



L'ENFANT-FEMME

By Rania Matar

Text by Her Majesty Queen Noor, Lois Lowry, Kristen Gresh Damiani

152 pages
\$50

The portrait subjects in Rania Matar's new book are girls ages 8 through 13 who appear acutely aware that they are poised between girlhood and adulthood. As they gaze steadily back at the camera, some of the girls muster a saucy confidence while others look wary. In her previous book, *A Girl and Her Room*, Matar used environmental portraits to show how adolescent girls express their personalities and aspirations through the way they decorate their bedrooms. The portraits in *L'Enfant-Femme* are more stripped-down; the subjects often pose outdoors, in an alley, a yard or on a porch. The simplicity draws attention to the subjects' body language and gestures:

A girl who confidently places her hands on her hips also nervously twists her foot. The format emphasizes similarities. A girl in a hijab posing in an alleyway in the Middle East and a girl barefoot on a porch surrounded by trees seem equally wary and awkward. The images are sequenced so that you see a series of images in which all the subjects nervously pluck at their skirts or clutch one elbow.

One photo shows a girl posing in front of throw pillows decorated with the likenesses of Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn, and another shows a girl standing in front of a wall plastered with a big fashion ad. These are two of the few clues in the book about where these girls get their notions of how to project themselves in front of a camera. They seem to be inventing their personae before our eyes. The quiet, considered portraits in *L'Enfant-Femme* invite us to ponder not only our notions about womanhood and their influence on girls' self-awareness, but how subjects assert themselves for the camera's penetrating gaze.

The underlying message here seems to be: Being a preteen girl is hard, whether you live in Massachusetts or Gaza. Matar's



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work makes us root for all her subjects to get through the storms of adolescence with their hopefulness unscathed.

—HOLLY STUART HUGHES