



Books

April 6th, 2009

MEMOIR: A Bomb in One Hand, Shelter in the Other

by David Varno

Dunya Mikhail, translated by Eliabeth Winslow, *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (New Directions, 2009)

This memoir-infused narrative poem, written over two decades by Iraqi poet Dunya Mikhail, provides a unique reading experience. The first part of the book, written between 1991 and 1994, envelopes the Iran and the Gulf wars—“two wars spanned by a suspension bridge”—in dreamscapes, spiritual invocations, scriptural rewriting and myth-telling; devices that veil her commentary on the Hussein administration and the Baath party. Her verse is formal yet very personal, and though it’s occasionally difficult to fully grasp her meanings—sparrows write in diaries, subsisting on the poet’s heart, then leave to nest in the helmets of fallen soldiers—the intimate tone carries an urgency of concern for not just herself and her family but for her generation. It was published as a long poem in Baghdad in 1995 to much acclaim in the Arab world, but shortly afterwards Mikhail was compelled to flee the country for her safety.

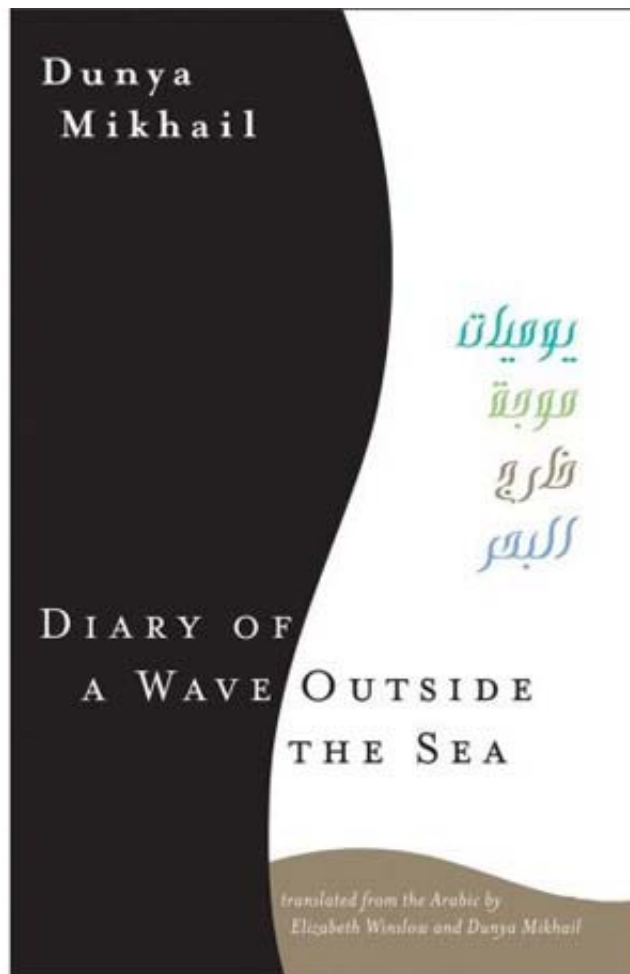
Diary of a Wave’s second part (1995 – 2007) covers that flight, in which she left most of her belongings in Baghdad, including all of her books except for *The Little Prince*, crammed her suitcase with letters and photographs, and made for the Jordanian border. In Amman, she contributed a newspaper column called “Scribbles,” and, aware of the prevalence of Iraqi political refugees, joked “who’s this Jordanian” when bumping into someone not from her homeland. Later she describes her relationship with her current home, the United States—a country that “bombs with one hand and shelters with the other.” This section of the book is written much more plainly, and sums up her experiences and perspective explicitly. She also reveals here the offending passage of her poem to the Hussein administration, a beautiful and intensely violent scene in which Zeus is shown as a wrathful oppressor who throws fire upon his people and barricades the sea in barbed wire:

In his spare time Zeus kept himself busy
cutting the stars from the sky

And sticking them onto chests and shoulders.
He busied himself with this hobby so much
that eventually the sky lost all of its stars.

Mikhail is a deft surrealist, and uses a dream narrative to chronicle her calling as a poet. On a seashore she is brought to “an enormous shell that contained the protoplasm of poetry. I felt like a kite,” she writes, “looking at the world from above.”

In the book’s final section, she tells the stories of several other poets of her generation, called the War Poets, and of their involvement in the Baghdad Writers’ Union, where they would debate with the older generation of poets. Now the Writers’ Union is gone, and most of the communication Mikhail has with Baghdad is with people who are trapped and attempting to flee, or are raising ransom money for kidnapped loved ones. Aside from highlighting what we’ve come to expect of this dire situation in Iraq, Mikhail’s book laments the fragmentation of her native county’s rich literary establishment. As an English-language reader, it’s already a privilege to get new literature translated from the Arabic, but *Diary of a Wave* is a special treat because Mikhail has been able to preserve the vitality of her nurturing milieu as well as have the strength to share and endure in a new world.



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