Who invaded you, Baghdad?
Weren't you once as dear to me as my eye?
Wasn't there a time when people lived within you, when being neighbors was a blessing?

Then the crow came and divided them.

How much grief can you endure?¹

"...Who among us had not been enticed by the magical stacks of books on the pavement and in carts, or walked awestruck, browsing titles and sniffing the scent of the pages? Who among us could forget the pleasure of buying new books in the 1970s, or banned and Xeroxed books in the '90s 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..."²
“Sometimes the weight of our own silence becomes completely unbearable, until we cannot take one more day of reading about the blood, bone, and ash.

“And then the moment comes when we recognize that this distant landscape is our own, and that we must walk through it.” — Beau Beausoleil, Introduction to *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here*
Idaho Center for the Book and the Arts and Humanities Institute at Boise State University present Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here, opening on October 2 2015 at the Arts and Humanities Institute Gallery, and continuing through the end of January 2016.

The exhibition honors al-Mutanabbi Street, Baghdad’s cherished district of booksellers, publishers and literary cafés, which was devastated by a deadly car bombing in March 2007. In response to the deaths and the destruction, Beau Beausoleil, a San Francisco poet and bookseller, and Bristol UK Book Arts Professor Sarah Bodman, issued an international call to artists and writers to create broadsides, books, poetry, prose and prints reflecting on these events, and commemorating Al-Mutanabbi Street and its significance to Iraq and the world.

The anthology of prose and poetry titled Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here was edited by Beausoleil and Deema Shehabi, and published by PM Press in 2012. A distinguished roster of contributing editors, writers and translators includes Etel Adnan, Meena Alexander, Sinan Antoon, Mahmoud Darwish, Sam Hamill, Dima Hilal, Persis Karim, Philip Metres, Dunya Mikhail, Muhsin Al-Musawi, Naomi Shihab Nye, Adrienne Rich, Amina Said, Aram Saroyan, Anthony Shadid, Sholeh Wolpe, and many others. It is a beautiful, heartrending and uplifting compendium of responses to this history, and the unbearable.

A collection of broadsides was created between 2007 and 2009. These are primarily letterpress prints (employing hand-printed type and imagery) which transcribe and interpret excerpts from the anthology, as well as other writings in honor of the project. The full collection of over 130 broadsides is archived at the Jaffe Center for Book at Florida Atlantic University, and may be viewed online at http://fau.digital.flvc.org/

An international call to book artists, subtitled An Inventory of al-Mutanabbi Street, was initiated in 2010. More than 260 editions have been created to date; a gallery of the first five years of books may be viewed through the website of the University of West England Bristol’s Book Arts program, at http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/

Most recently, a folio of fine art prints (etchings, lithographs, linocuts, serigraphs, woodblock and digital prints) subtitled Absence and Presence, was created between 2014 and 2015. Currently more than 140 prints have been contributed by artists from around the world. A partial catalog of this collection is available through the San Francisco Center for the Book, https://sfcb.org/exhibitions/absence-and-presence

The project has been exhibited more than 30 times nationally and internationally. Boise State’s own unique iteration of Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here comprises 61 selected works, catalogued here.

The Broadside, continued:

The Books:

They didn’t ask: What’s after death? They were memorizing the map of paradise more than the book of earth, consumed with another question: What will we do before this death? Near our lives we live, and don’t live. As if our lives are desert lots disputed by the gods of real estate, and we are dust’s bygone neighbors. 

Our lives are a burden to the historian’s night: “Whenever I hide them they come into my view out of absence...” 

Our lives are a burden to the artist: “I paint them, then I become one of them, and fog veils me.”

Our lives are a burden to the general: “How does blood blow from a ghost?” And our lives should be as we wish. We want to live a little, not for anything...other than to respect resurrection after this death. And they quoted, unintentionally, the philosopher’s words: “Death means nothing to us. We are and it isn’t. Death means nothing to us. It is and we aren’t.”

Then they rearranged their dreams in a different manner. And slept standing!

—Mahmoud Darwish

Translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah

Reprinted with permission from the anthology, Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here.
No more printers; no more printing; no more engravers, no more engraving; no more paper, no more papermakers; no more calligraphers, no more binders; no more secret alphabets of animals and trees; no more Abulafia, no more Kabalah; no more Conference of the Birds; no more Ibn-Arabi; no more algebra; no more writing; no more astounding medical knowledge first brought to Europe by way of the Spanish Moors; no more Romani codes, no more hand-painted gold initial letters; no more fantastical alphabetical beasts; no more tooled inlay of dark brown and blood-red leather incised on the cover of the book you’re holding now; no more stepping out into the afternoon heat with the book’s promised pleasures now held inside the cup of your hand; no more walking down the street to the cafe for a bowl of thick black coffee with sweet cream and argument and talk; no more languages to puzzle, no more street-market Arabic, no more street-market French; no more Assyrian, no more Armenian, no more Azerbaijani; no more Persian, no more Aramaic; no more Turkish, no more Turkamen; no more Iraqi Baghdadi Arabic, no more Afro-Asiatic Baghdadi; no Kurdish, no Italian, no Middle Eastern Romani; no German, no Spanish, no Afghani, no Russian, no Portuguese, no Lebanese; no more muddled, inflected English with the oddly shifting taste of hidden syllables on your tongue…"

—Excerpt from Al-Mutanabbi Street by Eileen Grace O’Malley Callahan
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Noted Scholar Dr. Jonathan Bloom to Speak at Exhibition Opening

As part of the opening celebration for Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here, Dr. Jonathan Bloom, Norma Jean Calderwood University Professor of Islamic and Asian Art at Boston College, will give a talk on Books in Islamic Culture: the Role of Paper. The talk and opening reception will occur at the Arts and Humanities Institute Gallery, in the Ron and Linda Yanke Family Research Park, 220 East Parkcenter Blvd. The exhibition opens October 2, 2015; doors open at 4:30, and Dr. Bloom’s talk will begin at 5:30. After the talk, there will be an opportunity to meet Dr. Bloom as the reception continues.

Dr. Bloom, who is the author of Paper before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World (2001,) The Minaret (2013,) and many other books, provided the following synopsis of his talk.

“Books have been an essential part of Islamic culture since its origins in the 7th century CE. The Quran, which Muslims believe is God’s word as revealed orally to the prophet Muhammad, refers to the revelation as al-kitab, “the book,” and very soon thereafter copies of the holy scripture were transcribed into multipage parchment books. As Islam expanded from Arabia in the 7th and 8th centuries, however, Muslims in Central Asia encountered paper, a Chinese invention, and began to use it for the administration of their vast empire, which stretched from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. Soon thereafter, writers of all sorts adopted the use of paper from the bureaucracy, thereby facilitating an enormous burst of literary activity, as authors wrote on all subjects from astronomy to zoology and translators made the works of Classical Antiquity and India available for the first time in Arabic. The use of relatively inexpensive paper (which was made from vegetal fibers and rags,) rather than parchment (which was made from animal skins,) facilitated the creation of vast libraries of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of books in Muslim capitals from Spain to Iran, and the nature of this medium led to the development of new scripts and types of bindings that have persisted to the present day.”

For more information, contact ah1@boisestate.edu

Two dear and longstanding friends of Idaho Center for the Book have left us, too soon, in recent weeks. These losses are noted with sorrow and respect.

Thomas Mark Rockne (1955-2015) was a poet and writer, photographer, artist and framer. A former student of ICB founder Tom Trusky (in both Composition and Book Arts) Tom Rockne was an honored contributor to this publication, most recently as a juror for Booker’s Dozen 2013. Tom held several advanced degrees, including BFA in Painting and Photography, an MFA and an MS in Economics: a rare combination that may hint at his multifaceted gifts. Tom won First Place in Boise State’s Presidential Essay Contest in 1976, of which he was quite proud; and also taught photography at Boise State from 1984-1988. He was devoted to his writing, which he pursued until the end of his life; and will be remembered by those who knew him for his uncommon warmth and wry humor.

Cheryl Kae Shurtleff (1947-2015) was an extraordinary artist, art historian and educator, for which she will no doubt be well eulogized and long remembered. She held a BFA in Drawing and Painting, as well as MA degrees in both Art Education and Art History. Among numerous distinctions, she was recently awarded the 2015 Arts Fellowship by the Idaho Commission on the Arts. She was a founding member of the Advisory Board for the Hemingway Western Studies Center, and its pioneering Artists’ and Eccentric Book Competition. She was a loyal friend to ICB since its establishment and early years, during times of challenge and controversy, and remained so throughout her life. She was an advocate for social justice, for students, for animals and for women. No one who knew Cheryl could forget her startling talent, her collegiality and erudition, her unflagging style and thoughtful, gentle manner. SB
Idaho Center for the Book & the Arts and Humanities Institute present

AL-MUTANABBI STREET STARTS HERE

An exhibition of artists’ books, broadsides, prints and poetry created in honor of Baghdad’s beloved district of booksellers, publishers and literary cafés, which was devastated by a car bombing in 2007.

Opening Reception Friday October 2

Special Guest Speaker
Dr. Jonathan Bloom
Professor of Art History, Boston College
Historian of Print and Paper in Islamic Culture

Doors open at 4:30; talk at 5:30; reception continues until 8:00
Hors d’oeuvres and no-host bar; free event parking

Arts and Humanities Institute Gallery
Yanke Center at Boise State • 220 East Parkcenter Boulevard
Exhibit hours: Monday-Friday 9 am-5 pm
through the end of January 2016 (excepting holidays.)
For more information: AHI@boisestate.edu

Images Above, details from Day In, Day Out by Michael Chabot; Presence and Absence by Csilla Kosa; Cicero’s Observation is Timeless by John Packer

Front Cover: Presence and Absence by Csilla Kosa

Texts: 1 Untitled (excerpt) — Ibn al-Utri (9th century) Translator unknown
2 Excerpt from Al-Mutanabbi Street by Lutfiya al-Dulaimi

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Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here. PM Press, 2012