

THE CURSE OF WRITING

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For Numano-sensei

What about the written word? Does it have a spirit of its own?

Long ago, the land of Assyria knew a great many spirits: the male Lilu and female Lilitu roaming the darkness, Namtar the Plaguebringer, the Etimmu of the Dead, Labasu the Abductress, and countless others. Evil entities filled the Assyrian night sky, yet no one had ever considered the spirit of the written word.

It was around the twentieth year of King Ashur-Bani-Pal's reign when strange rumors began to spread throughout the court at Nineveh. Each night, mysterious whispers could be heard in the dark corners of the king's library. As the revolt led by Shamash-Shum-Ukin, the king's older brother, had only recently been brought to an end with the fall of Babylon, some thought the whispers might portend another act of treason, but this could not be. The voices belonged not to people, but to spirits. At first, there were those who thought the whispers came from the Babylonian captives recently put to death before the king, but that was obviously not the case. As all well knew, the Babylonians, numbering more than a thousand, had without exception been relieved of their tongues before meeting death. In fact, a small mound had been erected where those tongues were collected. How could souls without tongues possibly speak? Following futile attempts to divine answers through astrology and haruspicy, it was decided that the whispers must belong to spirits dwelling in the king's collection of tablets. Yet if that were true, if there were spirits hidden among the texts, what was their nature? Since no one knew, Ashur-Bani-Pal called upon his most trusted scholar — the large-eyed, curly-haired Nabu-Ahi-Eriba — to investigate.

From that day forward, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba visited the library (a site fated to be buried two centuries

later — only to be excavated, quite by chance, some two thousand three hundred years thereafter). The scholar pored over the extensive collection, searching for clues. Unlike Egypt, Mesopotamia did not use papyrus. Cuneiform characters were written in clay with a stylus. This great library, stocked with slabs of clay, resembled more than anything else a potter's shop. Spending his days at the library table (the legs of which were genuine lion legs with claws intact), Nabu-Ahi-Eriba tried to glean some wisdom from that weighty collection of old texts, any information about the spirits of the written word, but discovered nothing. All he learned was that words fell under the domain of the Borsippan god Nabu. Beyond this, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba found little guidance in the annals. The aged scholar set the stack of tablets aside, focusing all his energy on a single character, examining it as a haruspex might scrutinize the liver of a sheep. While he was staring at the symbol, something extraordinary happened. Before his eyes, the character broke apart, disintegrating into a tangle of meaningless lines. From that moment, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba could no longer see how such squiggles could contain sound and meaning as they always had before. Making this strange discovery for the first time in his seventy years, the scholar was shaken to his core. It was as if the scales had fallen from his eyes. What could possibly allow simple lines written in clay to carry sound and meaning? Of course, once Nabu-Ahi-Eriba had reached this point, he had little choice but to recognize the presence of spirits. In the same way that a heap of body parts — arms, legs, nails, torso, head — does not a person make, how could these scribbles produce a word if not at the behest of a spirit?

With time, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba came to understand something of the spirits that had hitherto eluded him. He saw that they were as numerous as all things under the sun. They multiplied constantly, reproducing like field mice.

Nabu-Ahi-Eriba went into the streets, waylaying anyone who had recently learned to read and write. Patiently, he asked them: "Now that you know letters, have you noticed any changes?" In this way, he collected the oddest intelligence. There were those who claimed they were suddenly incapable of delousing themselves, those who said dust was collecting in their eyes as never before, those who had lost sight of eagles where they had always seen them, and those who found the sky far less blue now that they could read. Thus Nabu-Ahi-Eriba wrote: "These spirits appear to devour the human eye, as larvae bore into a walnut shell to skillfully extract the nut within." Additionally, the scholar found many literate people troubled by sudden coughs, chronic hiccups, sneezing, and diarrhea. "These spirits apparently infect the nose, throat, and stomach, as well," he mused. Others reported their hair suddenly thinning. Still others spoke of weak legs, trembling limbs, dislocated jaws. Ultimately, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba had no choice but to conclude: "These words are harmful. They damage the brain, leaving us mentally incapacitated." Indeed, once acquainted with the written word, craftsmen lost their touch, soldiers became cowards, and lion-hunters missed their marks. Nabu-Ahi-

Eriba's findings could not have been more clear. The scholar even spoke to a man who claimed that, once he learned to read, he no longer found joy in the company of women. Yet since the man was more than seventy years of age, this development was likely not due to the maleficence of the written word.

In Egypt, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba thought, they believe the shadow to be a part of the thing, but what if the written word is such a shadow, attached to the thing itself?

Is the word "lion" not the shadow of an actual lion? Perhaps, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba surmised, the hunter who has learned that word has set his sights on the shadow rather than the lion itself. Perhaps the man who has learned the word for "woman" holds not the woman, but her shadow. Before the advent of writing, before the flood of Pir-Napishtim, we knew joy and wisdom immediately. Today, we only experience their shadows through a veil of letters. In this age, people are much worse at remembering things. This, too, must be the devilry of the spirits that dwell within words. Whatever we fail to write, we lose the ability to recall. With clothing, our skin has grown weak and unsightly. With the invention of the wheel, our legs have grown weak and unsightly. And with the spread of the written word, our minds have all but ceased to function.

Nabu-Ahi-Eriba knew an old man particularly crazy for books. This man was even more learned than Nabu-Ahi-Eriba himself. The bibliophile knew not only Sumerian and Aramaic, but could even read the Egyptian glyphs inscribed on parchment and papyrus. He knew virtually every fact of the ancient world ever committed to writing, but his knowledge of the world around him was another matter entirely. While he could tell you about the weather on any day of any year during the reign of Tukulti-Ninib the First, he couldn't tell you if it was cloudy outside his own home. He could recite from memory the words of solace that Sabit offered Gilgamesh, but had no idea how to console a neighbor whose son had passed away. He could describe in detail the dresses worn by Shammuramat, mother of King Adad-Nirari, but was altogether unaware of the clothes on his own back. How he adored writing! It was not enough for him to read, memorize, or even fondle texts. Out of his boundless love of literature, he dissolved the oldest clay tablet of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in water and consumed it. The spirits had done merciless work on his eyes, leaving him badly nearsighted. The tip of his aquiline nose was callused from constant brushes with the clay. The spirits had also fed on his spine, leaving him so severely stooped that his chin nearly touched his belly. While this was a man who could write the word "stoop" in five scripts, it had never occurred to him that he himself was stooped. Nabu-Ahi-Eriba counted this book-lover as first among the spirits' victims. Miserable in appearance though he was, the old man was always so happy that anyone who saw him could not help but feel jealous. Nabu-Ahi-Eriba concluded that the man's blissful state, too, was the work of the words — a

strange philter administered by the mischievous spirits.

As it would happen, King Ashur-Bani-Pal fell ill. When his chief physician, Arad-Nana, realized the affliction was serious, he borrowed the monarch's robes, hoping he might trick the eye of Ereshkigal, Queen of the Dead, and take the illness as his own. A number of young men viewed the physician's ruse as patently ridiculous. No one, certainly not Ereshkigal, they said, could ever be fooled by so childish a ploy. Hearing these young men, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba contorted his face in disgust. To try to find logic in all matters, as these young men did, was confounding. In the scholar's mind, it was as if a man covered in dirt from head to toe had decorated just one small part of his body — the tips of his toes, say — in the most beautiful manner imaginable. These men had lost sight of our place in the world, adrift in a cloud of the mystical. For Nabu-Ahi-Eriba, this superficial rationalism was an illness all its own. More than that, he was convinced that this bizarre fad of logic was the handiwork of the spirits of the word, as well.

One day, a young historian (or keeper of the court record) whose name was Ishdi-Nabu paid a visit to Nabu-Ahi-Eriba and asked the old scholar: "What is history?" Seeing the confused look on the old scholar's face, Ishdi-Nabu elaborated as follows. There are numerous theories about how Shamash-Shum-Ukin met his end. While we can be certain of the fact that he eventually threw himself into the flames, there are those who believe that, in the throes of despair, he lived his last month in unspeakable debauchery, but others believe he purified himself daily, praying night and day to the God of the Sun. Some say he leapt into the fire alone with his queen, but others say he sent hundreds of consorts and servants to a fiery end before he finally joined them. All is now literally smoke — so who can say which is true? Ishdi-Nabu knew that a day would soon come when the king would have him commit one of these views to the record — thereby consigning the others to oblivion. So, the young historian asked, is this what history ought to be?

The wise scholar said nothing, so the historian tried posing his question another way. Which is history — the events of the past or the writing in the clay?

To Nabu-Ahi-Eriba, this seemed to confuse the lion hunt with the relief depicting the scene. This is what he felt, but could not clearly state, so he answered this way: History is both — the events of the past and what is written in the clay. Are the two not, in fact, one and the same?

But if that's true, the historian continued, what about things not written down?

Things not written down? Don't make me laugh, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba said. That which is not written down

didn't happen. What is a bud that fails to sprout? History is what we find here in the clay.

The old scholar pointed to a nearby tablet. Sheepishly, the young historian looked to see what it was. *The Conquests of Sargon II*, by Nabu-Shallim-Shunu, the greatest scribe in the land. The face of the tablet was stained with pomegranate seeds spat out by the scholar as he spoke.

Ishdi-Nabu, he said, it looks as though you do not yet understand the incredible power of the spirits of the words. The spirits who serve the god Nabu grab hold of phenomena, display that form as their own, and in so doing grant those phenomena eternal life. At the same time, that which the spirits neglect to touch, everything beyond their reach, is bound to perish. Why else would it be that the stars not mentioned in *Enuma Anu Enlil* do not exist? It can only be because they are not named therein. The old volumes tell us that the trespass of Great Marduk (Jupiter) upon the realm of the Heavenly Shepherd (Orion) angers the gods, and that an eclipse in the west must spell the downfall of the Amorites. Thus it is written, thus it is so. Ancient Sumerians knew nothing of the beasts called horses because they had no character for "horse." Listen to me — there is no power more frightening than that wielded by the spirits of the written word. To believe that we are using them for our own purposes would be a grave mistake. They use us to be written. We are servants at their beck and call. Worse still, the harm they inflict is considerable. I am now studying these strange spirits, and I am sure that your doubts about writing stem from your proximity to it. It is the poison of the spirits coursing through you.

Afterward, the young historian returned home, a look of bewilderment hanging on his face. Alone now, the old scholar continued to lament that even this promising young man had become a plaything of the spirits of the words. The fact that closeness to writing led to doubts about writing was by no means paradoxical. Nabu-Ahi-Eriba, blessed as always with the healthiest of appetites, remembered how he had devoured a full lamb only days prior, since which time he had been utterly incapable of looking a live lamb in the eye.

That night, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba cradled his head of thinning hair in his hands and lost himself in thought. Did I just face that young man and praise the power of the spirits in the words? What a horrible thing, he said, clucking his tongue. Those damned spirits have fooled even me.

But the spirits had not merely fooled him. They had cursed the old scholar with the most terrible affliction. It began with him staring at a single character for days on end. From that time on, he had been unable to see the character as whole. Yet it was not only the written character that had changed for him. When looking at a house, it would cease to be anything more than a meaningless assemblage

of wood, stone, brick, and plaster. He could no longer see it as a place fit for one to live. It was the same when looking at people. Their bodies broke up into strange, meaningless shapes. Why, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba asked himself, should this collection of bizarre shapes be recognized as a human being? He was at a loss. This problem was not limited to material forms, either. In his mind, every kind of behavior was distorted as a result of this analytical affliction. Everything he saw came to lose the meaning it formerly held. The scholar now found every element of human life fundamentally suspect. Nabu-Ahi-Eriba was on the verge of losing his mind. If I continue my studies, he told himself, it will likely cost me my life. Frightened by the thought, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba hastily compiled his findings and presented them to the king. Needless to say, Nabu-Ahi-Eriba's report contained more than a few traces of political opinion. To wit, the military realm of Assyria is being destroyed by invisible spirits and, making matters worse, no one seems to be aware that this is happening. If we should fail to change our ways and continue our blind worship of the written word, we will regret it most bitterly...

Of course, the spirits could hardly sit by and let this act of slander go unpunished — nor could the king, who was deeply upset by what he read. After all, the Great King was a devout worshipper of Nabu and a man of culture. That very day the king had seen to it that the scholar be confined to his home. Had this been anyone but Nabu-Ahi-Eriba, the scholar who had tutored the king from the time he was a boy, he would probably have been skinned alive. Finding himself suddenly thrust out of the king's good graces, the scholar came to realize that this could only be the revenge of the wicked spirits of words.

Nor was that the end of it. Several days later, when a violent earthquake shook the region, the scholar happened to be sitting in his personal library. As his was an old home, the walls collapsed, and the stacks of clay came crashing down with them. Row upon row of volumes — hundreds of heavy slabs — rained down with the cursed voices of the words, burying the old heretic and crushing him to death.