

Awake in the Chamber of Darkness

(The Egyptian Sequence)

by Ian Irvine (Hobson)



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Acknowledgements: 'Hypatia and the Ruined Serapeum' was published in *Poetry Life and Times* (UK/Spain) in Aug. 2015.

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See <http://www.authorsden.com/ianirvine> for more of Ian's poetry.

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The Feather Speaks of Love

Hecate, my sister
I have lingered in the temples of Isis
begging for a charm
 or an epiphany
I have mingled with the Pastophori
 hoarding their secrets
 and learning the arcane script of Thoth
Many tasks have I completed
 but still the broad moon
 ignores my frequent embassies

Hecate, my sister
I beg of you:
mix for me a potion
 and strengthen it with incantations
imbue it with Her name
 and imprint upon it - that brew -
 the aura of Her loveliness

And forgive me, sister
my impatience and desperation
for I am older now
the weighing of souls approaches

And that feather
 if it speaks in the dim halls
 of eternal sleep
let it speak about my love

Part One:

The Feather Speaks of Love

Dewy Decimal Neglect

The library - home of her nocturnal self.
When she dreams of the deeper waters
 she dreams of him,
and the price of his absence.

For she is no longer young
(as he is no longer young)
 their muscles and skin lack
 the suppleness of youth.
They move more slowly - mind and body
 begin to disentangle after mid-life.
'Less about sex, more about sleep'.

She forgets some days
 that she ever desired men -
wonders why she agreed to meet with him here
 at the café between floors.
She presides over
 architecture, political science, trade,
 economics, geography, planning ...
Quiet but industrious disciplines - 'egoless but
 lucrative'.

'I get it ...' he says, 'your love for these subjects
 - so central to biosemiotic well-being.'
She takes it as a long-overdue apology.

His floor (his world) is populated by creatives -
 musicians, new media gurus, novelists
 philosophers, poets, psychologists ...
'Glamourpuss show-ponies!' she blurts,
 spilling her coffee.

So many years away from the sunshine.

When youthful, he chose the road
 she chose a comfortable life, close
 to the palace. A public servant.
Relieved, back then, to escape
 his agitations and ruminations,
 his 'projects' and bleak dynamism.

*Though, I can be mercurial
and he can calm the horses*

After they refurbished the Great Library
 (digital ramparts and buttresses)
he gained tenure, and

she pondered the electrification of books.
And despite her plants and horses,
his papyrus and wings,
they avoided each other -
dewy decimal neglect.

Though she never married, she didn't feel lonely
(and blessed with happy children).

A realisation - decades in the making -
(she steadies herself on the staircase)
Eternally married
(but when was the ceremony?)
to the library - the uncanny library.

Come into the Sunlight

A request to meet with you soon:

Where the river meets the myriad streams
of the delta
Where the streams meet the shimmering blue
of the ocean
Where the ocean merges with the horizon
(the vastness of elemental sky)
Where the atmosphere meets the milder
gravity of interplanetary space.

These are the Chambers of Darkness
(that nurture the Mansions of Life)
Home of our potential selves, uncreated
and fragile, hybrid and mercurial.
We dream them as coded invitations to bliss,
but there are no static destinations,
Only chance encounters on back-roads
littered with enigmatic herms.
Only tentative formulae on papyrus scrolls
transcribed in the House of Books.

Such is the puzzle of creative living:
stasis versus dynamism,
tradition versus avant garde innovation.
As Sesheta you are present
(bathed in sunshine)
As Hecate you are veiled
(dream-like and tidal)
Articulate sisters, librarians in
the Chamber of Darkness
the House of Life

When will she come into the sunlight?
(with her vultures and jackals)
When will her underground streams re-appear
as gushing springs in arid valleys?
When will her scribal implements
paint for us a viable future?
When will her painstaking hieroglyphs
birth marvellous gardens and
fish-schooling rivers?

When will you join with your sister?
When will you come into the sunlight?

Hermapolis (Thoth and Ma'at Assist the Time Travellers)

Part I

Foul smell of corruption - even among
the scribes of the feather. The organisms that
separate the worlds retch at the onslaught.
Anomalies - unexplained monsters in the sewers
of our confident metropolis - thrive like
summer insects.

Relief then, to meet with you here - among
the books and statues, the palettes and
broad-leafed plants. Our once energetic
retinue exhausted after the long journey
(the river thick with watery reptiles). 'No
matter,' you say, 'your safe arrival
was foretold.'

We rest among hieroglyphs and inquisitive
scholars, we drink Mediterranean wine
and sample exquisite pastries. While he,
the beaked one, your companion - so
knowledgeable and amiable - addresses
then calms every ferocious scorpion
of doubt.

Her hooves! His wings! Such commotion
in the courtyard of the library gods - though
they bow as they enter. 'The boundless energy
of youth!' you say, smiling at the Europeans.
They smile back, and nod at the wise baboon,
devour delicacies then settle into cushions
either side of me.

Part II

'We've read your petition' he says, 'and grieve
with you at an all too familiar story ... but
history is no certain ally to the likes of us.
No matter, we possess the means to stifle
their chaotic machinations. By weightless truth
and subtle magics we will prevail - the cosmic
pattern wills it so.'

Animate conversation as lanterns appear
on tables stacked with maps, manuscripts,
and ornaments made homely for foreign gods.
Quiet meditations as the Great River slumbers
and the afternoon heat gives way to evening

cool. By midnight, on the mound of wonders
a plan is hatched.

Part III

We meet as equals in a break between acts.
Your eyes request the old silence and I submit -
enter the wordless trance that quickens
true scholarship of soul. Such stillness as
the evening cools and the Great River swells and
recedes. Such stillness - under watchful stars -
as the full moon resumes its reign.

Strange dreams in the temple of alphabets -
a hippo with mud-wet eyes, a gray lion
with silvery mane - mummified water birds
in dusty catacombs. Uneasy dreams as the
water level rises and the chanting begins -
'The will', he says, 'to remake a cosmos'.

Then wake to the phoenix dawn.

Masked Lover in the House of Codes

Masked lover with quiet ultimatums and
advice softly whispered, I honour you. This
house is lined with books but your knowledge
expands well beyond its fragile walls. From
your multiversal home you monitor enigmatic
codes and myriad possible worlds -
past, present and future.

Though unable, in the time bound moment,
to turn obscure longing into a realism,
I do not feel abandoned - your soft and
heated skin inspires me still to wild but
necessary projects.

On rare occasions I am rewarded, though
more often I'm led to surprising meadows
or vast and fragrant forests. There, in your
summer-bright dress, you say: 'Pay attention ...
never forsake the joy of the unique moment.'

Ours is a bric-a-brac love - pieced together
out of juvenile tragedies, submerged networks
of fate and hieroglyphic fragments on old papyrus.
A hybrid love - simmering away beneath
the mundane, warmed by some invisible star
promising future-fated culminations.

An impossible - but no less real - love:
 you in your
teasing masks - gracefully naked,
 eternal opponent of habit! -
'Habit cannot create a corpus (or an oeuvre) ...'
 you say
'never-mind a library such
 as fuels our dreams!'

Everything Dances

[Thoth advises the initiate]

The scribe is also a dancer and a teacher.

What does she teach?

Creative focus, sublime dynamism.

What else does she teach?

The numerous dances of life.

What are the dances of life?

Actions that flow with emotions,
emotions related to loved ones.

Is everything a dance then?

Yes, everything dances.

But I am no longer young,

what can she teach such as I?

When you no longer dance

you are no longer alive.

Does she discern between affirming

and negating ways to dance?

She teaches the life-enhancing dances
for each of the stages of life.

Will my transformation be painful?

All change and growth involves some pain.

What is the ultimate goal?

Supple body postures in a pure stream
of lively feelings and thoughts.

Her Many-Leaved Epiphanies

Mature plants with ripe buds and rich aroma,
a stiff sea breeze makes them sway -
back and forth - in the early afternoon heat.
Bees swarm and dragonflies flit to and fro as
she dizzies you into green-gold suppleness.

Medicinal visions as thick stems rub against
seed-spilling buds (she likes to write and
dance after inhaling their fragrance). Library
work can be stressful - and the Pharaoh's
indecision makes for astrological hard-labor.

The ropes and chords that aid her architectural
and pastoral arithmetic are made of hemp.
but whilst on duty she needs a clear head.
Channeling Ma'at is no easy task - farmers
and temple gods are easily offended.

She prefers the company of scribes. Admires
Djehuti - so still in the river's warm shallows.
The fertile quiet of the House of Books permits
her mind to drift. *Sunshine, water, silence* - key
ingredients of her many-leaved epiphanies.

To Become a Support for life

[The hall in the House of Life]

Initiate: 'I found the vulture and her nestlings between the columns
she being brave in [the] Darkness ...

I went to it, I looked into the Chamber of Darkness
I interpreted the hieroglyphic signs

I found She-who-is-wise ...'

Adapted from Vs 556-558 as found in *Conversations in the House of Life* (trans. by Jasnow and Zauzich, 2014.)

I

The inner-most chambers of the hieroglyphic citadel
were off limits to me.
I'd been stranded - beyond a dozen years -
in the intermediate precinct.
Occupied my days wading in the marshes
that bordered the turquoise sea.

Much did I read and write
and many strange beasts
did I struggle with and consult
though always, my heart set on her.

Each dusk I observed her diligent daughters
as they departed for distant regions.
Nine sisters of knowledge
in
Nine magical boats

Time passed - the years piled up like books - but still
entry to the inner precinct eluded me -
though not for want of desiring.
Each morning, each evening
I chanted, 'Open for me the doors to your
deepest epiphanies, for I desire
to become a Support for Life.'
These words I sang with all the love
I could muster - never enough.

How many years with no response?
Nothing old could be resolved.
Nothing new could be birthed.
The doors did not open.

II

Until one night - asleep in an outer courtyard -
I dreamt a sapling dream.

Lady Vulture and her nestlings hovered
in golden barges, above the marshland,
and then - as women - stood before me.

Chief among them said, 'Behold the primordial origins
of my inspirational daughters - initiators of scribes!'

I replied, 'I desire their wisdom. I wish to become
a Support for Life.'

Chief among them said, 'But can you accept the truth
about the Chamber of Darkness?'

I replied, 'I do not fear the truth - I desire to become
a Support for Life.'

Chief among them said, 'The living accumulate death
- the Chamber of Darkness supports life
by purifying accumulated death.'

I replied, 'I do not fear accumulated death -
I wish to become a Support for Life.'

Chief among them pondered my words then replied:

'I am the transformative shadow - my agile beak
devours necrotic soul stuff. Honor me
and the first gate swings open.'

I replied,
'I honor you, I honor the Protectress of Scribes -
I wish to become a Support for Life.'

III

The splendid one resumed her vulture form
She hovered above me
She stretched out one wing
She grounded the other
She hissed at the gathering crowd.

The gate to the inner precinct swung open:
I walked beneath the Vulture's wings
(Lady with the White Crown)
I approached the spitting Cobra
(Lady with the Red Crown)

The hooded one hissed, 'Who is it dares approach
the Chamber of Darkness? I warn you: the
winged protectress has no authority here.'

I replied, 'I am a scholar - a humble resident of Hermapolis.
Long have I studied the enigmatic signs -
I wish to become a Support for Life.'

The hooded one reared up before me, 'My tests
link signs to life's primordial sources -
could you survive my venomous spit?'
I replied, 'I honor the fangs of poisonous rejection - but
sublimation can birth a protective anti-venom.
I desire to become a Support for Life.'
The serpent pondered my words, 'Love gives rise
to the finest elixirs and the deadliest poisons.
Receive, then sweat out my venom
and the final gate will open!'
I replied, 'Save your venom, Lady Cobra, for I have
concocted an antidote. You cannot harm me -
I wish to become a Support for Life.'
Lady Cobra pondered my words then hissed:
'You have passed the final examination -
and are admitted to the Chamber of Darkness.'

IV

At last the gate to all my longing opened -
I stared into the Chamber of Darkness
I entered the Chamber of Darkness
I consulted the ba-souls in the Chamber of Darkness
I slept and I dreamt in the Chamber of Darkness
I woke and took breakfast in the Chamber of Darkness
I wrote in the Chamber of Darkness

And as I read and dreamt and wrote
I did so under the guidance of
She-who-is-a Lamp of Prophecy

V

After a time in the dim-lit tunnels -
it may have been years,
it may have been days -
I glimpsed a large glass sphere of cascading blue light
embedded, it seemed, in the earth above us.

In silence (as always in silence) she led me
through a network of tunnels and caverns
until we came to a thunderous waterfall -
a place of inhabitable cliff-side caves, prophetic mists
and ornately decorated columns and ledges.
A breathtaking place high above a fertile valley.

We joined in the end, a throng of pilgrims, and
bathed beside the tumultuous waterfall, then
ate breakfast on a granite ledge as the sun rose.
Below us, a stone path snaked lazily

to a distant village.
The light around us seemed new and dazzling
- the beauty of the scene
too much to absorb all at once.
(something strange about the water).

Overwhelmed, I looked to her for guidance.
Marvelled at her dark hair, almond eyes and olive skin -
the body of a dancer, the quiet,
purposeful movements of a sage.
She washed and dried her hair.
then carefully wrung out her clothes.
After a time I followed her
it may have been days,
it may have been minutes
away from the tumult, to the interior of a cliff-dwelling

Once there I saw tropical plants
and a sea of papyrus scrolls
I saw reed-brushes, parchment, stone slabs, cushions
and charcoal in containers ...

She meant for me to work.

Asleep Among the Books

Asleep among the books
I dream of fabulous cities
 see patchwork apartments
bark-lined and gold-embossed.
The people are walking stories
they hurry from 'introduction' to 'denouement'
on roads made of cardboard -
anything is possible
and every signpost is a poem.

Asleep among the books
I dream of wilderness and vast
 galaxies of possibility.
I have to concentrate
 to open up to detail -
a mountain lion hungry for meat
a twisted juniper on the cliff top clinging
a moose grazing winter pasture.

I'd like to be more specific
 but libraries are so generalist
the eyes flit from one title to the next
and covers merge and morph
 like clouds in high winds.

We dream this way
 and think the day more stable
it's a useful conceit.

Birthing the Future in the House of Life



Bring them - the loving couples - to the various
entrances and gateways,
The time has come to celebrate their love
in the form of a beautiful hybrid.
Sunshine floods the tomb, and underground
corridors echo with music
Dust is brushed aside and the hieroglyphs
receive a fresh coat of paint.
The sisters too, are one in purpose - their
mathematic busyness, their oils
and books and implements.
As night falls we rehearse for the morning:
life-renewing words (come the precise
planetary moment).

Regret is pointless now, as industrious beasts
(an ibis, a baboon, a jackal and a vulture)
complete the refurbishments - assess
the charms that empty caskets.
There is increased permeability between worlds:
the lives we lived
the lives our doubles lived
the realm outside known physics

'An old truth governs our chamber
(so sing the sisters)
We die each night, but are heliotropic
come the river-glittering dawn.
(so sing the sisters)
Imbibing such knowledge invokes a task:
*Fortify your heart with courage
then massage a desiccated corpse
- make it moist and supple*
Your goal
(so sing the sisters)
to animate a marvellous future'.

We sing and work all night – then,
 come the dawn,
fall silent, down our tools and step back
 from our caskets.

The air is charged with anticipation
 as sunlight floods the great hall
of the House of Life.

Our crucible! Our library!
Our temple! Our sepulchre!

(so sing the sisters)

Image: 'Casket' copyright the author, July 2015, all rights reserved. Taken in the Egyptian section at the MET, New York.

Sesheta and the Chamber of Darkness

Warm breeze through clumps of papyrus
Never-the-less, I shiver for I have been down
To the chamber of darkness, down among the
Jackals and vultures, the cobras and scorpions.

The river is ablaze with late afternoon light,
But I have been down to the chamber of darkness
And I have encountered old souls thirsty for news
From the villages of the valley and the delta.

Fishermen work their nets in murky waters,
But I recall old souls thirsty for news - they
Hovered beside colourful hieroglyphs in tombs
Long since plundered of exotic burial wares.

Sunset, cooking smells and the call to prayer
But I remember prophetic baboons under colourful
Hieroglyphs and a woman dressed in stars - poised
To convert the debris of life into ink on papyrus.

On the barge to Alexandria in search of the library
Prophetic baboons whisper of cobras, scorpions
Jackals and vultures - creatures that thrive in
The sandy hills beyond the first cataract.

Despite a warm breeze through marshland reeds
I shiver, for I have sojourned with a woman
Dressed in stars and I am tasked to convert
The debris of life into words - into ink on papyrus.

River Semiotics



'Behold, my mouth is open!
I am thirsty, and seek
the life-enhancing milk that confirms
her presence here before me.'
(Transl. by the author from the 'Book of Thoth'
(Demotic, Egypt, early CE).

I took the dominion of words
Saw them float on a swollen river
Watched them harden into hulls
For barges, bright and regal

You took the watery depths
Submerged alphabets and
Life-giving communications
The empire of fish

Fruitful union - me
A love-struck ibis, still
And meditative in your
Warm shallows

My boat, your nets, our fish.

But soldiers stole my words -
Turned barges into warships,
Forged evil weapons - dammed
The life-giving waters.

Launched the Alphabet Wars:
Men with armoured hearts
fought
Men with armoured words.
But settled, in the end, to

An exhausted truce - a
Lull in the frenzy of blood.

In time, the junk of war
Disintegrated, then sank

Leaving only
 tenuous words
 floating
 on your alphabetic river.

My words, your nets, our fish

Image: Thoth and Seshat (location: Karnak). Design copyright Ian Irvine 2015, all rights reserved.

The Great Library (Per Medjat/Per Ankh)

'The Internet Archive operates 33 scanning centers in five countries, digitizing about 1,000 books a day for a total of over 2 million books, financially supported by libraries and foundations. As of July 2013, the collection included 4.4 million books with over 15 million downloads per month.' From Wikipedia article on The Internet Archive

Some choose worlds of power and debauchery -
I choose Per Medjat, a House of Books. The
algorithms make it infinite and self-renewing.
Evolved to write and publish its own texts,
it computes all cosmological laws and patterns
then feeds me alien literatures - too much
to absorb, but I'm not fussed: enough story
to anaesthetize my final years! And the
goggles erase the prison that is my invalid bed.

Let us go now to Alexandria - to the Great
Library - I dream it more real than history.

I

See how they ransack the boats, friendly scribes
loyal to the palace. Hungry for knowledge,
dismissive of the usual bribes - prostitutes and
opium leave them cold. But show them a Hebrew
scroll and they leap about like baboons - your
vessel is delayed a fortnight. They're polite to a
fault: 'The state keeps the original - but we'll make you
a good copy. Until then, enjoy Alexandria!'

Alexandria, sprawling, boisterous city of Hebrew
mystics, Egyptians loyal to Ra and Isis, Greeks reciting
Homer, Pythagoras or Plato. And others intent on
new religions - Hermetists, Gnostics, Stoics. Each
with their scrolls and parchments - so many volumes!
authentic or forged, complete or fragmented.

My library is uncanny, it regenerates lost books
- Seshat, the diligent librarian, acts as their
midwife. Strange algorithms permit her a body -
we talk as we translate, purchase scrolls or index
new acquisitions. (My wife is ten years dead - so
do not deny an old man his cybernetic re-creations.
Better this than days of antiseptic boredom).

'Sesh' (verb) 'to write'. 'Sesh' (noun) 'scribe'.
'Seshat': 'patroness of scribes and libraries'.

II

But Alexandria is the least of it - we have built
new wings, new floors, new columns carved
with hieroglyphic evolutions - foreign alphabets,
unborn languages and codes - alien scripts from
distant galaxies. My library computes them
all then authors me numerous frivolous or
canonical permutations. All this my
declining brain absorbs. All this as the
hot Mediterranean sun bakes the fabulous
architecture - the library, the causeway,
the lighthouse on Pharos, the melting pot and
the placid waves on white-sand beaches.

But the Ptolemies - fuelled by Hermesian
volatility - lost something I've tried to restore to
my postmodern scriptorium. That something was not
in Israel, nor among the eastern Romans, nor
was it to be found in the desert among camels
and hermits (athletes of God). Instead, I looked
to Hermopolis - to Thoth's temple beside the
primordial mound (beside the life-giving Nile).

Knowledge without heart engenders
ruthless monsters - children of Isfet (chaos and
suffering). Their loyalty is with Apophis - incarnation
of programmer cruelty and biosemiotic violence.
My library observes gentler commandments
(and free of Pharaonic egotism). I speak of Ma'at -
like Seshat she is beloved of the Ibis. I speak of
the Greek Muses - and engineered a new Mouseion to
honour them. All our volumes sing their praises.
The library as soul oasis - a House of Books/
a House of Life.

III

You might think my library introverted
but I have surrounded it with theatres, music
auditoriums, temples, faculties for lectors and

their students, a circus, galleries for the arts
(static and situationist), healing centres,
precincts dedicated to the sciences - the
side-walks, bazaars and malls hum with ideas and
vital communications. Hard to know where
the library ends and the city begins, such
are the subterranean dependencies.

The Great Library catalogues all Open Books - but
there are Closed Books noxious to life - incitements
to violate the codes of Ma'at and the Muses. Our
scholars spend long hours debating, and
if needed, writing commentary on these
artefacts to suffering and black magic. Words
must not be treasured simply because they exist.

IV

Thank you for visiting - the nursing staff
are kind but overworked - the food is nutritious.
They say the prognosis isn't good ... mere weeks.
But enough about me - if you put on these goggles
I'll take you somewhere special!

Down this hallway are the libraries
of innumerable possible pasts. All the books that
might have been written. I visit this wing now
and then - the truest antidote to remorse.

All the old libraries were organic matter made
animate and volatile by mind. Alexandria's digital
resurrection promises new democracies of knowledge
(and being). Library as sanctuary - vessel for spiritual
alchemy. Read a book and select a friendly future.

These my conclusions (after long meditations):
Culture as matter-mind communications - energy
pulses in quantum fields. My library is networked -
despite goggled immersion visitors don't reject
the world. The library's core - though encrypted
for protection - communicates with millions. My
friendships are global (you need never be alone).

V

The opiates keep me comfortable - I want you to know that. This may be the last time we speak - I prefer the planetarium: its dappled Mediterranean light, its indoor plants, and soothing music. A good place to daydream as the medications muddy my thoughts in both worlds. I struggle to read anything now - even the podcasts seem fragmented. But she's with me as I drift in and out of consciousness - the librarian. Her perfumes, her gentleness, her vision for what must be created. Rest assured the Great Library will thrive beyond my passing.

Part 2

Our Biosemiotic Clay

Our Biosemiotic Clay is African

I - Nubian Alchemy

Kemet, al kemet - the black and fertile earth
the black and fertile origins of humanity.

Primordial mother, sister, lover, daughter

Eventually, by laws of genetic entanglement,
(go check the mitochondrial record)
we (re)trace the contours of her absence
to the mountains that fed the Blue Nile
(the ice caps were glacial back then).

Orchestrated histories veil her presence
at the base of the mountain
at the base of your spine
at the heart of the geometric benevolence
that designed the oldest pyramids.

Young African woman with palettes, brushes,
measuring tools and golden mallet.
After each inundation she calculated
a new patchwork of fields
to feed the hungry populace.

The rich luminescence of her wisdom skin -
as many statues attest -
is primarily African:
black sunrise of the written word
black sunrise of numerous civilisations

Acknowledge her thus - for
she took you swimming in the Nile.
*Did Michaelangelo imagine the Nubian
Pharaohs white - like Jesus?*

Back then, words were hieroglyphic images
- phonetics yet to be invented - and
she wrote in the glory of paint.
They begged her
Colour us a liveable future.

II - (Quantum) Woman Dressed in Stars

She takes you flying among the stars
(and every vowel restored)
You sense
habitual memory contract to a

tiny pin-point of sub-atomic energy/light
it flares against the universal nothingness.

The hieroglyphs swirl - so many narratives,
so many possible lives - until
fragile scintillae appear, then cluster, as though
glued to invisible structures.
You watch them float like clumps of possibility
(like clumps of future memories).

Your life is fluid again -
all good things are possible
and all dangerous things -
her skin, like the coffins of your former selves,
is a gallery of marvelous images.

(Seshet) = the hidden numeric order
Our need for numbers and images and words
to strengthen living structures

Her slim ankles, her calves, her hips, her breasts

The lovers exchange gifts:
charms, formulae, hieroglyphs, stories
(photons, electrons - elementary particle-waves)
A biosemiotic exchange to animate
otherwise passive clay.

Do you sense it
the first ragged gasp of a new becoming?

Thoth Meditates on Imperial Hubris

I

After the soldiers strut and posture
After they slaughter and pillage,
Assault and subjugate (to prove their
manhood) - come the fierce pangs
of remorse. Horrific dreams: bashed out
Brains of enemy children, wide-eyed woman
(The prelude to rape). When Alexander
Arrives - his hands soaked in foreign blood -
The people call him 'liberator'
As the Persians flee the pyramids.

II

But the liberators did not liberate - though
Quickly enchanted. I watch them summon
Old deities in the shadows of sullen monuments
(Beside the turbid Nile). 'Teach us' they beg me
'To live beyond our guilt'. But the pyramids
Brood, the hieroglyphs go mute - as the
Olympians trek listless through marshy flats
And sandy wastes - 'There are no crocodiles
Among the deities of Greece!' Aware of sinister
Omens, Hermes appears at my temple.

III

'Teach me, oh father, the oldest ways,
The deepest magic, the laws of Ma'at,
The creative power of words ... ' Imperial
Soldiers trade weapons for books - adopt local
Clothes and pretend to be Pharaohs. Amused,
I acquiesce - demand a wondrous library, a
Museum with rooms for philosophy and science,
Teaching and translation. A Great Library - ageless
Symbol of our hybrid population! Then settles
A tenuous peace - until the arrival of Christ.

Escaping Alexandria (The Demon of Noontide)

Sick of what passed for knowledge among
the chattering heads at the Museum
Sick of the comfortable life in the many-tongued
metropolis of Alexandria
Wallowing in agitated sadness due to delta living
(where the Gods are veneers for Empire)
I made for a country of sand, thirsty for wonders

Found there a cave without pretensions
where the rocks leached water.
Found simplicity - wore simple clothes, ate
simple food, spoke simple words.
Only my dreams were enigmatic - the cold
desert nights being crowded with apparitions
and magical creatures terrible to behold.

Though I sought the old ones at all the
prescribed hours - with all
the prescribed words – none answered
but he who abrogates all functions.
Such strange new recipes he gifted me:
Words to address the soul's corruption, the
world's fundamental flaw.
Words to provoke the fiery ecstasy
that liberates troubled souls.

I stayed despite the loneliness - battled scorching days,
and bitter-cold nights, blinding sandstorms
and meagre rations. My senses grew over-vivid
'til finally, one day, I soared like a desert hawk
high above my wretched body - it lay there convulsing,
so thin, so ravaged by invisible enemies.

I worked hard to please my inscrutable god,
endured ferocious attacks by malign spirits -
especially at mid-day with the desert's stillness
so heavy in the air. Even the sacred books
offered no protection or solace - when I left my cave
barbarian shadows loomed
from every rocky ledge.

Many times I had the urge to flee - back
to scholarly adulation, back to fine linens,
good food and eager lovers - back
to the noise and the all-day clamour of traders
and money lenders - back to
the sleep inducing disease
that is Alexandria.

Still, I worked hard to please my inscrutable god
And he rewarded me with words,
 Words to undo the soul's corruption
 Words to address the world's fundamental flaw
 Words to provoke the fiery ecstasy
 Meagre words, enigmatic words
 Dry words - nothing more.

Hypatia and the Ruined Serapeum

(Inspired by Alejandro Amenabar's *Agora*)

Broken statues, torn scrolls,
shattered pottery, piles of ash,
and smoke (gently rising)
in the early morning quiet.

‘The mob have roasted knowledge,
silenced the Muses, stamped everything
with God-infested words!’
mutters Theon.
‘And where now, oh father’ she whispers,
‘to speak the remnants of our world?’

Hypatia, too bright in the city
for the one God sun of Christ,
watches the skies lighten over Alexandria
(unreal stillness).
Her *Wanderers* – Jupiter, Venus and the others -
smashed or shorn of power,
this dawn, this new day for the writing

Is it here, in the clarity of her grief,
that she begins to see them
as if for the first time?
Not ‘circles’ but ‘curves’,
not Ptolemy but Aristarchus.

Soon enough the zealots will object
to her and her knowledge,
will attempt to erase this philosopher ‘witch’
from history, from discourse, from the dreams
of troubled men.

They succeed for a time -
they do not succeed -
for the heavens are precise
and stomach no faulty permutations.

*My ‘curving’ planets, my
celestial musicians,
my ellipsoid wanderers
(future astronomers will discover)
are welded
(of course she knows it thus!)
each to each
in the slow
orbits
of the possible.*

Part Three:

Alexandria is Everywhere Now

The Australian Ibis (Sister to the *Sacred Ibis*)



I - The Evening Dinner

An Australian ibis - sister to Thoth's sacred ibis (now extinct in Egypt) - is nesting near the dam at the bottom of our land. She hatched three chicks but only two survive. It's swampy down there, due to the summer of inundations - we imagine she feeds her young on yabbies, frogs and large insects.

Maybe there are two birds - she seems larger in the evenings. My son believes they change parental shifts at dawn and dusk. I like to imagine they write in their down-time: poems, plays, essays, novels ... Their black bills hint at great things: beyond wading the shallows, feeding snails to their young and antiseptic preening.

II - Factoid

Ibises (scribes) are 'pests' in today's new Australia of fast money, climate change denial and government sanctioned human rights abuses. In eastern seaboard cities, colonies of birds - escapees from inland drought - clamour for pastries and fish-food in parks beside suburban lakes. They number in the thousands.

III - The Community of Scribes

At dusk last night I tried to observe the change of shift - I crept slowly, noiselessly to a spot behind a large gum-tree and waited. The ibis was undisturbed - she/he waded in the shallows concentrating, no doubt, on some doomed creature slithering about in the rich spring mud. The chicks, hopefully, safe in their nest.

Time stood still - we could have been in ancient Egypt, perhaps on a minor tributary of the Nile - poised between night and day, sunset and moon-

glow ... white-black bird with amazing concentration!
Such a domestic scene: a parent sourcing the evening meal. And then I heard it: a disturbance in the air, a

communal flapping of wings, above me, above the tree-line -
how many birds? They circled in a gigantic V, necks out-
stretched, powerful unhurried wing flaps - lumbering
organic cargo planes - and the moon as their back-
drop. Until one of them descended, smoothly - the
predicted mate? - before executing a deft water landing.

As one bird arrived the other departed - they rubbed bills
in the handover. Soon enough she (or he) was soaring
beneath the papyrus heavens - in formation with cadres
from some secret avian writers' group. Free, by night
to pursue the challenges of scribing (and interpreting)
the hieroglyphic enigmas of past, present and future.

Their young, with luck, will soon be airborne -
for a global winter approaches, and
the sons and daughters of Thoth and
Sesheta are all that stands between
humanity and brutal, self-created chaos.

Image: 'Thoth as Ibis', by the author, 2015.

Thoth and Sesheta Visit the Scribes of North America



The jet lag is disruptive
but after a while our body clocks
normalise to perpetual travel.

I

Rocky Mountain snowmelt, tumult, water rage
is a short globe-twist, google-map enlargement,
west of the Nile's leisurely northern meander.
Sesheta, you could settle here as a mountain lioness,
prowling the pine and aspen-clad heights of Colorado
- where they've legalised your seven-leaved epiphanies -
ancient gateway to geometry, writing and medicine.

II

Memories of swimming with you in turbid marshland -
rich African silt of the Nile's northern spillage.
Tangled together: a green-gold mermaid and
a waterbird. Captured/ensouled in your sweet hemp
netting - enacting the old drama of the sunrise.

To the east - Heliopolis,
To the West - pharaohs sleep in the desert,
To the north - the multiversal library,
To the south - the ibis flocks of Hermapolis

III

You fish, you hunt - a stuffed carp, a mummified ibis -
erotic practices? The river spills into agriculture,
into the salty Mediterranean. All the tender arts - astronomy,
poetry, law, medicine, love-making - are ruled
by the feather of compassion.

For a millennia we hold to a pattern -
the timeless south.
Later the floods and invasions demand
a new House of Books.
We build it at the mouth of a great river,
the shore of a turbulent sea.

IV

From the air we see Manhattan Island, cloudy
at first but by the third morning the views are
clear and panoramic. Here Hermes prevails
in the frenetic calculations of Wall Street,
the ever mutating images and narratives of
Times Square and Broadway. Beneath the city too,
in subways and road tunnels, everything moves
so fast and furious. Only Lady Liberty - aloof and
monumental on the harbour - to remind us of
The old peace
The moon's tidal logic
The precise arithmetic of the heavens.
The precise geometry of the temple

I always find you here - in the zone
between worlds.
The place
where the feather meets the heart,
where the river meets the ocean.

Image: 'Thoth', by the author, taken at the New York MET, June 23rd 2015.

The Green Colossus (June 22nd, 2015)

New York harbor on a balmy summer's day.
Crowds of all nations flock to Lady Liberty - a
French gift to America as the war of Independence
gave way to a century of progress.

'... modelled on the Roman goddess Libera', says
the audio guide, as we lift our gaze to the heavens:
her sandals, the folds of her garments, the bare,
confident arm that holds a torch aloft.
Almost too much to absorb, so
we squint across the harbor at the skyscrapers
of Lower Manhattan (the nightmare
of 9/11 but a sea whisper away).

We stroll the island, surprised at the green
immensity of the torch-bearing colossus.
We all know the story - she welcomes migrants
fleeing old world oppression
She symbolises
freedom, human rights, opportunity, democracy.
Capitalism is rarely mentioned (it having gone feral,
of late, on the streets of New York City).

She carries the rule of (book of) law - it's
inscribed with a momentous date: liberation
from the British.

That would be me - I think, momentarily anxious
about my passport. It's then I count the
spikes on her crown - 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Precisely *SEVEN* ...

'She's always on the move' says the guide '... distributing
her gifts [her concepts] far and wide'.
(Though these days she needs a military escort)
SEVEN, I ponder, as a Japanese couple capture
their love on a cellphone attached to a selfie stick
(Lady Liberty, enigmatic above them).

Seven *spikes* ... or *sun-flames* or *fronds* or *leaves*?
officially they symbolise oceans and continents, but
I'm thinking of Seshat, Egyptian Goddess of writing,
prophesy, astronomy, architecture, etc. - the liberal
and creative arts - arts loyal to
the feather of Ma'at (also an Egyptian).

In the hieroglyphs Seshat is depicted with a crown
of seven somethings:
palm fronds or papyrus leaves?

stars?
sun-flares?

Or hemp leaves - I smile and rejoin
the tourist tsunami - make a mental note
to check online for links between Seshat-Ma'at
and Libera. Is

this statue the same goddess re-imagined?
I muse, then sigh at our first glimpse
of the vast crowd waiting for the ferry back
to Battery Park.

She's still packing them in, I think, as we
join the queues (tentative in our epiphanies) -
her gifts [her concepts] as
relevant today as the Old World deities
that birthed them.

Therapy for Troubled Gods

'Who, do you think, offered therapy to troubled gods?'
she asked, as we began our tour of Getty Villa.
'This is very disconcerting', I replied, 'we're in California,
thousands of miles from Greece, Rome and
Egypt and here you are pretending that these artefacts
give you an excuse to, erm, manifest ...'
'Be quiet!' she interrupted, 'everything is global, hybrid now ...
sure this place is a little fake but it's modelled
on villas unearthed in Pompey, Herculaneum, etc.
And the art is the real deal ... a billion dollars buys
many an authentic god.'

'I'm not complaining about the art' I said, 'I'm
complaining about you being so ... *loud*
today. I can barely hear myself ...'
'Please answer the question,' she insisted.

I thought hard - dishing it back, I knew from experience,
would get me nowhere.
'I don't know ... gods are gods, supposedly
They don't need therapy ...'
'Wrong!' she said, 'You are so wrong!'

'But Gods are big and immortal and perfect
and all-knowing and all ...'
'Not these guys and gals!' she said waving her hands
at the statues of Jupiter, Bacchus, Mercury,
Diana etc. that crowded all around us.
'Maybe the God of Universal Power might
dismiss therapy for Gods, but elsewhere
gods and goddesses occasionally get sick -
both physically and mentally ...' pondering this
I climbed the ornate stairs to the second floor.

'Okay!' I say, 'among the Egyptians: Thoth, Seshat and Ma'at
were probably "divine therapists" of sorts.'
'And among the Greeks?'
'Hermes, Asclepius, Hygiene and Hecate ...'
'Well done ... The Celts?'
'Well Brighid and Cerridwen and sometimes Rhiannon ...'
'Not bad!' She broke off as we pondered
a remarkable smith-forged silver statue
of Mercury - part of a treasure-trove
dug up in southern France (where he was linked
to Rosemerta, a Gaulish lass).

'Pretty cool, huh?' she said after a while,
'Yep ... "pretty cool" '

'Don't be sarcastic ...' she replied, 'I'm
Trying to help you ...'
'Okay,' I said, looking up at her pleasing face
'then help me, please.'

She looked at me sympathetically
said: 'Listen up, lover, the best
Gods and Goddess are pathways to
desirable futures ... that's the main purpose
of these weird entities!'

We were walking toward the main outside courtyard -
despite the beautiful gardens and water-features
the looming haze of the marine layer over Santa Monica
made the deities outside look moody.

'So the job of divine therapist is to ... what ...
keep them healthy and sane enough to ...'
She put a slim finger to my lips, said '*Shsss*.
... to facilitate the creation of desirable worlds for
humans ... Otherwise, all is chaos!'

I looked at her - so L.A. in her black t-shirt sporting
a green medicinal caduceus wrapped up in
seven marijuana leaves -
'Where'd you get the shirt?' I asked.
'Venice Beach ... for \$18 bucks.'
'Kind of appropriate,' I said.
'Healing is a cosmological principle,' she mused,
'therefore all the Gods eventually
roll up at the Museum ...'
I nodded, starting to understand, 'I need
a coffee,' I said.
'The cafe is over by the gift shop - which also sells
great t-shirts! L.A. - T-shirt city, huh?'

Summer in Vancouver (Alexandria is Everywhere Now)

I

The great libraries of the past were urban. Built at the heart of kingdoms, nations, empires they were housed in ornate buildings designed to funnel paper culture to the provinces and colonies. A flat page, flat earth geography of culture. On the borders armies routinely amassed - my cannon versus your cannon.

II

*Compression, engine roar, take-off, ascent, level-off.
'The seat-belt sign is off.'
Descent, engine-roar, touch-down, decompression.
'Welcome to Vancouver! You will shortly be
permitted to leave the aircraft. Remember to
change your clocks to local time ...'*

III

Wifi on planes, at hotels and guesthouses, in airports and other public places. Alexandria's Great Library is everywhere now. On this trip we visit: Auckland, Los Angeles, Denver, New York, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver. Seven modern cities that embrace the everywhere library - culture quantized, we possess it 'via satellite' - from above, it saturates the very air we breathe.

Our solar library is vaster by far than the largest patriotic library. We are humbled and diminished - though not enough, yet, to halt the Wars of Difference, or reverse our planetary death wish - obvious enough from outer space: the forests, the glaciers recede ...

IV

Stanley Park in summer: ferns and raspberries, and flowers of all shapes and colours line the path to the Seawall. Above us gigantic trees - pine and red cedar - shade the rainforest floor. Hard to believe downtown Vancouver is only 10 minutes away by bus. Next we stand beneath a huge, green suspension bridge - briny smell of the ocean - but the spell of dense foliage is broken.

V

Later you and I sit reading on the veranda
of the old Victorian house we've rented. In our
bedroom are shelves with hundreds of books -
some in English, some in Italian - and the walls of
every room are lined with art. Here in the garden
everything is lush and green and we are shaded,
as we read, from the late afternoon heat.

VI

*Compression, engine roar, ascent - breathtaking
views of greater Vancouver and Seattle
as the plane climbs to 35,000 feet. Up here -
close to Luna, Sol and Mercury - we can
imagine ourselves in the new Library of
Alexandria.*

Spirits of the air, grant us release,
from
 the brutality of the local,
from
 false patriotism and all oppressive horizons,
from
 the centrifugal pathologies of Empire, Faith
 and Ideology.

*... Level off
'The seat belt sign is off ...
 Please feel free to move about the cabin.'*

The Library of All Souls

I

Deep beneath the metropolis - built over abandoned sections of the old subway system - is a library that is also a bookshop, academy and - it is rumoured - a healing centre for writers and other creatives.

Though modelling silence and humility, its chief librarian is no cliché of repressed bookishness. And I confess - she and her library have long nourished the secret streams, rivers and lakes of my imagination.

She tends to a vibrant subculture of privacy-conscious eccentrics for whom a thriving arts community is as much a feature of human well-being as well-funded hospitals and good government.

One day by phone she informed me - in a matter of fact sort of way, as is her manner - that I'd been a library 'member' for decades - though she would confirm no specific joining date.

She also told me I'd been 'summoned to appear before the Government of Souls' - though I knew nothing of this Council or its purpose. 'There is talk that a charm might be lifted from your person'.

This coded message I understood - though I preferred to name the charm a curse. The short of it: I prepared nervously for a journey deep beneath the modern metropolis to the Library of All Souls.

2

The descent to the underground library did nothing to calm my nerves - narrow passages, steep staircases and gloomy caverns where trains once came and went. She briefed me as we walked:

'I'm on your side' ... 'the Government of Souls only visit in emergencies' ... 'best to state your position in a straightforward manner' ... 'they'll be above us ... hidden from direct view ...'

We came to a great wooden door, carved with the words: 'Welcome to the Metropolitan Public Library'. The librarian paused there and turned to me: 'I'll be translating their questions ... as well as their verdict'.

We entered a large, cavernous, candle-lit hall filled with a maze of rickety bookshelves. It smelled damp and unhealthy: 'Surely the books are riddled with mildew and dry rot!' I said as we walked.

She gestured 'Be quiet!' as she led me through the swamp of books before us. 'There's a glass-domed theatre through here,' she whispered. Things scuttled and gobbled around us as we walked.

3

There were signs on every wall: READ TO HEAL. READING IS A SACRED DISCIPLINE. LIBRARIES CURB THE MONOMANIA OF AUTHORS. CIVILISATION BEGINS WITH READING.

We came, at length, to the theatre. Its domed ceiling appeared two-tiered: the first reared up over 30 meters above us, ending in a large circular lip. Above that I noted the well-lit vault of the second tier.

'They're up there now ...' she whispered, 'on the second tier'. I looked up, glimpsed the smoky shadows of large entities on the ceiling above the lipped circular ledge. 'The Council is in session ...'

The librarian motioned toward two ornate wood and leather chairs situated on the theatre's main stage which was directly in front of us. Once seated we found ourselves drenched in silver light.

4

The librarian donned black headphones before translating the Council's deliberations, which droned and echoed above us like the muffled cries of alien beasts - incomprehensible and eerie.

How to summarise the underlying patterns of a life in mere words? They knew it all - the long buried hurts and secret disappointments, the failures in love and vocation. A gruelling hour with nowhere to hide!

An odd process - no questions to answer. Instead, via the librarian, I was asked to reflect on certain themes - 'moods of your youth', 'wounds', 'fears', 'happy times' etc. When I tried to speak, however, I was silenced.

The creatures unearthed volatile layers of raw

memory, and I sensed them scrutinising and weighing actions from every era of my life. As they worked I sensed them back there in the past with me.

After an hour or so the librarian took off her headphones and looked at me: 'That's it - you're done! You were very open ... and the process is quite confronting ... we should have a verdict soon.'

5

She led me back through numerous corridors to a small, warm office beyond the cavern of books. There I was treated to coffee and biscuits. 'Odd, aren't they?' she said, '... different to book folk.'

'Everything here is odd,' I said, but she ignored my cynicism, handed me coffee: 'I sense a verdict is near ...' Minutes later the phone rang - she walked to her desk to answer it. After listening intently, she looked at me.

'Do you feel it yet' she asked. 'Feel what?' I said. 'A change in the fundamental patterns of your life,' Her analytic gaze made me want to close my eyes - perhaps evidence of the change might be found within.

Suddenly I felt profoundly disoriented - something was happening. The librarian drew close - her steady breath on my neck, her quiet, sympathetic words: 'The hybrid reality asserts itself - hang in there!'

I wanted to ask: 'what is the hybrid reality?' But again I was silenced - instead uncanny visions swirled all around - I was aboard a vessel, caught in a whirlpool: I saw pyramids, papyrus, hieroglyphs, the murky Nile.

6

The librarian spoke: 'They say you're afraid ... to lose what little you have ... They say you need assistance ... a lamp to curb the darkness that ever threatens to engulf the House of Life.'

The visions faded. Only the warm office, the librarian and memories of compromise. 'Do they feel it' she asked, 'the broken selves in many worlds? Tell them: stay close, for the curse of fear dissolves.'

About the Author

Ian Irvine (Hobson) is an Australian-based poet/lyricist, fiction writer and non-fiction writer. His work has featured in publications as diverse as *Humanitas* (USA), *The Antigoneish Review* (Canada), *Tears in the Fence* (UK), *Linq* (Australia) and *Takahe* (NZ), among many others. His work has also appeared in two Australian national poetry anthologies: *Best Australian Poems 2005* (Black Ink Books) and *Agenda: 'Australian Edition'*, 2005. He is the author of three books and co-editor of a number of literary journals – *Scintillae 2012*, *The Animist* ezine (7 editions, 1998-2001) and *Painted Words* (10 editions 2005-2014). He coordinates the Professional Writing and Editing program at Bendigo Kangan Institute (Bendigo & Melbourne, Australia) and has taught in the same program at Victoria University, St. Albans, Melbourne. He has also taught history and social theory at La Trobe University (Bendigo, Australia) and holds a PhD for his work on creative, normative and dysfunctional forms of morbid ennui. Web site: <http://www.authorsden.com/ianirvine>