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The Meadow and the Archive

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“The Meadow and the Archive” is a short fictional story about a government archives branch operating in a totalitarian empire in which components of the natural world have been eradicated. Archivists observe and assist a woman whom manages to liberate an important element from a particular collection. It is hoped that this element will contain the beginnings of a wilderness that the empire has systematically worked to destroy. The transaction also offers hope for other subversive modes of archival use.

On what would be Jerusha’s last day, a familiar woman watched us through the glass doors of the archive. Jerusha and I watched back from behind our desk. “Stop staring,” Jerusha whispered. I turned away. I was very fond of Jerusha – she was my mentor, and I considered her a friend. I would never do anything that would upset her or get her into trouble.

The woman’s name was ShifrazeH. She had been to the archives before. On some days she would come in; on others she would only wait outside like this and then leave. I thought it was curious, but Jerusha reminded me there were other reasons the woman could be there: the archive is only one suite in a shaded arcade of government departments, including a train station a few outlets down. Most of the people strolling past or hovering outside – staring at the small, isolated strips of government-sanctioned plants on the side of the walkway – were waiting for their train.

That day, ShifrazeH came through the doors. She was tall and wore a grey overcoat and carried a small red purse. As she walked to our front desk, a researcher looked up at her, his mouth agape. I felt Jerusha tense with alarm. I have wondered since if Jerusha worried he was some sort of government spy. But it seemed the researcher was just lost in remembering something and did not notice ShifrazeH. He mumbled to himself and looked back at his screen.

I pushed our roster toward ShifrazeH. She held her breath and took the ballpoint emblazoned with the name of our empire and our agency’s role in it. She wrote her own name and the title of the materials she wanted to see: The Hellenwood Papers, Box 19. It was what

she always asked for, and she wrote the words neatly but as quickly as possible, and then stepped back.

Shifrazeah did not like to stand close to us. Jerusha had told me that the woman had an extraordinarily acute sense of smell: It was painful for her to be there. I could see it on her face. Her jaw tensed, her smile collapsed. I thought about the other researchers and their smells: of paper and canned meat, toothpaste and tobacco, sour sweat, train station coffee. I tried not to think about what Jerusha and I smelled like, but I knew it must be the same, only with antiseptic and earthy strains of tunnel clinging to us a little deeper.

Jerusha ducked into the back hallway where recently touched collections sat on shelves running the length of the entrance to the tunnels. The tunnels connect government hubs across the city to one another. They are also where papers are kept by the empire when people do not ask for them. The tunnels are staffed by bureaucrats, called earthworms, who sleep underground in monastic cells adjacent to the chains of boxes. They have more knowledge than us, more power. They tell us which boxes can or cannot be requested. They can pass us forms that say RESTRICTED instead. Sometimes boxes that are allowed into the hands of a researcher one day will be restricted the next. These are the transactions that make researchers tremble and leave as quickly as possible, and we never see them again.

Each time Shifrazeah had come in, I worried that Jerusha would return with a restricted slip for her. I imagined, given Jerusha's obvious interest, that such a denial would be bad for her as well. But that day, too, Jerusha emerged bearing The Hellenwood Papers, Box 19, between outstretched fingers. Shifrazeah seated herself in the farthest desk from the door and Jerusha gently placed the box in front of her.

Jerusha had warned me, in the firm, with the intense manner she took on when we were alone, that we must try not to think of Shifrazeah at all. It's easier that way, if we could manage. The less we noticed, the less we could be asked by the empire to remember. That way, no one gets into trouble.

But it was impossible not to notice Shifrazeah. She had no pencil with her, no notepad, no computer, no crumpled envelope or newspaper to fill the blank space in with penciled dates and names. Instead she brought a tiny vial with a sandy-colored cork stopper the size of a thumbnail. She would open the vial and sit it on the edge of the desk. She sat the cork, which was bigger than the vial itself, beside it.

The first time I saw this I turned to Jerusha. I expected her to react as I had, with bafflement and stifled laughter. But she grabbed my wrist and stiffened her face, silently urging me not to say anything.

Later, Jerusha told me there were old arts not known by the empire or their earthworms. And these arts still existed. They are hidden, she had said., but they are important.

I had seen inside Box 19 before we checked the materials back in and it went to the earthworms. Inside, were a series of neatly arranged books. They were beautiful, bound in an almost mystic shade of sea-green fabric. Shifrazeah always looked at the book that was a paler shade of green than all the others. It was the #111 field journal of someone from a time long before the empire. There were handwritten notes inside. I had not been able to understand them. There were many equations. But the word I noticed again and again in the

journal was “goldenrod”. I knew this was a flower. It was one of many I had never seen.

They were among the things you didn’t notice were missing until you started to pay attention: types of flowers, trees, birds, insects, which the government considered invasive and impure. You heard whispers that all but the white wildflowers had disappeared, that there were no more bees; you could see that the ivies that used to cover buildings and viaducts were now gone; you noticed that everything smelled greasier, heavier, burnt, and that the smells of gardenia or lilac that used to accompany you on your walk home from the train had not been back in years. Then the names themselves became unmentionable.

That is one more way they control us, Jerusha had told me. They plucked from the environment what allowed us to exist in the ways that they could not manage and they tried to destroy all traces of it. Remember these things, Jerusha said, but know also it is dangerous to pay attention. People disappear, too.

In her trips to the archive, Shifrazeah had flipped through the pages of the #11 field journal but always landed on one page in particular, in the very middle. The book lay perfectly flat opened to it. She would sit very still in front of it with her hands in her lap.

I had looked at this page. It was— or it had been — completely blank except for a small black bump, as if some very small bug had been smashed between the pages.

On what ended up being Jerusha’s last day, all the researchers left early to catch the 16.50 train. Shifrazeah left at the same time as everyone else. On her way out, she looked at Jerusha and nodded. I pretended not to notice.

I went to go collect the boxes, but Jerusha stopped me. The earthworms wouldn’t come out until the top of the hour, she said, and she wanted to tell me something before then. She grabbed my hand. She told me she and the woman — Shifrazeah — came from the same place, an old unincorporated town in the middle of a giant goldenrod meadow. The town and the meadow were destroyed. It can never exist again, she said, not in the way it did.

I was shocked. This was not the kind of history we ever spoke of to anyone. But we all knew it, and Jerusha did not need to tell me the rest of it: how she and countless others were taken in some violent way into the empire; how the fury of that conquest was tamed and cleverly hidden with pen and paper; how it was captured and moved deep into the earth, and tagged with anonymous, bloodless names and numbers, excising the horror of what actually happened. This was a story we know too well. Whether you could find any evidence of it in the archive was another question.

The archive functions both to remember and to hide, Jerusha told me, as it is constantly edited to protect and promote the empire, to highlight a memory may also destroy it.

Jerusha let go of my hand. She walked toward Shifrazeah’s desk, where the book from Box 19 still lay open. She unfolded a scrap of newspaper she took from her pocket. Inside was a scalpel which she used to sharply nick the paper. She pressed her finger to the attacked page and then rubbed her fingertip on the newspaper.

Jerusha walked back behind the desk. She showed me the newspaper, on which there was the tiny black bug she must have taken from the empty page of the field book. “I told you there are arts we cannot talk about,” Jerusha said. “So I cannot tell you how Shifrazeah has done what she has for us. What matters is that she took what was needed from here. It is in now safe.”

I did not understand, and I was frightened. Stealing from the empire would send you to a hard labor camp.

“It’s okay,” Jerusha said, noticing my face. “No one will know. To the earthworms, there is nothing missing. But for us, it is hope. We have goldenrod again. We have the beginnings of a new meadow. Not in here anymore,” she said, gesturing to the bug. “It is with Shifrazeh. While right now the meadow is small, upside down, an imprint of a meadow, some day it will grow.”

Jerusha smiled. “I am ecstatic,” she said, “because she has liberated it from here.”

She crumpled the newspaper and threw it into the trash under the desk. Then she squeezed my hand again and walked out the glass doors. I was left to wait for the earthworms by myself.

I have thought about Jerusha and Shifrazeh a lot while going back and forth on the train. I have wondered if I will ever understand what they did. Where is the meadow and how was it liberated? Whether it begins in that vial — a scent, a little homunculus of a meadow, a seed of sorts — is beyond what I know.

But I have arrived at seeing how such extractions could be possible. I have spent years, after all, watching over researchers. I have seen them again and again reach a state of trance. In this state they twitch, hammer keyboards, talk to themselves. They groan with weariness from the work of re-creating the conversations of long-abandoned offices. They sigh with love for the archival voices they have just heard underneath the muted cries of trains stopping and starting again or the banter of earthworms emerging with mail and messages for us. Sometimes the researchers stare blatantly and blankly at me and the other clerks, jerking their heads up on the verge of questions. But we are not who they are looking at and we are not the people they can ask questions of.

If researchers can fall into this flow between themselves and the words of buried records, what else could be retrieved? What could be accomplished in the reading rooms of the empire?

I watch for the meadow when I am out. I like to imagine that one day I will see it from the train. I like to think that we will not know it is here until it is too late to stop it, until the railroad tracks are bent and buried under the colorful weight of echinacea and yarrow, aster and columbine, the air full of goldenrod spores.

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