

Introduction

Five thousand years ago, the people of Sumer could dig just a few feet into the ground and eventually find water pooling up around them. The name of their home — *Mesopotamia* — was given to it in fact because it lay between the shores of the Tigris and Euphrates, “the place between two rivers.” They believed, not unreasonably, that they came from the water, that their home was the first to emerge from the ocean and to bring into the world a shape out of chaos.

They invented civilization.

They invented agriculture.

They made the first alcohol, first kiln, first loom, first wheel, first road, first city, and the first government on earth. The laws that they established were the first legal codes, their taxes the first system of levies.

Consequently, around 3200 BCE, the Sumerians developed a way of keeping track of their progress, advancing these successes even further over time with a rudimentary series of scratches in clay that we recognize today as the first system of writing.

They developed it into a form for recording their transactions—

From a cultivated field, which is situated in the valley of Li’u-Bel, Itti-balatu, the son of Nabu-iddin, has made a purchase of six talents of wheat from Tashmitum-damqat, son of Shigua. Tashmitum-damqat has counted the money, the full price of that crop from the field in Li’u-Bel, on Ululu thirteenth, the seventh year of Cyrus.

They developed a kind of warranty —

Bel-akha-iddin, son of Bel-epish, spoke unto Bel-shum-iddi, son of Murashu, saying: "As to the ring in which an emerald has been set in gold, I guarantee that for twenty years the emerald will not fall from the gold ring. If the emerald falls from the gold ring before the expiration of twenty years, Bel-akha-iddin, son of Bel-epish, will pay to Bel-shum-iddi, son of Murashu, ten manas of silver," as witnessed by Khatin, son of Abu-nu-emuq, on Elul eighth, the thirty-fifth year of Artaxerexes.

They even established the first-known marriage contract —

I, Rimum, son of Shamkhatum, have taken for my wife and spouse, Bashtum, daughter of Belizunu, in the witness of Uzibitum, priest of Shamash, the son of Addiya. The bridal present shall be ten shekels of gold. If, after receipt of this, Bashtum to her husband, Rimum, shall say "You are not my husband," she shall be strangled and cast into the river. If Rimum, her husband, to Bashtum shall say "You are not my wife," he shall pay her ten additional shekels. I swear this by Shamash, Marduk, and my king Shamshu-ilu-na.

And so this is how it began. Not poetry or stories or dramas or songs. This is how *writing* began. The first thing we thought of doing after inventing this new tool was account for all the stuff we had, the stuff we'd lost, the stuff that was owed to us.

Indeed, it's estimated that over 90 percent of what the Sumerians wrote down only served an administrative function. The roots of writing are planted it seems in the worst kind of nonfiction imaginable: informational, literal, nothing about it mattering beyond the place it held for facts.

It's upsetting to think that this is what our genre evolved from, but even more so that some still think the genre hasn't evolved.

Are we working toward information, or are we working toward art?

It's not very clear sometimes.

For me, the lyric essay has been a way of defining what I like about the genre by pitting it against what I don't.

I was cocky about this for a while.

I said some things about memoir that I probably now regret.

Ditto concerning criticism, journalism, all narratives, etcetera.

At one point, I had a very clear understanding of what I believed this was and wasn't.

But it's been a year now since my teacher Deborah Tall passed away. According to Jewish tradition, it's time that her headstone be placed at her grave, and I feel that my teacher is really gone now. This feels like she's really gone.

I'm less willing, these days, to offer definitions.

On the day that somebody dies, you want never to go to sleep. And now that a year's gone by, I want the lyric essay to be whatever it wants to be.

But I know that's not very useful.

Every semester I inherit undergraduates from our introductory workshops who've been taught that anything goes when it comes to lyric essays.

I want to tell them just the opposite.

Just the opposite isn't true.

Last fall, after her death, I spent an afternoon with my box of stuff from college. Most of it was junk: tests I could never pass today, essays I would never write, a petrified piece of rotini pasta that Diane Ackerman left behind at a dinner before her reading.

Underneath a hat, however, crumpled at the bottom of the cardboard box, I found a yellowed fax that Deborah had once sent.

To: John D'Agata

From: Deborah Tall

4/14/93

I was still a sophomore, and I think she was on the road. I picked it up in the English Department's office at my college and probably read it a dozen times before I reached my dorm.

John, Just saw this in the new *Georgia Review* and thought of you. Hang it over your desk. Lose no sleep. Also heard from someone else that this is a very good book. See you next week. Deborah

It was a review of Jim Galvin's now-classic *The Meadow*, a book that

we've since embraced in the nonfiction community, but one that reviewers had difficulty placing at the time. "The book defies categorization in its mix of philosophy, memoir, aesthetics, imagination, and documentary observation," the reviewer initially wrote.

But I'm reminded of what Latin American historian Eduardo Galeano wrote in the preface to *Memory of Fire*: "I don't know to what literary form this voice of voices belongs. I don't know if it is novel or essay or epic poem or chronicle. . . . Deciding robs me of no sleep. I do not believe in the frontiers that, according to literature's customs officials, separate the forms."

Somehow, over the years, I became a customs official. I wrote a manifesto. I visited people's schools to indoctrinate their students.

"What you're looking for," Deborah wrote me, in another note I saved from my junior year of college, "is a kind of essay propelled not by its information, but rather by the possibility for transformative experience. You're talking about the lyric. A lyric form of the essay."

Is that too simple for us today? Is that too soft for academia? Can we still keep a thing alive without consulting the owner's manual for its breathing apparatus?

It's not that anything goes. Nor that there were ever rules for succeeding in the form. It's that everything in nonfiction — this genre of crop receipts, of warranties, of marriage contracts — has the potential to be turned into something that is better, more potent, more artful, shaped.

I want us to be transformative. I think that if we are, we might not ever die.

Let's start over, then. Can we?

We could go back, if we wanted to, to 2700, five full centuries after writing was invented.

The Sumerians, at this point, are still using their technology exclusively for commerce. Thanks to this, however, the first city on the planet has grown from an outpost of one reed temple and five mud huts that once housed an estimated twenty-seven people, to a city of 80,000, stretching two and a half square miles.

Oral history tells us that the gods at this time, looking down at the Sumerians, notice the new markets, the new apartment blocks,

the clanging carts on paved streets, the potters and the butchers and the prostitutes and jewelers all screaming out for customers, scribbling out receipts.

In fewer than three generations, according to archaeologists, the Sumerians came to constitute the highest concentration of humans on the planet — 4,000 times.

Four thousand times more dense than the world had ever seen.

The gods were looking down, they say, because we'd never been so noisy.

They decided that that was enough.

They decided to send a flood.

For seven days and seven nights, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers overcame their banks, coursed rapidly through the city, dissolved it back into the earth. The home of the Sumerians was rendered, once again, indistinguishable from the nothing it originated from.

We have geological records that confirm this flood occurred.

We have an oral history that says everybody died.

One tradition, however, says that a young man by the name of Ziusudra was spared by the gods for the sake of novelty. They granted him immortality, invited him to heaven.

Before he left, however, just in case there were survivors, Ziusudra inscribed a list onto the blankness of the world about how he thought humans might rebuild their broken culture.

This, we think, was somewhere around 2600. Six hundred years before the first poem was ever written. Eight hundred years before the story of Gilgamesh was told.

This not only is the start of world literature as we know it, it's the start of an alternative use of nonfiction in the world.

What Ziusudra left behind was more than information. It's the first recorded document of instructional observation, a catalog of do's and don'ts that gestures beyond itself, the first attempt by a human mind to communicate an idea with imaginative expression, an essaying through a speaker's own experience of the world in order to make a shape where there previously was none:

The List of Ziusudra

In those days — in those far remote days — in those nights
— in those far-away nights — in those years — in those

long ago years — at that time when wise ones knew how to speak, the oldest, the wisest, knew how to speak with the goldenest of words, but they did not write anything down.

Friends, let me give you the instructions that the elders gave to me. Let me give you advice, and please don't neglect it. The instructions of our elders are precious in life. We should comply with them.

First of all, don't ever buy a donkey that excessively brays, for this is the kind animal that will split your midriff.

Neither should you buy a prostitute from the street, for hers is a mouth that will bite.

You should not ever buy a house slave either, for he is a weed that will make you sick.

You should not ever hire a freedman to help you, for he knows that he can get away with lying in the shade.

And do not ever buy a slave girl from the palace, for they are usually sold from the bottom of the barrel.

Don't loiter about when there is a quarrel in progress, and try not to ever be a witness to one. Don't get into any quarrels, nor cause one, talk about one.

Stand aside from quarrels altogether, in fact, for you should take another road in life.

You should not disgrace yourself, should not tell lies, should not boast or gossip or deliberate for too long.

You should not draw water from a well you can't reach: for this will make you suspicious to those who are near.

You should not set to work using only your eyes, for possessions are not multiplied by only looking at them. And you should not drive away a powerful man from your

home, for that is like destroying the outer wall of your house.

Instead, by grasping the neck of a large ox you can cross a mighty river, and likewise by moving alongside the paths of mighty men you will go very far in life.

Understand, though, that when we are talking about bread it is easy to say, "Sure, I will give some to you," yet the time of actual giving can be as distant as the sky.

The eyes of the slanderer always move like a spindle.

The garrulous man fills his grain bag while the haughty one brings his home empty.

He who works with leather will eventually work his own.

And a weak wife will always be seized by fate.

For fate, dear friends, is like a wet bank. It is always going to make you slip.

– *John D'Agata*