

Alexandria Alight

(For Pierre DesRuisseaux)

I.

The extreme example of sunshine charred to smoke,
sayeth Plutarch,
Julius Caesar exhibited severe blindness—
refused to recognize—
Beauty as Justice,
or *Justice as Beauty,*

as at Alexandria, Egypt,
48 B.C.E.
(that untimed time),

in his *Putsch* to dethrone Ptolemy,
to rout the obstreperous Egyptians,
and so he waxed incendiary:

The “Gypsies” were so havocking his sails,
so disrupting his sea-borne siege,
Caesar fretted that his patchwork armada
would fritter into tatters,
become torn-apart carcasses—
mass floating coffins—
his sailors, bloated like rats,
dead in the drift,
or look bedraggled rats, clinging to splinters.

Caesar chose not to skipper—
but to scupper—
his vessels.

That impenetrable, unreachable egotist
wagered on letting his seamen burn alive—

he ordered flames be set jetting along ropes,
flames set streaking meteoric through rigging,
so that his stagnant heart
would stay the turbulent dismay that’s *Defeat*.

He had to stave off the *Death* threat that’s *Defeat*.

Terrifying scowls shattered his face:

Better to arson his navy—
 make smoking, fiery, unholy terrors of his fleet—
 char waterlogged wood to charcoal chips—

so that each burning boat resembled
 conniving dandelions.

II.

Caesar's ships were soon burning,
 intended to become floating fires
 to render Egyptians charcoal,
 swamp their soldiery in flames,
 smash their machines to sparks and cinders.

Once awash in salt-spray and foam,
 Roman sailors now pinpointed helpful breezes,
 placed their torches,
 and were soon awash in ash.

But Caesar's commands—
 rolling off his tongue like water off his back—
 showed him a debauched, *prima facie* arsonist,

so eager to pitch down and tar Ptolemy,
 so eager to have the Egyptian perish
 with the taste of *Disgust* in his mouth,
 to know miserable, dreadful *Humiliation*,
 to be humbled,
 then tumbled into a grave
 beneath a pyramid of the dead,

Caesar needed, not just bloodshed,
 but gore.

He ordered that any sailor jumping ship—
 without first setting it alight—
 would land, spitted by swords.

III.

Now the Roman Navy blazed, flaming, drifting,
 and so, soon had the city waterfront—
 all its docks, wharves, piers, equally burning—
 with stomach-churning effect.

Each blazing galley was a luminous contaminant.

Sparks rode waves of superheated air;
cinders took flight too;

these miniature torches rained down on the port.

The harbour witnessed berthing fires—
galleons aflame,
looking massively imposing as pyramids—
but pyramids imploding,
dismantling placid water,
singeing even the sea.

And the irregular and horrific *Arson*
made lime-white bones
of soot-blackened bodies.

Thus, the flooding fire swallowed up the dockyards,
then chugged and charged, fuming perpetually,
through all of Ptolemy's palaces,
leaving the bashful architecture of ruins.

IV.

Shortly, the kindled lightning of Caesar's smoking hulks—
his marine-borne 37th Legion—
that melange of roaring bees—

incinerated the Great Library,
liquidating 40,000 book scrolls—

account books, ledgers,
histories, theologies,
poetry—

all gone to smog and filth,
all teased to smithereens
and tatters.

V.

What was lost?

Books good to prop up unbalanced kingdoms
or teeter-totter marriages

or lopsided tables.

Eventually, rainbows soothed the sea,
 but Alexandria's Great Library
 was undermined ceremonies,
 empurpled charring,
 songs gone to cinders,
 poems gone to pulp,
Philosophy gone to unpardonable swill
 (maggots in the mash):

Even *Theology*—gods—got dragged through garbage—
 flagrant garbage,
 undignified garbage.

Imagine Osiris half-burnt, his gilt-face singed.

Minds had to break down, vagrant.

VI.

Caesar's chronicled *Triumph*—
 his capture of Alexandria—
 was drastic—

to exterminate the library,
 to set parchment smoking robustly,
 pages blackening unrelentingly,

while cheering with wine
 the aching stories of Egyptian groans—

enacted a masterpiece of immorality.

VII.

Such constant *History* is
 our dispiriting *Inheritance*.

But words still throng into song,
 thrive,
 and thus are born alive—

Dante's glittering ink, *par exemple*,
 or Layton's crowing lungs,
 or DesRuisseaux's plumes of letters,

all arrive as impudent as sparks—

or as the lighthouse beams that silver

the wrecks of vainglorious tyrants
and the weedy graves
of assassins and arsonists—

to tell us *Liberty* is more precious than gold,

that the Poet enters a Pantheon of Equals—
the perennial pinnacles—
emissaries of wine;

that their great strumming is fire
that never dies down,

that encumbers
otherwise unencumbered *Darkness*.

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