

Ziusura, or The Man Who Was There

by Carmen Covito

Call me Ziusura. That wasn't really my name, but you know how it is, over six or seven millennia a lot gets lost. You can't expect me to waste my few remaining traces of energy digging into my fading memory to identify and extract some irrelevant name, right? Naturally I remember my name perfectly well, but I'm not foolish enough to share it with you. It's important to me. A man's name is the only thing left to him when his entire world has disappeared. Besides, you could use it against me, and I'm almost certain you would, given that certain ancient customs are back in style these days. If someone believes in, say, astrology, what's to stop him from practicing name magic too? In any case, that's not the point. The point is, no matter what you call me, I was there and I know how things really were.

I am here now, too, at least in theory, but my current form is a little looser, somewhat... scattered, I guess you could say. In reality I find myself in such a fluid state that saying "I am here" sounds pretentious. I've never attempted to rise above my given position; I've always accepted the fate to which destiny and social order have relegated me. So don't misunderstand me if, in order to prove that this humble — but spontaneous and worthy — testimony of mine is reliable, I'm forced to linger a moment over my condition and status. I'm speaking to you from an oil well in the southern part of the Region between the Two Rivers, today known as Iraq. I shouldn't really say "from." I know this may seem strange to you, but it would be better to say "through" or "by means of," because actually, since I am beneath the drill and the pipeline, technically my voice is coming from the gurgling depths of crude oil, so I guess it would be better to say that the well itself is speaking to you, except that... Let me retrace my steps: I need to make this clear. The well is simply a megaphone. I am oil.

Okay, as the American soldiers I just heard flying and shooting overhead would say, you don't buy it. It was you, though, with your chemical science, who discovered that

oil is born from organic material submerged in prehistoric slime and squashed between two layers of rock like a hamburger in a sedimentary bun. Then what's so strange about a curious Sumerian one day slipping into that mixture and ending up as food for anaerobic bacteria? Of course, this happened thousands of feet down: I swear I couldn't believe it myself when I was falling farther and farther into that enormous fissure, terrified, stuttering that, Divine Ereskigal!, I had only planned to use the bitumen that I had been collecting to make a couple of ritual offerings and, on my honor, I had not had any intention of selling it wholesale and making a profit off of material legally owned by the priests. Why fling an innocent being directly into hell? A long time after that, when I had turned into something resembling bread dough, I was absorbed into that nauseating black beer, and I realized that I was alive, or almost alive anyway. I wasn't suffering — there was nothing left for me to suffer with — and if there is no pain, then there is no life. Yet I felt as though I were still myself. I thought, at the time, that the wicked Ruler of the Underground World was amusing herself by being cruel to me: to disseminate the atoms of a poor merchant in hydrocarbon swill and somehow keep him conscious and aware of his infinite troubles would seem to me to be some kind of demonic Guinness record — if I believed in demons, that is. But as different civilizations have come and gone and the various gods have fallen, I've gotten smarter: with all of eternity to suck information from the Good World Above, and with nothing else to do but stay here and refine it, you learn to have faith in your own alkanes and naphthenes. According to your latest scientific findings, my so-called "survival" can be attributed to spontaneous polymerization of neuromolecular human structure on a nucleus of deeply fuzzy post-organic singularity. Otherwise, how do you explain my ability to extract information through sub-perceptive analysis of vibrations caused in the earth's crust by seismic and microseismic activity, radio and television broadcasts and cellular phones? But this is not what I wanted to tell you.

I've heard that some of your experts on ancient times have come to blows over a claim that recent discoveries prove it was not we Sumerians who invented writing, but those upstart Egyptians or even those hicks from part of India, riff-raff who lived on the Saraswati river. That might have been possible, and if it were true I wouldn't object — we Sumerians have never been nationalists. We didn't even know we were "Sumerians"; it was too early to adopt a collective name. We limited ourselves to living in the center of the world, building our city-states, and, whenever possible, stealing the cities of our neighbors.

Back then I was part of an élite group of privileged travelers, and we weren't concerned with introducing subversive new ideas like the concept of "nation." I was a man who believed in hearth and home, well, hearth and home and caravan since I was constantly traveling to sell-and-buy worldwide from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea (I knew those pre-Harappan guys along the Saraswati — they didn't know how to write to save their lives, but they sold some pepper that wasn't bad). Why would I care about proving moral supremacy? All I asked of my customers was that they not cheat when it came to the weight of silver. But you would do better not to sit there open-mouthed while the Egyptians, the Indians and their modern pals pour lies like water for you to drink. I know how writing was invented. I was there when Nam-tar-anna called Ur-nasir an idiot.

You see, for a long time we'd been using the ingenious — if inconvenient — system of symbols sealed in a dried ball of clay. Do you know what I'm talking about? I guess not. Let me explain. This is how it worked: let's say, for example, the head of a village had to provide two hundred forty loaves to the temple warehouse as repayment for previous supply and couldn't bring them there in person. He might, say, give them to me, but how could he guarantee that I (remember, I'm just an example) didn't help myself to a couple sacks on the way and then leave him in debt with the temple? He would take two hundred forty little terra cotta loaves and close them up in some wet clay. Once the clay was dry I would have had to break it in order to pull out the two hundred forty symbols and make them into one hundred twenty, or even sixty, along the way. But the legitimate recipient of what today would be called the "packing slip" had to crack it open to check that the number of symbols corresponded to the pieces of merchandise delivered. So we came up with a really clever improvement that made it possible to interpret the slip without breaking it: while the clay enclosing the symbols was still wet, the sender would mark his seal on it, along with the number of symbols that were inside, and to make it even easier for the recipient he would draw something that illustrated the type of merchandise. Well, Ur-nasir had just finished etching everything and we were sprawled in the shade in the courtyard of his house watching my slave load the sacks of loaves onto the asses and waiting for the packet of clay on the table to dry, when he asked me, "You want a beer?" and he called his wife to bring me one. Nam-tar-anna came out all covered with flour and looking grumpy and slammed the jug down in front of me as if she were mad at me and planted herself there with her hands on her hips and looked both of us up and down as if we'd committed

an outrage. Everything remained perfectly still. After a little while, the shrew bent down and began touching the clay to check whether it was dry, I thought, poor foolish woman. Can't she see from the color? And that's when all of a sudden she started cackling like a crow and then shrieked, "You're an idiot, Ur-nasir!"

"But ma'am," I started to say, seeing that her husband was so dumbfounded that his throat was swelling up and he couldn't speak a single word. I shouldn't have gotten involved because then she turned to me and yelled, "You're an idiot too, you frigging merchant!" At that her husband jumped to his feet, regained his powers of speech and let out a yell they must have heard as far off as Uruk, but he was so angry that his words were garbled and it was hard to make out most of what he said, except for this: "...you and all the other whores of Eridu."

Nam-tar-anna acted as if she hadn't heard a thing. With a slap she sat him back down and then she delicately crouched on the mat, brushing away little leftover pieces of clay. "You're an idiot and now I'll prove it to you," she said, all calm and with the barest trace of a smile. But I was wrong, I realized, she hadn't been sweeping away the clay; instead she had collected the pieces and kneaded them together to form a kind of square little pillow, a wet knob of clay that she placed on the table in front of us.

"Look at that," she said to her husband, pointing to the half-dry packet, "and shut up. I see a seal, a drawing of bread and the number two hundred forty. What do you see?"

Ur-nasir's throat was swelling up again, but before he could get out another barrage of insults his wife had already picked up the seal and the piece of straw dirty with clay that was resting on the table, and she swiftly copied all the marks onto the fresh knob of clay and shoved it under his nose.

"And here, what do you see?" she asked in a teacher's voice.

"The number two hundred forty, bread and the seal of Ur-nasir," I answered out of compassion for my customer, out of indifference to danger, and maybe, yes, in fact, definitely because I was truly curious to know what Nam-tar-anna was getting at by treating us like two three-year-olds.

"That's why you're idiots," she said. "There's no need to waste time and energy making all those little terra cotta loaves and those stupid sealed packets. All you have to do is put the marks on a tablet like this one. It has all the same information." Ur-nasir looked at me. I looked at Ur-nasir and his bloodshot eyes were round and wide like empty

bowls and I knew that he had understood the same thing that I had: she was right, and someone would have to think fast of a way to admit it. "Merchants have always been clever, no? It's up to you to use your brain," he was begging me with his wide-open gaze. Back then we didn't say, "Okay," so I didn't say it, but my personal experience told me that it's not proper for a husband to admit that his wife is right about something, so I accepted his plea and saved us both from embarrassment by jumping up and raising my arms to the sky as if I had simultaneously been stung by a bedbug and visited with a vision. "Enki! The Lord of Wisdom has spoken from the mouth of a woman! Bow down, Ur-nasir! Let us all bow down!"

Okay, it was a dirty trick, and today I'm a little ashamed of it, but at the time it took a certain amount of courage to evoke the name of a deity for no good reason, and in any case I had shown a presence of mind and spirit that bestowed honor on my class. Ur-nasir let out a gratifying sigh of relief, but Nam-tar-anna's smile became an unpleasantly ironic sneer, or at least it seemed that way to me. Now that I think about it, maybe that was a misimpression or a temporary trick of the light. It would have been difficult for her to twist her lips into such a complex arrangement, and one that was so very unfeminine. She was busy chewing the piece of straw, in fact. She wasn't listening to us as we discussed the enormous, fantastic possibilities opened up by the Divine Enki's revelation: like a government clerk, Ur-nasir was pleased at the thought that tablets would take up less space in the archives than round packets, while my mind was racing around the marvelous improvements that could be made in accounting records, and maybe even the possibility of sending a slip without merchandise. Meanwhile, Nam-tar-anna was mumbling to herself something about "gi" means "straw," but "to provide" is also pronounced "gi," and so drawing straw next to the symbol for bread might mean "bread provided"...

No, she didn't add the picture of the straw to the message right then. The surface of the tablet was drying up, and her husband's patience was drying up as well. He rose to his feet, pulled the piece of straw out of her hand, took back the seal, threw a mat over the tablet and the packet and kicked Nam-tar-anna back into the house yelling, "Go get me my good clothes, lazy woman! You bottomless pit, scourge, locust, whore!"

Knowing what I know now, I realize that I should have killed the man right then and there. He made me unload all the sacks, saying this time he'd bring them to the temple himself, and he'd pay me for the inconvenience, but nothing more. All of a sudden, he

said, he felt like going for a walk, and he wanted to see the archivist priest again — it had been such a long time since they'd had a good chat. The jerk! If I had killed him he wouldn't have taken credit for the new invention, which is what he did, thereby earning two hundred *sila* of barley and an embroidered sash, while I got nothing. May demons torture him in eternity, may his offspring disperse, may he lack water for his fields, may he run along the steppe on four legs like a wild ass... Sorry about that. It's strange how a case of injustice from the past can still inflame me, even several millennia later. Ur-nasir is dead, dead many times over. He isn't even dust anymore. No one remembers him, except for me. I can consider myself avenged, no? But I have always been the fiery type. In that moment, I was so fired up with enthusiasm over the possibilities of those tablets that the loss of my little business deal didn't bother me one way or the other. I said good-bye to that black-hearted liar with the utmost graciousness and ran home where, happily, I immediately wrote a list of all the stock in the warehouse. How naïve I was! And short-sighted too. As an attractive, wealthy widow, Nam-tar-anna would have chewed her straw in peace and she certainly would have followed her brilliant idea about the pictograms to its natural conclusion. Right there in the courtyard she would have given birth to the entire system of cuneiform writing. Instead it took years before some unknown *dubsar* figured it out for himself.

I repeat, I'm sorry I didn't kill that jerk, her husband. Civilization would have accelerated exponentially. We could have saved a lot of time and, given that I would have moved with my new wife to her better-irrigated farm, up in Eridu, the thought of which had tickled the back of my mind when I first saw it, before I'd ever set eyes on Nam-tar-anna, I would never have fallen headfirst into that bitumen. But back then I didn't understand time, or women, very well. Now I know too much about such things. Well, at least about time.

(translated by Natalie Danford)

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