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Alexandria, 641 A.D.

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Or water that cannot be seen in water.
You too are made of wavering, unsure
Yesterdays and tomorrows. During, before . . .

translated by Robert Mezey

ALEXANDRIA, 641 A.D.

Since the first Adam who beheld the night,
The fresh day, and the shape of his own hand,
Men have spun stories and word by word preserved
In stone or metal or on scrolls of parchment
All that the earth engirdles or dream shapes.
Here is their labor's fruit: the Library.
They say that all the volumes it comprises
Would far exceed the number of the stars
Or sand grains of the desert. Any man
Who might be bent on reading all of them
Would lose his reason and his rash eyesight.
Here the vast memory of the centuries
That came to pass, the heroes and the swords,
The symbols, terse and bare, of algebra,
The discipline that sounds the seven planets
That rule our destiny, the virtues of herbs,
The powers of talismanic ivories,
The line of verse in which the kiss abides,
Theology, the science that can thread
The solitary labyrinth of God,
Alchemy, that looks for gold in mud,
And all the images of the idolatrous.
The infidels declare that if it burned,
All history would burn. They are mistaken.
Nothing but human wakefulness brought forth
The infinity of books. If there remained
Not even a single one, it would once more

Summon up every page and every line,
Every labor and love of Hercules,
Every last reading of every manuscript.
In the first century of the Hégira,
I, that Omar who subdued the Persians
And imposed Islam over all the earth,
Order my soldiers to destroy with fire
The endless Library and all its works,
Which shall not perish. Blessed be the Lord
Who does not sleep, and His Apostle, Mohammed.

translated by Robert Mezey

GENERAL QUIROGA RIDES TO HIS DEATH IN A CARRIAGE

The bare arroyo now without even a thirst for water
And a moon fading away in the icy sky of dawn
And the countryside dead of hunger, poor as a spider.

The carriage swayed groaning and creaking up the hillside:
A monstrous diligence, funereal and emphatic.
Four coal-black horses, their blackness the emblem of death,
Tugged along six terrors and one unsleeping bravado.

Alongside the postillions a Negro was riding.
To ride to one's death in a carriage, how very stately!
General Quiroga desired to enter the shadow
Taking with him an escort of six slit throats or seven.

Foul-mouthed rowdies from Córdoba (Quiroga was musing),
How can they hope to withstand the weight of my presence?
I am invested here, I am made fast in this life
Like the end of a picket rope tamped into the pampa.