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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.