

AL-MUTANABBI STREET

By Lutfia Alduleimi

Before I was born in al-Mutanabbi Street, I was no one. I could deny the documents that made reference to my birth on a particular day of the year or a certain province of the country. I was a mere small woman without a place in this world. Then I was born on al-Mutanabbi Street the day my first book was published—*A Passage to the Sadness of Men*.

I had discovered as a girl of nine the richness of the story through *1,001 Nights* in a room that girls were forbidden to enter, and I was determined to become the contemporary Shahrezade. This young girl had no future, except perhaps to become a woman set aside to live a pointless life among quiet, forgotten women. But Shahrezade, the first woman to use the magic of imagination to narrate the tales of the East, plucked me out of my time and visited upon me the spell of dreams and tattooed a shining mar on my forehead, setting in place my destiny, as had the gods and goddesses of old:

Go to the place of books. You will be one of those women who narrate stories, one of the daughters of Shahrezade.

Thus, that first narrative sealed my fate and gave me over to the enchantment of the tale. Yet in contrast to Shahrezade's salvation through stories, the contemporary tale and the narration of stories would eventually expose me to death at the hands of terrorists, because I was a woman, and an Iraqi writer living in a land that was ransacked in 2006. The extremists had decided to cut out this woman's tongue, to decapitate her, but she escaped death and gave birth instead to another in her series of offspring.

I'll never forget the day I carried the manuscript of my first book to the al-Jahiz Printers located in one of the side streets off of al-Mutanabbi Street. I keenly followed the production of the book, visiting the printer every day, then spending the rest of the day browsing the bookshops scattered around al-Mutanabbi Street, buying stacks of books, and finally returning home at the end of the day bearing my treasure trove. When I collected the first copy from the printers, I swaggered vaingloriously down that street, possessed by the feeling that I had become on that day a new person, and I walked, drunk with pride, toward al-Rasheed Street,

bearing my one true birth certificate in this world. I was possessed by a spell at the thought of being a writer walking down al-Mutanabbi. I can remember that I was wearing a short, purple and black dress. That was 1970. I was very skinny then, and I feared that the wind might take advantage of my excessive lightness and exhilaration to blow me away. When news of my book's publication spread, my writer and journalist friends came to al-Jahiz Printers on al-Mutanabbi Street to pick up their copy and congratulate me on the birth of a new work, whose two godfathers were al-Mutanabbi, the greatest of Arab poets, and al-Jahiz, our most skilled prose stylist.

WE ALL CAME FROM THERE

No writer or poet from Baghdad, or any other city in Iraq, does not have a piece of a memory from that venerable street of books and bookshops, the Modern Bookshop, the Nahda Bookstore, Al Ma'arifa Booksellers, Al Muthanni, and others. Who among us had not been enticed by the magical stacks of books on the pavement and in carts, or walked awe-struck, browsing titles and sniffing the scent of the pages? Who among us could forget the pleasure of buying new books in the seventies, or banned and xeroxed books in the nineties during the period of sanctions? Fridays were like holidays to commemorate the gathering of friends and the purchase of new books in al Mutanabbi Street. That street was a paradise for readers and writers, an enchanted gateway for the passerby to approach the treasures of a culture. It was a market for wordsmiths and stationers, a place for the most extreme celebrations of the mind. It had a place of luminous distinction in the memories and dreams of its visitors. It encompassed the calamitous losses bequeathed by a history of defeats, rulers, and brutality. It was the domain of poets, writers, traders in manuscripts, and booksellers, seekers of fame and yes, spies listening intently to the whispers of the intellectuals. (In the nineties, it was even subject to raids by security forces.) Banned books that had been copied and produced surreptitiously were published there, and those driven mad by the cruelty of war would wander up and down, reciting classical poetry that made fun of the dictator or yelling out mock news broadcasts that tore through the silence of the writers, who stood by petrified at how the brutal regime might respond.

THE FALL OF THE ATTESTATIONS OF BOOKS IN AL-MUTANABBI STREET

I decided to set one of my stories in al-Mutanabbi Street, based on its special role in our

cultural life. I called it, "The Eclipse of the Attestation of the Book," a title that played with the multiple ironies of a time when intellectuals were embargoed and made hungry to the point that they sold their books in this street to be able to afford bread for sustenance or medicine for a child with leukemia during the sanctions years of the 1990s. I made the main character a lover of books who lost a part of his memory whenever he sold a portion of his immense library in response to the repression of the regime. His name was Birhan, which also means 'attestation,' and his plight recalled that of the philosopher al-Kindi, whom the Abbasid Caliph sentenced to prison and fifty lashes because of his writings and ideas, even though he was older than sixty.

Finally, Birhan sold the last of his remaining books in al-Mutanabbi Street, so that his memory was completely erased, and he left the street shattered and aimless to wander the ancient neighborhoods and alleyways of Baghdad. At first, the censors wouldn't allow it to be published, but I wrote a new section about the sanctions in which the protagonist discovers the horrors the country was facing during his wanderings through the backstreets of the city, until the piece became a short novel. Friends printed it secretly using a photocopy machine, and we distributed a hundred copies to friends in al-Mutanabbi Street. We had dared to challenge the repression of culture by the authorities. Later, a proper publication of it was done in Spain, and then repeated in Ramallah, Palestine.

AL-MUTANABBI IS MURDERED TWICE, FIRST AS POET, THEN AS PLACE

After the catastrophe of the brutal explosion on the street of culture, I still imagined myself there. I reflected constantly upon the days we'd spent in the street. My friend, the poet Dunya Mikhail and I, would go there on Fridays to buy books—both the banned and the unbanned. I could see myself walking there among the smoke and the wreckage, treading lightly over the wounded dreams of poets and novelists. I stood by myself and cried, and the smell of burning books engulfed me. Heat from the ashes formed a layer on my face. I saw myself in the midst of darkened, burnt out shells of the bookshops, listening to the sporadic coughing of a few remaining booksellers or regular customers, and I blubbered uncontrollably over the shocking scene that seemed to me straight out of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, a book that had prophesied all the way back in the early 1950s what thought and culture are being subjected to right now by sanctions, prohibitions, and burnings, and in the face of consumer culture, media's intrusion into human life, and the rise of intolerance and terror.

A poem rang in my ears, one written by al-Mutanabbi, who was killed for being a poet, and when the street was dedicated in his name, it came in the sights of hardened killers and the idea police—those terrorists who are frightened to death by books and culture. They had announced their hatred for thinking and enlightenment, and their pursuit of every single writer, journalist, and artist that might possibly pose a threat to their backward assertions and their ideology that proclaims they alone possess the single and impregnable absolute truth. I heard the great classical poet Abu Nuwas, as he walked next to me, recite an elegy for our burning, occupied city, as he stammered drunkenly:

"Weep not over renown; weep only for this."

And the road wept along with him, the columns in Rashid Street, the ashes of al-Shabindar Coffeehouse where the writers had escaped the solitude of their craft, the carts, the bits of pavement, the burnt tiles from buildings, the books turned into scattered scrap of pages, the bookshops turned into piles of trash, all wept, and in the midst of all this weeping, cries ascended from the dead, the victims of the word. We could hear distinctly their plaintive wails amidst the flames, those who loved the book, even unto death, whose fate was connected ultimately to its fate.

Al-Mutanabbi Street, which had flourished through its words, poems, discussions, and debates, had become a path for ghosts, reined over by a catastrophic silence and the smell of death. No longer did the coffeehouses ring out with the clamor of their regulars, arguments of the poets, mirth of the domino players, or the zeal of its disputants. No longer did the hawkers of books cry out and spit on the hot, dust-covered pavement, while they announced the availability of a thick manuscript or a rare book from the eighteenth century. There was no one to utter a word, no song to emerge from the Um Kalthoum Coffeehouse on the corner of Al-Rashid Street that was traversed by al-Mutanabbi, none of the rhymed prose of Yusuf 'Amr, nor songs by Fairouz... nothing to be heard in the street, except the roar of the flames and the suppressed cries of those buried under black mounds of debris, the sellers burned to death alongside their diwans, novels, and philosophical books, indiscriminate destruction of bilingual, reference, and spiritual books. The otherwise total devastation was punctuated only by limbs and flames and the cries for help of the victims emerging from the midst of the smoke.

THE STREET OF THE BOOKS HORRIFIES THE MURDERERS

"There is no glory in this land, except in death; books are a drug that distracts people from heaven." Thus say the murderers and the jihadis from the Stone Age, as they malevolently promote ignorance of tradition and thought, and spread death through their barbaric justice to the poet, the novelist, the writer, the historian, the bookseller, or the ordinary woman who has come to buy a dictionary or encyclopedia; to the romantic, who walks dreamily reciting a love poem, set upon offering it up to his beloved that evening, and the author of a story negotiating a new printing of his book with his publisher.

They all died among the 130 victims, each of them passionate lovers of the book, killed in the street of the books, with no coffin but the ashes of the tale, and no funeral music except the crackling of the flames.

And Abu Nuwas leaned on my shoulder and repeated: "Weep not over renown; weep only for this." But I whisper back: "Don't forget that books and libraries have been burned thousands of times over the course of human history, not least in 1933 in Berlin, the day the Nazis celebrated in a central square amidst the beat of marshal music and chants of soldiers, and although the burning of books in al-Mutanabbi Street won't be the last, books will persevere, and libraries and bookstores will flourish, for the beauty of books does not die, and al-Mutanabbi Street is a Phoenix that will be reborn from the ashes, O Abu Nuwas. Indeed, I'll meet you here one day soon, for I have made a vow to a man who loves me in a foreign land, that we will meet on al-Mutanabbi Street. We three will drink a toast together to al-Mutanabbi and to our new books in the al-Shabindar Coffeeshouse. Do not forget our date, my dear Abu Nuwas."

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