

Words Were His Water

I thought we were safe –
burrowed deep in our
dailiness. There was the
peace we had managed to
find in our own routines
despite everything else but
then in the winter of '07 the
dreaming began. Every night
the same dark dream and
then one day in early March
I woke to the truth of it.

Each night it began placidly
enough: a city rising high – a
city built of books. Houses
and bridges, ramps and rugs
and tables all made of books.
The people in this place knew
stories about the sea of stars
in the heavens, the heavens
below in the glimmering seas,
they knew the words etched
on grains of sand, the songs
trees and birds sang, the
praises issued when the

mountains were birthed.

These narratives surrounded
them and gave comfort and
strength.

But one day clouds of locusts
were pulled up into a
spinning sand storm and
dropped down onto them like
hail. Dirty sheets and filthy
rivers of clacking wings and
bottomless bellies were
everywhere. A trillion open
mouths chewed the city to
sodden pulp. Then flashing
bright across the dull metal
sky they flew away leaving
nothing in their wake. It was
then I woke to find my own
hell on earth on
Al Mutanabbi Street.

My beloved, my boy, my only
boy had just learned to read
and his thirst for words, for
pages was unquenchable.

Until the words made sense
to him he had been parched.
Desiccated. He was a dry
plant that had suddenly
blossomed. Words were his
water.

At night as he drifted off to
sleep he would tell me the
pages were as sweet as dates
or figs and filled with bright
bits like a pomegranate. It
was a keen pleasure to watch
him read.
To watch him chewing the
new words and new ideas
like mastic.

And then my husband, so
moved by his son's
excitement took our boy to
the booksellers, to Al
Mutannabi Street to show
him how wide the world
would come to be for him as a
reader. To show him how

many books there would be
to savor in his long life. My
beautiful brilliant boy.

My sun and my moon had
drawn dozens of little black
stars on his high-top
sneakers. That is how I
identified his body. By his
new shoes. Nothing else left
to hold.

My husband survived but
was blinded. These long, dim
days now I read to my
husband. This keeps us
indoors and keeps us safe.
Perhaps.

Aloud I read all the books our
boy would have loved if he'd
only had the chance.