The Archivist

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THE ARCHIVIST

We’re on our knees in his backyard like two boys shooting marbles, as he draws circles & X’s mysterious as hex signs in the dirt.

I tell him Hannibal’s war tactics don’t excite me, but he’s somewhere else in his hierarchy of phalanxes & battlements. Now, he scribbles Othello & quickly erases it with his hands, & says, “Love & jealousy filled his mouth with poetry & killed him.” He looks at me & grins. “But Othello’s only fictional,” I say.

“No, he’s actually a composite,” the archivist says. Then he writes Masinissa in the dirt & underlines it. “Now, it was love that made him
into a great warrior.

Did you ever see Cabiria, that Italian movie?

I shake my head.

“At seventeen, he came to study tactics & Latin in Carthage,

& fell for Sophonisba. They say she was so pretty she could melt a stone charm if a man held it on his tongue. He was a boy in a man’s body when he goaded her father, Hasdrubal, to declare war on Syphax, so he could fight & prove himself in battle to win Sophonisba’s love. Syphax was defeated in two battles.”

He punches me twice on the arm, & then something makes me laugh: I see

my boyhood friend, Bill, rigging the rifle, before he runs through the trap to show how it worked in the movie, before the bullet sinks into his thigh.
“What’s funny—I mean, this is for real. Masinissa wasn’t even eighteen when he went to Spain with Hasdrubal & attacked Scipio, Rome’s greatest general, & defeated him. But Syphax locked in & allied the Romans & threatened Carthage till Sophonisba married him.” His bald head is aimed at me, & I’m thinking how his two daughters danced the grass down in a circle in the middle of the yard where we’re on our knees, with their jump ropes & endless cartwheels.

“Are you still with me? After Masinissa heard the news in Spain, he went to Hasdrubal who sided with Syphax, & it was then he secretly joined the Romans before heading home to Massylia,
a small kingdom in southern Numida. It wasn’t long before Syphax attacked.

Badly wounded, Masinissa hid in a cave with the five men left, & false mourners chanted songs of his death till Scipio marched into Africa to join him. Outnumbered, they sent a peace note, & then sneaked into the camp of the Numidians & set it afire.” The archivist’s eyes steal a few sparks from the air. The two sculpted glasses half-filled with rum summon us like abandoned chess pieces on the tiled squares of the patio. “Man, the Numidians thought the fire was an accident, so they ran out without weapons. Do I need to say anymore? The same happened to the Carthagians—
their camp ablaze,
    forty thousand dead
    & a thousand topnotch

horses & four elephants
    captured. Hasdrubal
    & Syphax tried to hide

behind the city walls.
    Syphax said it wasn’t
    arms that beat him, so he

raised another army
    from the dust & attacked.
    This time, Masinissa

beat him toe-to-toe,
    wrestled him into chains
    & marched him to Cirta,

where Sophonisba waited
    with her maidens. She
    threw herself down

at his feet & begged
    for him to kill her,
    saying, ‘Let death

take me rather than
    a Roman under the skies
    of Africa.’ Of course,

he married her before
    Lelius & Scipio
    marched into the city.”
I say, "I don’t want blood
on the hands of my heroes."
Our eyes meet & we hold
the stare of green-eyed
cats that go all the way
back to Egypt. He says,
“You want perfection
without the salt. Angels
without birthmarks."
The way the sun falls
in the doorway, I can’t
tell if it’s my wife,
his wife, or his daughter,
Louise, beckoning us
to come in for dinner.
Rape & pillage are the two
words on my tongue. I stand up
& brush the dust off my hands.
“Syphax didn’t give up.
He said to Lelius:
‘I was ruined.
But I have one consolation.
Sophonisba has passed
into the hands of my enemy
who has shown himself
no wiser than I.’ Now,
Scipio heard this from Lelius,
& he sent for Masinissa
& said to him: 'Do not
tarnish your virtues
by a single vice.'
OK, now let's go in
& have some food.'

The archivist stands up
& brushes his hands
on his trousers, smiling.

He's aced me again,
like a lover getting up
in the middle of sex
to answer a phonecall
halfway around the world.
The ringing in my head,
the questions that won't
stop. Again & again,
I return for this battle
royal on Saturdays.
I wondered what he'd do
if I hugged him.