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Selected Poems

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The War Widows Are Heard

The country where your husband is accused by a debt-ridden neighbor,
seized in the sun-dried cornfield, is the country no one can escape,
the country we all live in, encased in smooth walls, clean laundry,
paper cut-out newsmen and bold-faced fashion fronts.

Your homespun shawl and burning eyes hold the still point
for a room of squirming children, a youth old before his time,
a woman who will never weep again. You travel far to tell
your story in a place where nobody knows who you are.

You stood watch behind the woven walls of a house
while men threw other men into rivers like sacks of evidence,
while men with nothing to lose pushed faces underwater
until they thinned out, pale as words coming through three languages,
transparent as tadpoles, though words swim better than men,

better than we do through three languages, better than your husband,
who wished to be a fish, who wished to slip away
but got caught, buckled, floated to a place of blind eyes.

The men in khaki shorts hauled their catch onto tractors,
water dripping off the bruised and splayed limbs.
The relevant authorities do not offer words at all
in any language, but you speak, you go on speaking.

Figure 1. “Buried guardian,” Bungamati village, Lalitpur, Nepal.
(Hunkins, 2006)
A Choreography of Corpses

Something wants to come near, 
a choreography of corpses. 
Landmines, tattoos 
and boys cooking rice 
in the alley behind the jail.

Girls so young one could snap 
them between two fingers. 
Why did you join the rebels? 
Nothing. Nobody. Because 
the world is hard and undisturbed 
by hacked roots, shallow graves 
wrenched from frost. Thin flies 
alight, listening for transition. 
Something wants to come near, in boots, 
with exposed wounds, brute opposites.

I know we can graph this violence, 
indigestible myth, fragmented families, half-sunrise 
on democracy. Civilization of suffering, genius 
of wounding, doubled padlocks on doubled gates, 
the colossal waste of time and life.

I know we can do the math: 385 prisoners, 
jail built for 125. Seventeen-point list of demands, 
five-point agreement, seven-party alliance. 
There is always a graph. And there is always a bridge, 
which sometimes unaccountably remains standing.

Ann Hunkins, poet, translator and former Fulbright 
scholar to Nepal, worked for the UN Office of the High 
Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal in 2006, 
interpreting for war crimes witnesses, torture victims, 
and others. She is at work on a collection of poems from 
that time and she also has a collection forthcoming of 
translations of nineteen short stories by and about Nepali 
women. In 2008, Hunkins received a National Endowment 
for the Arts Translation Grant for the novel Aviral Bagdacha 
Indravati (On Flows the Indravati) by Ramesh Vikal. 
Other translations include contributions to W.W. Norton’s 
Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from 
the Middle East, Asia & Beyond, 2008, as well as Dhoopi 
(The Juniper, 2006), a long poem by Toya Gurung, and 
Karagar (The Prison, 2005), a novel by Banira Giri. She 
currently lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.