

A hushed library is a place of purpose and discipline: a quiet curtain seems to muffle life within the stacks and desks. Librarians are alert to the slightest of noises, and children are perpetually admonished to hush.

Quiet is necessary for concentration, of course, but the librarian in Simic's poem has elevated it to an art form. Miss Jones – the perennially unwed librarian, more in love with the books inside the library than the world outside it – is too consumed with her task to do anything else. The quiet she has cultivated helps her to transcend the insignificant. With this accomplished, she can continue her work of deciphering "the great secret."

She has not yet solved this puzzle; it eludes even her daily attempts. But she hears something. Miss Jones understands that the books she tends can inform and illuminate her. Her puzzle is the one that every philosopher, writer, and intellectual faces. We cannot explain it. But we know that while it will never be solved, it must not be abandoned.

The narrator, too, is on his own quest. A patron likes to believe that a library can answer any of his questions; surely, there is no fact or truth that cannot be found in a book. Simic combines the classic reference text – a dictionary – with the eternal mystery of otherworldly angels to suggest that even angels can be defined and explained. He surprises the reader again by mentioning that angels were once visible. They were even so common as to be reduced to mere nuisances.

Of course, the reader wonders why the angels have vanished, and why *A Dictionary of Angels* has been ignored for half a century. Perhaps humanity has abandoned its pursuit of the ethereal; perhaps scientific developments have made us reluctant to look beyond what is immediately visible. The angels themselves may have withdrawn from a world that is simply too busy to notice them. After all, the narrator cannot hear the whispers that Miss Jones can. His ear is not yet attuned to their subtle sound.

Today, card catalogs and the Dewey Decimal System may seem like antiquated alternatives to a simple Internet search, but Simic inspires the reader to rethink the library. He transforms it from a humble collection of books to a mystical place; there, fact exists, but so does truth. Today's technology can memorize but not think. It can tell us information, but can never truly understand it. We alone can understand, and Simic suggests that we turn off our computers and wander the library's wooden shelves. We may even encounter angels there.