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The war works hard

by **Robert Philbin**
[**bookreviews**]

"We'd all be human, if we could." Bertolt Brecht

A journalist covering the Iraq war commented on a late night talk show last night that America's situation in Iraq is hopeless because by now, he said, he doesn't know of a single Iraqi family who has not suffered some tragedy or horror as a result of the US invasion. We have lost something, he commented, in that transition from being "liberators" to becoming "occupiers", and we may never get it back. I don't doubt his insight about the widespread misery, just look at the Iraqi civilian casualty estimates - many as high as hundreds of thousands - but I question that more than a few of us understand what the reporter means by the mass personification of war, or the blame the Iraqi people harbor toward the US government as a result.

Very few of us know anything about what war does to perfectly innocent people trapped in its awful geometry. Civilians are always innocent bystanders, and always the most meaningful targets. They are all hearts and minds. The purpose of the bombing of the village of Guernica in northern Spain in 1937 was to undermine the morale of the Basque civilians and their insurgency against Franco. The purpose of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the summer of 1945 was to "break the will of the Japanese people" and to "save American lives".

In Vietnam "pacification" meant winning hearts and minds by bulldozing villages and moving populations into distant refugee camps. (Abraham Lincoln understood the impact of a burning cornfield on the civilian populace in the South during the American Civil War.) We experienced what it feels like to suffer war on the home front on September 11, 2001. But many of us still remain immune to government propaganda and a visual history of war, against the daily photographs and reports that bring news of more innocent deaths in Iraq. We may have been safely inoculated against the pain of the innocent by the weight of decades the US has spent at war in our lifetime, and always, it seems, among the poorest and weakest peoples on the earth.

Since Homer first mythologized the fall of Troy, 30 centuries ago, poetry and war have been fused in an unholy alliance producing both the propaganda of heroics, and the chilling reality of mass murder. Poets sometimes make the best journalists because only they can approximate a special kind of truth that shapes a state of mind a reader can absorb viscerally, as soon as he or she encounters it:

What good luck!



The War Works Hard
Dunya Mikhail
Saadi S Simawe
(Introduction),
Elizabeth Winslow
(Translator)
New Directions Publishing
Corporation
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She has found his bones.
 The skull is also in the bag
 the bag in her hand
 like all other bags
 in all other trembling hands.
 His bones, like thousands of bones
 in the mass graveyard,
 his skull, not like any other skull.
 Two eyes or holes
 with which he saw too much. [1]

I read these lines knowing nothing of the language or traditions of Iraqi poetry, but, after all, what does one need to know? Where else but Iraq could this bleak discovery have occurred? How could anyone rejoice at the good luck of finding a brother, husband or father's remains in a bag of bones?

Iraqi poet Dunya Mikhail connects any reader to the love of that lucky Iraqi woman clinging to her bag of bones. And when she does, all the propaganda of politics and lies disappear. Poetry raises questions as well as it raises the dead: How monstrous was that dictatorship? Why did we ever support it? Why did we not take it down in Desert Storm? Why did we not support the uprising later? Why do we still make war among a people exhausted by killing, adding only to their bone yards? What are we doing in Iraq?

Poetry translated from another culture has the magical power of carrying the reader to the human heart of that culture. This is possible because the artist, the poet, is an alien in any culture, both apart of, and apart from its mores. In another Mikhail poem:

The war continues working, day and night.
 It inspires tyrants
 to deliver long speeches
 awards medals to generals
 and themes to poets
 it contributes to the industry
 of artificial limbs
 provides food for flies
 adds pages to the history books
 achieves equality
 between killer and killed.

In the world where *The War Works Hard*, death is the great equalizer in a landscape of artificial limbs. The poet is the outsider and her poetry brings down the flimsy barriers of time, space, and circumstance. What remains is the human being, no different than any other human being. Foreign poetry makes the foreign universal, and this is the unique power of Ms. Mikhail. Unlike the returning combat veteran poet, she documents and laments the loss of human love in a culture so brutalized that humanity itself may become only a memory:

Graves were scattered with mandrake seeds.
 A bleating sound entered the assembly.
 Gardens remained hanging.
 Straw was scattered with the words.
 No fruit is left.

Born in Iraq in 1965, "her imagination saturated with uprootedness and endless war," Ms Mikhail worked as Literary Editor of *The Baghdad Observer* until threats and harassment from Ba'ath authorities forced her to flee Iraq in the late 1990s. In 2001 she was awarded the UN Human Rights Award for Freedom of Writing and has published four collections of poetry in Arabic (an Iraqi Christian, she speaks and writes in Arabic, Aramaic and English).

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Mikhail, whose work has been compared to the reclusive and brilliant Emily Dickinson, currently lives and teaches in Michigan. *The War Works Hard*, her latest book was shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize last year, and includes earlier works written before her exile. She says "most of my writings serve as documents of witness; they document what I saw. " As in a few lines from her poem, 'The Jewel', about the bombing of the main bridge in Baghdad,

It no longer overlooks the river
 No longer is in the city
 No longer on the map
 The bridge that was
 The bridge that we used to cross every day
 The bridge
 The war tossed it into the river
 Just as that lady aboard the Titanic
 Tossed her blue diamond

In a recent interview, Mikhail discussed the liberating experience of adjusting to thinking and writing in a culture that respects free speech above propaganda:

"In Iraq, there are no editors because they have censors. They don't care about the quality, they care about the ideology, and that is how they use their editing scissors. There, they are watching every work and they can put you in prison--they care that much! Here, you can write whatever you want but no one cares? It is very ironic. I noticed a change in my writing when I came here: I didn't need to use symbols anymore. My language and my poems became more direct. I do not know if not using symbols has made my writing more powerful or less powerful but I wanted to peel away some of those masks and shields that burdened me." [2]

She writes about memory and war and healing directly in the poem 'America':

Please don't ask me, America
 I don't remember
 on which street
 with whom
 or under which star
 Don't ask me
 I don't remember
 the colours of the people
 or their signatures
 I don't remember if they had
 our faces
 and our dreams
 if they were singing
 or not
 writing from the left or right
 or not writing at all
 sleeping in houses
 on sidewalks
 or in airports
 making love or not making love
 Please don't ask me, America
 I don't remember their names. *The War Works Hard* is an important and informative document because it communicates the experiences of war directly from the perspective of its most silent victims.

Notes

1 All poetry by Dunya Mikhail, translated by Elizabeth Winslow, from *The War Works Hard*. Winslow is a fiction writer and a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her translation of Dunya Mikhail's *The War Works Hard* won the PEN prize for translation in 2004 and was published by New Directions in 2005. She has had other translated poems published in *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *Poetry International*, *Words Without Borders*, *Circumference* and *World Literature Today* and short stories or non-fiction published in *Phoebe*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Louisville Review* and *Variety*. [[Back](#)]

2 From a [Legacy Project Interview](#) with Dunya Mikhail, April 21, 2005.

Video: Dunya Mikhail [reading at Berkeley](#), February 2007. [[Back](#)]

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