

---

FICTION | FALL 2015

## The Archivist

By Jeremiah Mercurio

*‘Tu ne cede malis, sed ...’*

-Virgil

*Register: part I: subpart A*

Since getting sick, I’ve put my life in writing; I file it, plan each minute in the day, plan what and when I’ll eat. The date is December thirteenth, nineteen ninety-nine. The time is five in the evening. I ate breakfast at eight: a peach, a pear, a little Special K. I lunched at twelve: a canned-ham sandwich and applesauce. I had a snack at three-thirty: grape juice and cheddar cubes. Dinnertime is near. I just nibble at night. Peanut-butter crackers. I might have tea, maybe a V8. These are geriatric meals, right? The menu at nursing facilities—places called Green Acres and Sunny Estates. I might eat like the elderly, but my family hasn’t pastured me yet. I’m aged but can’t be called decrepit. I’m aware. I feed myself, bathe myself, dress myself, clean my feet and file my nails. I feed my cat as well. His name is Frank. He’s fine in my care, but my daughter Elise thinks differently, thinks he’s fat. I feed him all the time, she tells me. She sends a nurse named Berthe—the girl intrudes thrice a week, brings supplies, checks the cat and me. We’re always fine: fed, washed, and frisky. Elise still threatens me, says she’ll take Frank away. “He’s unhealthy,” she’ll say, but it’s a lie. “He’s a lump,” she’ll say; “needs a new caretaker”; but he’s as fit as can be. She’ll tell me the same:

that I need fulltime care, that she'll put me in the fuddy-duddy farm. "When I'm dead," I tell her, but she isn't amused.

*Part I, subpart B*

I map my life as well. Blueprint my living spaces. I tell myself, *remember*: Bradhurst Avenue, upper Manhattan; my apartment is up fifty-six stairs in the tenth building traveling west after the subway egress. It is eighty-three paces between the subway and my place, if I recall accurately. I must keep in mind that the building has black shutters, a gray ashlar façade, a brass railing. The stairs are carpeted with a ragged shag rug, slightly stained in several places; at the base, the landlady's tan spaniel sleeps. I must remember: there are five levels; the third landing is mine, apartment C3. There is a lift, but it frequently needs fixing. My apartment is three-chambered: a kitchen (with a struggling fridge and leaky sink), a study (in which I read), and a place (I can't call it anything else) where I sleep. A thin, t-shaped hall, like a gimlet, links the three.

Ms. Palpebra, a cleanliness fanatic, lives beside me. She visited yesterday. Said Frank was filthy. Said the apartment was a mess: papers stacked everywhere, dust bunnies breeding in every cranny. She's absurd, but harmless.

Despite my daughter's best attempts at incarcerating me with the elderly, I still live in my apartment. I signed my lease here in August, nineteen seventy-nine. Last year my landlady made me a duplicate, which I tucked neatly away in a filing bin. My rent is five hundred. Twice what it was when I came here. Every weekday since I first signed the lease until last year I walked the same sidewalk—eighty-three paces—linking my apartment and the subway. Every day I'd take the B train, switch, and ride the R until arriving at Mt. Sinai Medical Center.

Five days a week I plied my trade: I was an archivist in a science lab dealing with geriatrics—specifically Alzheimer’s patients. I’d still be there if I hadn’t fallen ill.

*Part I, subpart B, addendum 1:*

I said earlier that my hallway is thin, but that’s misleading. Perhaps cramped is the adjective I want. There’s little space, regardless. I’d like extra space, but where else can I keep my things? Lining the hallway are my puzzles, jumbles, and sundry games. I keep my mind sharp. Play literary games. Scrabble by myself. Create anagrams. Unscramble letters in the jumble. I erase the answers and try again. I save and file them. Easy puzzles—puzzles I’ve finished—stacked by themselves. Hard puzzles—puzzles I’ll try again—kept beside them in a separate stack. My carpentry guides (I’ve started tinkering with the pastime) are in the hall as well, as are messages addressing myself—“feed cat,” “feed self,” “call daughter,” “aggravate nurse.” There are crates erstwhile filled with fruit and eggs, currently packed with medical magazines, quarterlies. Napkins with scribbled messages fill a fruit crate. There are piled-up fliers—distributed by street peddlers and dating back a few years—which I’ve divided three ways: fliers advertising Jesus, fliers seeking drug-trial subjects, and fliers claiming I can make eight-hundred a week stuffing mail (an ever-present enticement). Everything filed in the hall is arranged by date—I mark them when I get them.

*Part I, subpart B, addendum 2:*

I called my apartment three-chambered. In truth there is, as well, a (what can I label it?) cabinet where I relieve myself and wash my face. The cat’s litter pan is there; I carefully clean it twice a week.

*Part I, subpart C*

My kitchen is arranged thus:

In the breakfast niche, painted flat white:

milk jugs, stacked like crushed cars in a salvage yard; empty cereal packages amassed aptly by type (fiber, sugar, mixed); banana peels piled neatly behind the milk (despite my best attempts, I can't prevent the cat's sleeping in these); peach and plum pits crammed in bags; and milk caps heaped wherever there is space.

In the fridge (late-fifties Frigidaire):

skim milk, peaches, plums, prunes, pears, a can (half empty) filled with peanuts, three empty peanut cans, a lettuce head, an eggplant, a baguette, Hershey's kisses, ketchup, cheese, grape juice (my liver can't handle wine) and V8.

I need a new fridge; the engine grinds incessantly, like a sawmill. It smells like antique wiring—burning rubber and metal.

In the cabinets (birch veneer):

thirty mismatched teacups and saucers gathered up at yard sales; seven chinaware dishes, chipped and dingy; fifty-eight *alma mater* mugs advertising thirty-nine universities, stacked alphabetically—a Bard alumna mug lies separate, left dirty, unfiled, and unstacked (Why is it dirty? Why isn't it put

away?); thirty-five spaghetti packages; sugar; salt; pepper; dried basil; Darjeeling tea; a waffle-maker needing repair.

In the drawers:

a Philips-head screwdriver, seven Japanese kitchen knives, a small Yankees pennant, a felt-tipped marker, dried-up like a cadaver, ten rubber bands, twist ties, a spatula, a rusty whisk, cheese grater, garlic press, an egg timer.

by the sink:

Frank: my thick-haired Persian cat, curled up and sleeping, purring lightly; eight plastic bread bags, washed and drying, in which I keep my peach pits.

the sink drips all the time.

*Part I, subpart D:*

The study's where I relax. There's a chair I like sitting in beside the bricked-up fireplace. It's sheathed in black-and-green tartan fabric, practically threadbare under the knees, but inviting. The study is where I save my receipts as well. Receipts in chests, bags, and bins. Supermarket, bank, and restaurant receipts. Subway stubs. Train ticket (March, nineteen eighty-five, Penn–Raleigh). A circus ticket (Barnum & Bailey, April twentieth, nineteen eighty). My daughter lives in Raleigh. She married a man named Ned. A deli receipt: Christmas, nineteen ninety-three. Purchased: an 8lb. ham. I can't eat an 8lb. ham by myself. I eat like a bird. Like a grub, perhaps. I munch lethargically, diligently. I'm a vegetarian, mainly. The receipt telling me when and where I purchased my chair (a particularly dear receipt). Receipts

the magazine salesman gives me—he indulges me by handwriting receipts. Tax receipts. Insurance receipts. Pay stubs. Birth certificate. Marriage certificate (I was married in fifty; my wife died in seventy-nine). My death certificate eludes me. It's the receipt I'll never get. I'll be buried by the time it arrives. I want a receipt affirming the time I've spent researching my disease, but it's unlikely I'll get it. That eludes me as well.

*Part I, subpart E:*

The place where I sleep's packed with all my pictures.

Example 1 (album eighteen, family picture number thirty-three):

Flat matte picture, taken with a 35mm camera (by family friend—the name's irretrievable): my fifty-fifth birthday, December thirteenth, nineteen eighty-six. I'm wearing a silly black hat, grinning widely. My face is wizened. White is gaining ascendancy in my hair. My French sniffer's salient. Twenty acquaintances, maybe fewer, are present: all names have faded; the faces are fuzzy in the picture and in life. It's typical in many ways—at least at that time. I seem happy. My daughter seems happy. It is seven years after my wife died—heart failure, cardiac arrest specifically. Having my daughter with me diminished the pain. My being with Elise diminished hers. We talked all the time. We were inseparable then. Talking with me wracks her nerves, she says when she calls these days. It wasn't always that way.

Example 2 (album three: magazine clippings, picture number seven):

Newsweek. A grayscale still depicting Reagan in an early film. The blurb beneath the picture discusses Alzheimer's. It says research funding increased exclusively because he had the disease. He is smiling smugly in the picture. Unaware. Blissfully naïve. His future incipient behind the eyes, hidden beneath the surface. The article emphasizes that there still isn't a cure.

There's little space where I can sleep. My bed is small, which is a blessing. Calling it a bed's an injustice, in fact. It's just a mattress, but that's all I need.

It designates the rectangle I've reserved, I've claimed, but it's nestled in the skyscraping heaps that keep me safe. My album stacks, my cherished album stacks, are vital—they help me remember.

*Part II:*

My mind slips these days. Things, effects, entities, beings, I can't grasp, can't fix, can't classify. I tell myself: think, save, affirm, label, affix, mark, trace, retain, embed, ingrain, secure, pin, place, plant, nail, glue, freeze, cement, bind . . . It's admirable advice. I try remembering my daughter's graduating—all three times (Bard, City, and Harvard). I try remembering December thirteenth, nineteen sixty-five. My wife's death is vague. Was it February twenty-eighth, nineteen seventy-nine? Was it February twenty-ninth?

What the average man struggles against is irrelevant, insignificant, paltry. Spats with the wife, fights with friends, headaches, heartaches, back pains, spasms, missed buses and trains—all meaningless. He can tell what day it is. He sees the past and future as distinct. He

can identify where he lives. What apartment. What building. What avenue. What city. What state. He can at least read his watch and have it be meaningful a minute after checking. Time is what plagues me. Its walls cram me by changing my space, by making it alien. It melts my space, in fact. New paper piles spring up. New streets are laid. New streetlights erected. New ads run in the magazines. Buildings refurbished. Carpet replaced. Walls painted. Baths retiled. Cabinets refaced.

Yet killing time can't save space. The race against time isn't a race I run, *per se*. My race isn't against just time—it is that, but it's against space as well. Against distance: lateral, linear, centrifugal, centripetal: against perfect circles that cleave the earth and attain its center. Against paths that are unfamiliar at any instant. Against the space between my daughter and me. Against streets, districts, precincts and quarters that are ever-presently strange but weren't always that way. Against the time it takes traversing any given space and against the space itself.

Even that's unfair. My race transcends space and time because it is a race against the very thing with which we fight space and time: remembering, writing, reading—all that names what is essentially the same idea: cementing life by casting it in the page. But the page's eternity is shaky. It's as unstable as my mind.

Had I been wealthier, I'd have studied the brain. As it is, I've read a little. I've picked up essays, articles, tracts, theses, manuscripts, typescripts, treatises, maps, diagrams, and diaries.

I've arranged a hundred scientists' research, classified it, filed it, made it easily retrievable.

I've saved everything since I heard I was ill.



I've enlisted in case studies, trials, experiments; I've been a guinea pig several times. The experts and I remain clueless. They think the cause is clear, the cure uncertain. The cure is the pressing puzzle.

But what presses harder is why my daughter hasn't called in years. Why she keeps her distance. My change was gradual. Just lately has remembering turned difficult. The past few weeks, perhaps? A year, if I stretch it. And I've been genial the entire time. I've handled my new state with calm and lucidity. I've remained pacified. I've arranged my life in such a way that the change will be imperceptible—she can't see it; I can't see it. I haven't been a burden. I'm self-sufficient. I realize where things are. I can get what I need. Why she persists, then, in neglecting me surpasses my understanding.

*Part III:*

This is my birthday, if my mind serves me well. December thirteenth. Calendars aren't helpful—they're meaningless. If I can't remember what yesterday was, I certainly can't guess the current date. Instead, I sense rhythms: circadian, perennial—I even feel each minute tick by. Time isn't difficult. Adjusting a little here, acclimating a bit there, appreciating senses that have never been fully used: an internal watch ticks with an accuracy hidden by manufactured timepieces. Neither is space hard. The self is sufficient. Calendars, watches, maps, quadrants—all entirely unnecessary; they bewilder humankind.

I stay inside. I make tea. Add a sugar lump. Add cream. I sit in my chair. Read this week's *Time* and *Newsweek*. I sleep a little. I drift. I enter the kitchen, again. I grab a peach. I pit the peach. I discard the pit. This is my twelfth peach pit bag. The bags make an attractive stack. I wash my                      I'll remember the name.                      I put the knife back in the

drawer. I pet the cat. Frank's kind cat friendly, self-sufficient. His fur satiny, a beautiful sheen. Cats must envy him. I smell mildew while standing by the wall. I suspect Ms. P— isn't as clean as she might think. I find my turntable buried beneath papers in the study. I espy my called what? (singles, discs, tracks?) 7-inches, I mean piled crate. I like the Byrds still. think that's predictable? Perhaps is. But Dan Hicks? unassailable. I nest in my chair. I buttress myself against what's-her-name's shrill cries with my music. She and the landlady are jabbering. Ms. Pababa dislikes the shag carpet. She seethes at the stains. Really, she is right. The rugs are bad. I hear my name. I try relaxing. I remember my career as an archivist. I remember my life as a farmer. A dairy farmer, I My parents were farmers I remember much.

I hear a ring. I turn up the music. I hear a ring again. I answer the call.

*Part IV:*

It's Elise.

"My daughter did remember my birthday," I tell her. She says my birthday's in December. Tells me this is March. She is busy, I understand. She can't keep track. I have a system. I must keep her straight. I tell her she's teaching excessively. She's wearing herself thin.

"I have a system," I say. I tell her she's always grading papers, researching, meeting with faculty, with the dean, writing articles. It's understandable. She was always scatterbrained. Never juggled several things at the same time very well. She teaches English. She's creative. She isn't calculating. She can easily make mistakes.

“I’ll help,” I say. She changes subjects.

“Heard the news?” she asks. She tells me that the landlady wants the apartment emptied. Says Ms. Palpebra has griped. She’s apparently gathered signatures. Thinks the apartment's dirty, that it smells bad. There are health risks, Elise says. Palpebra’s fretting. Has called the health department, the landlady. She even called Elise.

“She’s a mad bat,” I tell her. “Always has been.” I describe Ms. Panpaba’s ranting and raving. I flip the pages in my register. I read each entry. It’s apparent that she’s senile.

“We’ve had this talk, Dad,” she says. “I can’t deal with this all the time. I teach. Ms. Palpebra’s right.”

“I’ll get her,” I say. “They’ll put her in an asylum when they see my entries.” My daughter’s never met Ms. Palpebra. She’s always busy. If she’d meet her, she’d see. I’ll send her my ledger. I’ve calculated Pantana in a separate register. I’ll send it and she’ll see.

She switches the subject again. Says she’ll have Berthe take Frank away. I must have Frank, I tell her. He and I are inseparable. His destiny and mine are intertwined.

Elise starts describing a nursing center. Says it will be nice. Says there’s a lush yard. Says there are patients like me. Says they can’t remember things either. Says the staff will help. She says she and Martin can’t help me. Says they teach. Martin, her husband, sails the same ship. He’s busy as well. It’s understandable. They can’t perceive what’s happening. They’ll see eventually.

I ask her why she hasn’t called lately. She says she called yesterday. Clearly, she’s stressed. She needs a break. Imagining things.

I eliminate chance. I fix everything between my register’s pages. Pin it there. I scrawl the exchange between the page’s lines. When she calls again, I’ll tell her what she said. She

never remembers. She needs a similar system. A way she can remember, retrieve, dredge up, glean, recall, perceive, reminisce, retain, revive.

---

Jeremiah Mercurio is a writer, scholar, and librarian who holds a PhD in English literature from the University of St Andrews (Scotland), as well as masters degrees in creative writing and library science. He serves as a research & instruction librarian and visiting assistant professor of writing at Haverford College. Mercurio has published stories and poems in various journals and has research interest in cognitive narratology and fin-de-siècle British literary culture. He is currently completing a monograph on literary doodling in the manuscripts, notebooks, and personal libraries of 19th- and 20th-century British authors.

---

© 2015 *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*