. In the novel, Whatsitsname is referred to using the masculine pronouns he/him/his.
12. For reviews of the novels see, for example, Robin Yassin Kassab (2017), Becki Maddock (2017), Valentina Viene (2017), Susannah Tarbush (2022).
13. For a detailed study of scars and violence see Brent J. Steele (2013).

14. For a study of postmortem resistance, biopolitics, and necropolitics see, for example, Howard Caygill (2013) and Banu Bargu (2014).

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