

THE STREET OF THE POET

poem by Jim Natal

*In February 1258, when the Mongols overran Baghdad,
the Tigris was said to have first turned red with blood from the mayhem,
and then black with ink from the books of the Grand Library
that had been thrown into the
river.*



Fire and water to the same end, the same purpose, magnificent libraries
ransacked, ravaged, and gutted by any means at hand, no shortage of edicts
or fervored intention. Blood and ink lost are lost not for good, but
forever.

Baghdad, 1258: volumes are tossed and sunk, pulp in muddy Tigris currents,
pages and illuminated script like leaves and planks floating; if there were
candles instead of buildings burning on the banks it would be
ceremony.

Baghdad, 2007: a car bomb rips al-Mutanabbi Street, named for the great poet.
Bookstores burst unbound; presses warp; sweet tea, blood, and coffee soak the ground.
The visible dead, spiritually wounded: Nothing learned in 700 years but more efficient
destruction.

Now, a museum displays a burned-out Iraqi vehicle salvaged from the blast.
It's unidentifiable except for four door frames and wells for wheels. People pass
with superficial glances, think it, perhaps, abstract sculpture rather than another charred
messenger.

When books become smoke, the words tend to drift. They crumble into
vowels and consonants, letters find the upper atmosphere and jetstream
global distances, disrupt flight patterns, thought patterns, cover
al-aalam*.

After a wildfire, hills must be reseeded or the fallen ash will harden, crust over
at the next rain. After a flood, the waters must go somewhere. They join
like favorite passages and every river—brown or red or black—flows
holy.



*In March 2007 a massive car bomb was detonated on Baghdad's al-Mutanabbi Street.
Overall, 30 people were killed and 100 were injured. The bomb targeted the historic heart
of Baghdad's intellectual and literary community. Named for the famed 10th century classical Arab poet
and known as "the street of booksellers," al-Mutanabbi Street is a legendary locale in Baghdad,
a winding lane filled with bookstores, outdoor book stalls, small presses, and cafes
where books have been sold, made, and discussed for
centuries.*

*Arabic for "the world"