From “New Genizah” (published as “Ode to the Library Museum,” *The Paris Review*)

In the Chester Beatty Library, there are books made entirely of jade. There are picture scrolls featuring calligraphy by the brother of the Japanese emperor. There are papyrus codices that constitute some of the few surviving texts of Manichaeism, a religion of darkness and light that rivaled Christianity in scale until its last believers died out in fourteenth-century China. There are Armenian hymnals, Renaissance catalogues of war machines, and monographs on native Australian fauna. There is all of this and more—thousands and thousands of other works diverse in period and place of origin, waiting for human eyes. And yet as I walk through the galleries, as I survey the cases of books safe behind their glass, it occurs to me that if a book is a thing meant to be read, then in a certain sense, these objects have lost their function to all but the scholarly epigraphists, backs bent in the private study room. And yet far from becoming something less because of this, the books on display have become something more.

Can we recover a physical literature? Can we recover a literature that is not merely read but felt? The library museum gestures at just such a possibility. By immobilizing pages, by securing spines, by presenting material that is illegible or unintelligible to the average modern reader, the library museum ruptures our habitual schema for what to do when confronted with a text. We cannot comprehend the sentences, the words, the script itself even. And furthermore. we are not meant to, are meant instead to attune ourselves to their textures, their heft, their thingness. When we cease to read, we begin to see. At the point of losing sense, we regain sensation.

The early semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce divided signs into a taxonomy of three categories, each distinguished by the tightness of the bond between signifier and signified. This relationship is at its most direct in what Peirce calls the icon, which possesses a similarity or resemblance to its referent—a drawing, for example. A rung below this in Peirce’s system is the index, which is like a trace or a footprint. A puddle bears an indexical relationship to a raincloud; smoke is an index of its fire. At the apex of abstraction is the symbol, in which no link of likeness exists to bind a thing to its meaning. This is where Peirce puts writing systems—the letter *a* has no more or less natural claim to the sound it makes than any other letter.

In the Chester Beatty Library’s biblical gallery—which contains the oldest surviving book of the Bible outside of the Dead Sea Scrolls—a slip between the first category and the second, between symbol and index, is made manifest. Lacking any knowledge of ancient Greek, I cannot understand the fragment of a papyrus that reads, “Here is

wisdom.” I cannot understand when it says, “Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast,” for I have no understanding; I am looking and not reading. Where I should find the form-defying awe of apocalyptic holy verse, instead I see a scribe: his afterimage, his trace, the shadow of his movements where his ink ran dry and where he must have dipped his reed afresh. This slippage provides the basis for a deeply empathetic relationship with a text—not in terms of identifying with its meaning but in terms of identifying with its copyist. Without legible content to impart, words yield to a contemplation of the surface—papyrus weathered to the color and texture of a dirtied bandage—and the hand that must have written upon it with concentration and care. Free from reading, the eye is permitted to observe in fine-grain detail the strange beauty of the page itself: how it is thick in the center but increasingly ragged near its edge, where the warp and weft
of papyrus fibers reveal themselves, sparser and sparser until the fragment ends, like sand giving over to the black waters of the sea.