

The swallow can't swallow, and the reeds must die.

Could it be the way the marshes lie?

Only he whom marches could ever truly tell you why.

What dies in day and burns in night?

What glows in dark and shrinks in light?

What's twice as many when left alone?

What's a smaller issue the more it's grown?

To some it's clear and some are blind,

It seems a thing only I can find.

-Excerpt from Hammond's Riddle, circa 1700 BCE

Chapter 1 – Excavation

The sun beats down on another arid day at the digs, heatwaves rising from off tepid particles of recently settled sand. Dirt pushes up against itself in sweeping walls, methodically brushed aside layer by layer. A deathstalker hugs the side like a balled-up wrapper.

Shattered tops of caved mud houses form bubbles from the earth, sectioned within crafted rectangles dug into the ground. The river bend frothed and ran over just a jog's length away.

Crouched about, picking around like fussy children at their vegetables, were several primates dusting for fragments of unreachably forgotten past. In weeks of work, a shard of clay was a grand prize.

Hands embalmed in crust and splotchy skin reddened and cracked from the brutal elements, pithy hats and sweaty clothes ineffective in their protection, they endeavored onward in a sort of maddening obsession; an incommunicable venture of passion.

Though any given point in space is indefinable and inconstant, many hundreds of cycles ago this land once housed a community of riverside people whom settled here to use the fertile mud for agriculture.

All that remains of them are the places, tools, and stories they left behind.

Derick Winchester was one such splotchy primate fishing through the dirt for what remained of the riverside people. The buttons were undone on his overshirt and the white undershirt beneath was no longer white at all.

A maroon sash around his neck a shade darker than his colleagues' denoted him as the expedition leader, and he wore the extra years of experience in his face and what was left of his hair. Panting heavily, he looked up from the mud roof he was painstakingly flicking at, with a brush no larger than a pencil to make a vague gesture toward his nearest companion.

The target of his call had thick blonde hair that, were it not matted down by the humidity and desert, would undoubtedly shine magnificently. He appeared to grin through his work, impervious to the monotony of it.

"Sanders, c'mere'n'take'a'gander at this!"

Sanders peeked up from the sand he was shoveling tirelessly.

Derick massaged his fingers slowly through sand before cradling something within. With the gentleness one might handle a baby bird, he lifted it from the ground for Sanders to see.

It looked like an odd rock, or a brick, one that were a shapely rectangle unmodeled by the forces of nature. It was dusty enough as to make the excavator holding it appear perfectly clean.

But there was fragmenting along its bottom, giving it the grim appearance of a decapitated head.

Derick carefully raised it forward to Sanders's eye level, whom had trotted over with a bounce that ignored the exhaustion he felt.

"What'dya make of it, 'ay lad?"

Sanders narrowed his eyes and sniffed. His eyes scanned the object sagely, as if preparing to give his informed opinion; then he wagged his tail. Derick smiled at the golden retriever.

"Aye, aye, that's right, now don't pant on it, your breath could wet it down and ruin it."

Derick turned it over to look at its other face, tracing indents with his finger and whispering to himself.

"You called the dog over before me?" a somewhat nasally voice whined from behind, bearing the indignation of subtle dehumanization.

The excavation lead whipped around.

"I'd near forgotten you were here, son! I was under the impression you and Robert were cooking in the tent!

"Robert gets... fussy when others interfere with his cooking. He kept hitting me with the spoon."

Derick huffed. "S'pose so. Right then. Well, gander at this," and he proffered the stone out for his junior to see.

The younger man adjusted his glasses and inspected it closely. "Looks like a big flat rock. The seat of a chair, is it?"

"No, no Cid, look closer!" Derick said, pushing the tablet into the rookie anthropologist's hands, "feel those indents! That's the hardened material brainwork of forgotten peoples!"

Cid indeed felt those indents, the tactile memory of centuries ago. Each was as full to the brim with dirt as an overflowing baking pan. To the naked eye, they were no different than the rest of what was caked on the surface.

Cid paused in contemplation. "...Writing? Is it writing?!"

"Jog your noggin, of course it's writing, blast you! If you can't tell a tablet from any other chunk of rock, what good are you?"

"...It's only my first excavation, sir. I'm unpaid. I'm hundreds of miles from home, I'm..., he trailed off.

"Well, ye'know, nonetheless," Derick coughed, "gotta be hard on ya so you'll learn, y'see," but even as he said this his voice slowly softened to one with a more pedagogical lilt. "These hashes all along the face here are ancient cuneiform writing. Aside from, feck, a towering obelisk of gold or sumn', this is one of the largest prizes men of our profession can hope for out here."

"Any idea what it says?"

Derick turned the tablet back over in his hands and studied it thoughtfully.

“Nuh, full’uh dirt.”

“That right,” Cid affirmed while scratching his arm idly.

“Well, gently now then. Let’s take this back to the tent. I’m eager to get some refuge either way, nasty business workin’ under the sun all day. And ‘sides, ‘skiters out here can carry some down sickly infections.”

Cid stopped scratching his arm. “Huh?”

Cid sipped tentatively at the colorless, tasteless, ostensibly textureless gruel before him all the while staring down the large and stern-faced man sat before him who ate it with such fervor you’d think he had never eaten in his life.

Next to him, an empty seat, as Derick stood over a pop-up desk, scouring the tablet with a magnifying glass. In the corner of the tent, Sanders picked away at a bone.

After a particularly boisterous slurp, Robert met Cid’s gaze, whom quickly looked away and back.

“It’s very good,” Cid lied. “It really reminds me of my mother’s cooking,” he said honestly.

Robert only nodded, and grunted. His beard was stained with gruel. His eyes were clouded by mist.

Derick had been hovering around the top of the tablet for a while now, licking his chapped lips and continuously opening and re-squinting his magnified eye every six to eight seconds.

"I say! It appears to be titled," he proclaimed at last, prompting Cid to look over meekly.

"A transaction date?" Cid recalled from his short time at university that most surviving historical records from this culture were transactions between merchants.

"Not quite, my boy, not quite. No months, no numbers; merely a name."

A lone lantern lit the interior of the tent and its light cast dramatic shadows on the cloth walls. Sanders now rested atop his own paws.

"Then what is its title? What sort of writing is it?"

Derick looked at dirt under his fingernail. "Can't make it out with all this dirt can I? We'll just hafta' get'ta brushin'."

"But first," Robert spoke at last in a gruff voice befitting of his visage, "we finish our meal, and rest." He slammed his fork against the table.

No one had a mind to argue with that.

The dusting effort took days, requiring a careful hand from top-to-bottom. Dusting out one character upon the tablet's face could take upwards of an hour. Yet despite this, the venerable seasoned archaeologist was diligent through his work.

Derick was no expert in deciphering the ancient language, but you don't make a lifelong career of digging the culture's history up without spending a little time learning the patterns.

The delicate control the work required often made his hand terse up, and he'd clutch his wrists wincing through the night. Though the modern terminology for this condition had not yet been invented, it was well-known by this point in history that a lifetime of wrist-intensive work would bring about pain just like this, and Derick was getting up in the years.

When the pain was too much to handle, he would swap off dusting duty to Robert, who went about it with a consistent flow but little care for the details. During these times, Derick would supervise Cid down at the dig site.

"Our work oft goes unappreciated, Cid m'lad," Derick would tell him down at the site, wiping his brow with his handkerchief, "but it's things like this that can change the world."

Cid would nod enthusiastically.

"Imagine, take for instance, if we never knew of the great stories of Ancient Rome. Where would we be then without their wisdom? You can learn lot about people from the past, more than any living person'll tell ya."

As days passed by, the small expedition group uncovered more of the house the tablet originated from. It was an unusual home, with its numerous shelves erupting from the sand.

Most homes were prosaic, idyllic. They featured a space for living, pots for storage, tools, a table, and a couple cuneiform tablets for record keeping.

But shelves outnumbered pots 3:1, and each bore the shattered remnants of tablets with unreadable faces, smoothed from centuries of erosion.

"If none of these are recoverable because of the elements," Cid asked one fortunate day where the clouds were blocking the sun, "why did the one we're dusting survive?"

"I haven't a clue! I'm not one of those boys in the lab who could smell a crumb of dirt and tell you its entire history since the time of God. All I know is we count our blessings when we receive them."

The reason, unbeknownst to the mammals of the Earth, was that knowledge that needs to be found will find a way to make itself found. Skeletons find their way back onto the plane of the living in immaterial forms when their business is unfinished, visage unrecognizable but intent cosmologically intact.

At last, on another scorcher of a day when the group were taking refuge within their tent, the first row of characters on the cuneiform tablet had been unveiled.

Cid studied it intently, peering over the shoulder of his mentor. Nearby, Robert stewed another monotonous dinner, tasteless gruel sticking to the spoon and forcing him to scrape it along the pot's side.

After a few minutes of screwing his face up and attempting to appear like he was thinking meaningfully, Cid spoke up: "What's it say?"

"Somethin' about birds, and marshland."

“What?”

“Birds. Marshland. Dunno. Nothin’ unexpected for folk who lived in marshland with birds.”

“That’s all we have? C’mon, let’s dust more, it must have more to say!”

“Can’t bear to, been spendin’ far too many days and nights hoverin’ around this tablet like a horse fly. ‘Sides, seems to just be about nature or what-have-you. Let’s just box it up, we’re almost out of days for this trip anyhow.”

Mysteries don’t often immediately make themselves apparent as such. Such humble beginnings.

Chapter 2 – On Display

A great drab olive-green truck putted to a stop in the alley, betwixt glass-windowed storefronts for candies, clothes, and toys. These were high-demand locations, because the streets bustled with activity and patrons to the local museum.

The Bexxford Museum of History was the shining beacon of an otherwise unremarkable city that was known solely for its unpasteurized goat's milk not too long ago. The magnificent building was large as a palace and tall as the surrounding stories stacked atop one another.

The old venerable shoe-cobbler; who'd been known by the locals for decades; peered out the window frame of his store to watch the truck and the pair of workers that would soon exit. It was a rare occurrence and distinct sound, it came only about once a year: the roar of an engine and heavy clicking of tire against cobbled stone.

Two heavy bolt doors opened on either side of the truck, one slow and deliberate, the other flying open and crashing against its own hinge. Out the truck stepped two plainly dressed men: one markedly thin, the other markedly round.

They communicated using only vague gestures and facial expressions, then moved around to the back of the truck and brought the doors open with a sweeping motion. A ramp folded out, and the workers entered the truck.

The cobbler took a great sip of tea, watching as the truck workers reappeared from out the back of the truck wheeling a crate on a dolly.

“This old museum of ours; to think it still gets new arrivals! It warms my heart. When I was a boy, there was nothing like seeing the pieces of other worlds, y’know,” the cobbler began rambling to his wife, who sat nearby knitting a blanket in the midsummer.

“So you’ve said. Nothing warms my heart quite like hearing you say those same words every year when the truck stops by!” she paused as something occurred to her. “I’ve always wondered, though. Why shoes? I’ve been here with you for forty long years and I’ve only known you as the humble old cobbler.

If you loved other worlds as you’ve always said, what made you fall into footwear?”

The cobbler smiled.

“Are shoes really so different? They can go to and come from many places, wearing the dirt and scars of land and travel as readily as flesh. I never had the money for travel, but what I did have was my grandfather’s old business. You understand, don’t you?”

His wife matched his smile, and for a moment they appeared identical enough that one could feel palpably feel the four decades of union they shared.

“Yes, dear, I do.”

The truck workers were oblivious to all of this. They’d been here a half-dozen times before, and every time the old town and storefronts all looked the same. Another corner shop on another corner. They had a job to do and a beer to slam down after at whichever pub was closest and cheapest.

Not even they knew the contents of the crate. Was it fragile? Sure, that's a given—it was marked as such on the box in red spray paint. It wasn't too large, not too heavy; it could've been a bronze bust, or an ancient lockbox, or really just about anything.

It was one of the conversation topics the workers would often return to on their long commutes, despite neither being overly affected by the topic.

“Whadya think that real small box is?” one of them might ask one day.

“Could be a... an old ring! An old gold ring with a big ruby. Boy, if I had something like that, maybe my wife'd finally take me back, eh?”

“Ha! It'll be a cold day in hell, and hell indeed, were that to happen. Tell you what mate, I bet it's a little bit of an old house fly stuck up in some amber. Them museum types love that stuff, yeah? Me personally, I'd never pay to see a bug!”

They'd laugh, throw a couple more idle suggestions around, and never quite agree on anything. It was a pastime and nothing more.

All this to say they dollied our object of interest out the truck and into the museum's loading bay all the same as any other reclaimed treasure of history.

In that crate, cushioned softly in a bed of straw, was a clay tablet found in a dig site by the river settlements of Babylonia.

Was a crate really so different than being lost beneath the earth? Weren't both just temporary means of imprisonment? Or does that make the assumption that occlusion is inherently any less being than exposed?

These were not questions held by the tablet. It was, of course, a stone tablet.

It was loading bay-bound, then traded off to some curators where it could be relocated and analyzed in a study. The kind of study with pretty polished wood grain and a lamp with a dark and verdant lampshade.

A woman with brunette hair in a ponytail, in a monocle and suit. Her masculine wear caught her much ire from those who passed through town, but most of the locals had grown accustomed to it by this point.

When the tablet sat atop her workspace, surrounded by tools and a spotlight, she absorbed its qualities at a glance in the way only an expert could. It was etched with a strange hand. Strokes were scribbled as freely as thoughts flowed from one's head.

The bespectacled woman, a curator, tried to match the handwriting scrawl on a slip of paper with a pencil, creating that distinct scratching only a pencil could. Her mind raced with ideas.

Words stood out, mostly nouns. Tales of the swallow, peat from the marsh; but that wasn't all.

Her eyes connected dots like a puzzle, dashing between the repeated instances of one word: a word she didn't know. Not that she'd never seen it before, but its meaning was an ongoing investigation. No context ever seemed to suit it—it showed up as readily in matters of finance as it did in matters of animalia, medical study, and war.

She heaved a thick book with a forest green cover off the room's cherrywood bookshelf, dropped it on a desk, and paged through it furiously knowing full-well she would

not find the answer she sought. Merely, she was a worker of strict and excess discipline and followed procedure irrepressibly.

Symbol guides, contextualization, connotation and denotation. She scoured the paragraphs bearing these titles with hawklike tenacity, hoping to find a sentence she had somehow missed the other half-dozen times she'd been through this exact process.