

2010 Festival Poet: Dunya Mikhail

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Iraqi-born [Dunya Mikhail](http://www.dunyamikhail.com/) (<http://www.dunyamikhail.com/>) was only fifteen-years-old when Saddam Hussein's armies invaded western Iran in 1980. Just awakening to the possibilities of her own potential as a poet, she had little time to indulge in writing on the themes we might expect to preoccupy someone so young. The Iran-Iraq war would drag on for eight years, and be followed two years later by the first Gulf War with the United States. Because war was the norm in her homeland throughout her teens and early twenties, she emerged as a poet of

witness almost out of necessity.

Mikhail has no delusions that writing about war will heal her or her country. Shedding light on a wound doesn't necessarily heal it. But she believes that poetry can provide a way to see and tell the truth, to force us to look at what we might otherwise turn away from. This can be a dangerous practice in a country whose leader expects its poets and artists to praise every act of their government. Under Hussein, even neutrality was not an option. It suggested a refusal to endorse his regime and was considered an act of defiance.

In 1995, after the publication of *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*, her fourth collection containing anti-war poems, Mikhail faced increasing harassment. A friend warned her that she needed to leave the country as soon as possible. When two newspaper editors were publicly humiliated and executed, she took that as the final warning it was time for her to flee.

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She credits poetry with saving her life. She was working for the *Baghdad Observer* at the time, and her passport listed her as a journalist. This presented a problem: For a journalist to leave Iraq, an official leave of absence was required, which could take months. A friend knew someone in the passport office who changed her profession to “poet.” Because poets didn’t need an official leave, this allowed her to make her escape quickly.

After nine months in Jordan, she emigrated to the United States, where she has lived in exile ever since. What she discovered, once she returned to writing, was an unexpected change in her work. No longer worried about the Iraqi censors, her poems, like “[The War Works Hard](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16991),” (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16991>) became more direct. It was a strange shift, coming from a country where a poet’s words were under careful government scrutiny, to one where it seemed possible to write poetry about anything.

And poetry, she says, allows her to feel at home in her new country. No matter where she is, once she starts writing, poetry makes her feel at home. Living in the United States, she continues to bear witness. Mikhail points out that the first known poet in history was an Iraqi woman, named Enheduanna, who had an official title, “Keeper of the Flame.” That, she believes, is the poet’s role, to be the keeper of the flame.

Author of four poetry collections in Arabic, Dunya Mikhail’s collections available in English are *The War Works Hard* (<http://www.amazon.com/War-Works-Hard-Dunya-Mikhail/dp/0811216217>), and *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (<http://www.amazon.com/Diary-Wave-Outside-Directions-Paperbook/dp/0811218317>).

Please use the “Share your thoughts with us” box below to share other resources you may have found for this poet. In this way, we can build together a mini-wiki-encyclopedia on the 2010 Festival Poets.

Return in the weeks ahead as we continue to profile the 2010 Festival Poets.

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