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## Review of 'The War Works Hard'

**Paul Batchelor, *Poetry Review*, Vol 96:4, Winter 2006/7**

Dunya Mikhail is an Iraqi poet currently living in the United States. Her most recent poems are found in the first and longest section of *The War Works Hard*. Although Saadi Simawe's introduction describes these poems as child-like (albeit like the wise, subversive child of The Emperor's New Clothes), these are songs of experience rather than innocence. When the truth is as bitter and bleak as this, it requires irony if it is to be expressed at all. This is from 'Bag of Bones':

What good luck!  
 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 [...]

In the brilliant title poem, Mikhail displays a Brechtian knack for finding the unexpected angle that can illuminate a situation afresh. The poem begins 'How magnificent the war is!' and goes on to form an ironic hymn of praise to war:

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 [...]

*The War Works Hard* closes with poems written in Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war. These pieces are more demanding, with the irony working as a necessary cryptic device for the author's sympathies (see the gnomic 'Nun'). The bulk of the book is taken up with the later, more public poetry in which Mikhail finds ways of writing about Iraq without indulging in sloganeering, glibness, cynicism or any of the other prefabrications commentators use to avoid the truth. In Elizabeth's clear, unfussy translation, an important new voice in world poetry can be heard in English.

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