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from *How to Be the Last Librarian at Alexandria*

Comportment

Sound small cries every two to four hours. These should begin quietly and with a stillness that befits a library, then rise to pierce the armory of pages shot through with mites and youthful geometry pupils still proving. They are not proving that electricity may be packaged into copper and clay; they are proving the impossibility of turning even a page. First the hand must arrive there. And how does the ink grip the page? The pupils hold their breath, fascinated, afraid of their own blossoming.

Tie your hair back at the base of your head, just at the hole in your skull where the spine enters and the head hinges forward and back again.

Recall the vertigo of flying and falling. Think, if you could but find those plans afloat two rooms away and build Saqqara's glider-plane, if you could imitate a murder of crows.

Eavesdropping, listen to the sun splinter through the wooden door and tattoo long throats of white along the stacks of manuscripts. Beyond the door, to the west, the colonnades, the great hall and living quarters, observatories, laboratories, zoo, and in the black dirt at the river's edge, the garden. Listen to the river soon to fill with rain and rise to cover the gardens. Then tilt your ear to the east and listen for the dead at the crest of the flood plain, in the low desert, drying beneath the sands or lying stretched, already desiccated, in their tombs.

Early dusk, raise water; join the restless moving in astonishment at the sun, at how it has worn its enormous bulk across the sky in a single red stroke. If you must, wash the goats that clatter along the stone paths of the garden. Let their fur curl into the crook of your fingers.

Architecture

Sit in the window ledge and wear the sun like rings. Wet your skin and redden it on the brick. Lift your arms into a vaulted arch in which the touch between your palms is the keystone to prevent collapse, to balance the pressure pulse in and out of elbow and voussoir. You are a wonder of the world.

Trace each stroke of hieroglyph incised above doorways and arches. Watch the moon ascend and tear copper from the sky. When you unfurl the scroll, let the letters fall to your feet, pressed out in a wave of musk, of camphor and storax. The tumbling strokes of ink, little dragons, all knuckle and joint, half-lines and hemispheres, mouth, circle, orbit and rondelle, triangle, aureole and rondelet.

Beat on the desks, the shelves, on the floor and the walls, beat with your hands and your feet and your body. Recall the sound of spears. Lift to your lips the flute that was the emperor's gift. It is sweet in the way that something impermanent is sweet; it is like an iris or another sense. Or perhaps it is like the swifts, and how the many of them fly as one.

Let the pupils cry and run from you. The birds have long since disappeared from this city. But it is not the scrolls or the birds they should cry for; they should cry for and wonder over you.

Housekeeping

Let the thin rails of dust shine mildly in the morning, grey at mid-day, and become at night a scattering of ash upon the shelves and upon the soft dark hair on your arms. Make sandwiches of olives and cheese for the students hidden among the shelves and railings. Send them home.

Let the manuscripts and scrolls stack their nine hundred years along the walls, beneath the windows fixed in stone, along the tiled floors and frescoes, beneath arches set by volcanic ash and sand.

Burn your finger at the open-fire stove and think, if only you had built Archimedes' steam boiler. Those plans are folded with their picture-graphs in the room for mathematical mechanics. To accompany them -- plans for a screw to lift water from the river, hypothetical hydraulics, pipe-organs and candelaria in which the heat of candle-flames might spin a hoop from which small figures are suspended. But with what would you make these and whom would you ask for help?

On the grounds, monks build pyres. They have brought only axes, not aromatic oils for the fires, nor professional mourners. Wait until the day ends and burn candles infused with frankincense and sweet basil; look through the open garden at the moon, at the bordered hemisphere of its one closed eye.