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Iraqi Poetry Today—and more...

BY BRIAN TURNER

As I deployed to Iraq as an Army sergeant late in 2003, I stuffed an anthology of poems (Iraqi Poetry Today; King's College, London, 2003) into my rucksack. I never would have guessed that within a couple of years I would meet one of the authors whose work was in the anthology—the amazing poet Dunya Mikhail. I also could never have guessed that I would have a book of poetry myself and that by chance I would work with Ellen Dore Watson as my first line editor at Alice James Books. I've been fortunate enough to meet and to become friends with both Dunya and Ellen. In a recent email, Dunya told me that she's revising one of the poems that I carried with me in the anthology. Here's the first section of that 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 colors 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 the 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
 or their birthplaces.
 People are grass—
 They grow everywhere, America.
 Don't ask me...
 I don't remember
 what time it was,
 what the weather was like,

which language,
 or which flag.
 Don't ask me...
 I don't remember
 how long they walked under the sun
 or how many died.
 I don't remember
 the shapes of the boats
 or the number of stops...
 How many suitcases they carried
 or left behind,
 if they came complaining
 or without complaint.

...There are many fine poems in this volume. It's available through Amazon (though I'm sure your local bookseller can also order a copy for you):

Iraqi Poetry Today (Modern Poetry in Translation, 2002); ISBN-10: 095338246X

To read more of Dunya's work, you might start with this amazing collection:

[The War Works Hard](#) (New Directions, 2005)

And to read more of Ellen Dore Watson's work, you might start with:

[This Sharpening](#) (Tupelo Press, 2006)

In 2008, another anthology came out that I found insightful (in similar ways to *Iraqi Poetry Today*)—*Flowers of Flame* (Michigan State University Press), Edited by Sadek Mohammed, Soheil Najm, Haider Al-Kabi, and Dan Veach. (That was a project that expanded after first appearing as a special issue of *The Atlanta Review*.)

Another book I'd recommend (though I have the 1987 edition):

[Modern Arabic Poetry](#) (Columbia University Press, 1991)

It's an ongoing, life-long education. These are a few of the wonderful books that have helped me along the way.—Brian T

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) on Friday, April 30th, 2010 by [Brian Turner](#).

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