

Cuneiform Alphabet

Early mid-September Saturday morning cold
and I am in third grade struggling with making letters
with a pencil on white three-punch paper with
blue lines. “What are you doing,” my father asks.

And I respond by telling him I am writing—
for hours. I have found timelessness in
what I describe today as listening to guidance,
which is not so much hearing my inner voice

as it is hearing voices that guide my hand,
in writing cuneiform characters, some of which
I have copied from the entry I have found
regarding them in *The World Book Encyclopedia*.

Exhausted by sometime that afternoon, I look up,
finally, and squint into the downward slant
of light spreading into beams among the pattern
of roses that repeat themselves on the linoleum

that curls up on the corners of the kitchen floor,
shadows just beginning to appear in the corners,
my grandmother starting dinner in a skillet
on the stove behind me where I have written page

after page in a strange alphabet that
I don’t even question, and will not remember.
Years later, as a young man, the volume
of the encyclopedia in which I placed these pages

will mysteriously open in my hands, and I will
feel embarrassment about having written
such childish scribbling, having already begun
my journey and apprenticeship as a writer;

whereas, now, as an old man, what
I remember is making cuneiform characters
in an alphabet I didn’t know,
and my exercising an ability to listen

vigilantly to what was being sung,
and my making letters that I strenuously
formed into words
in attempting to replicate them in song.

—Wally Swist

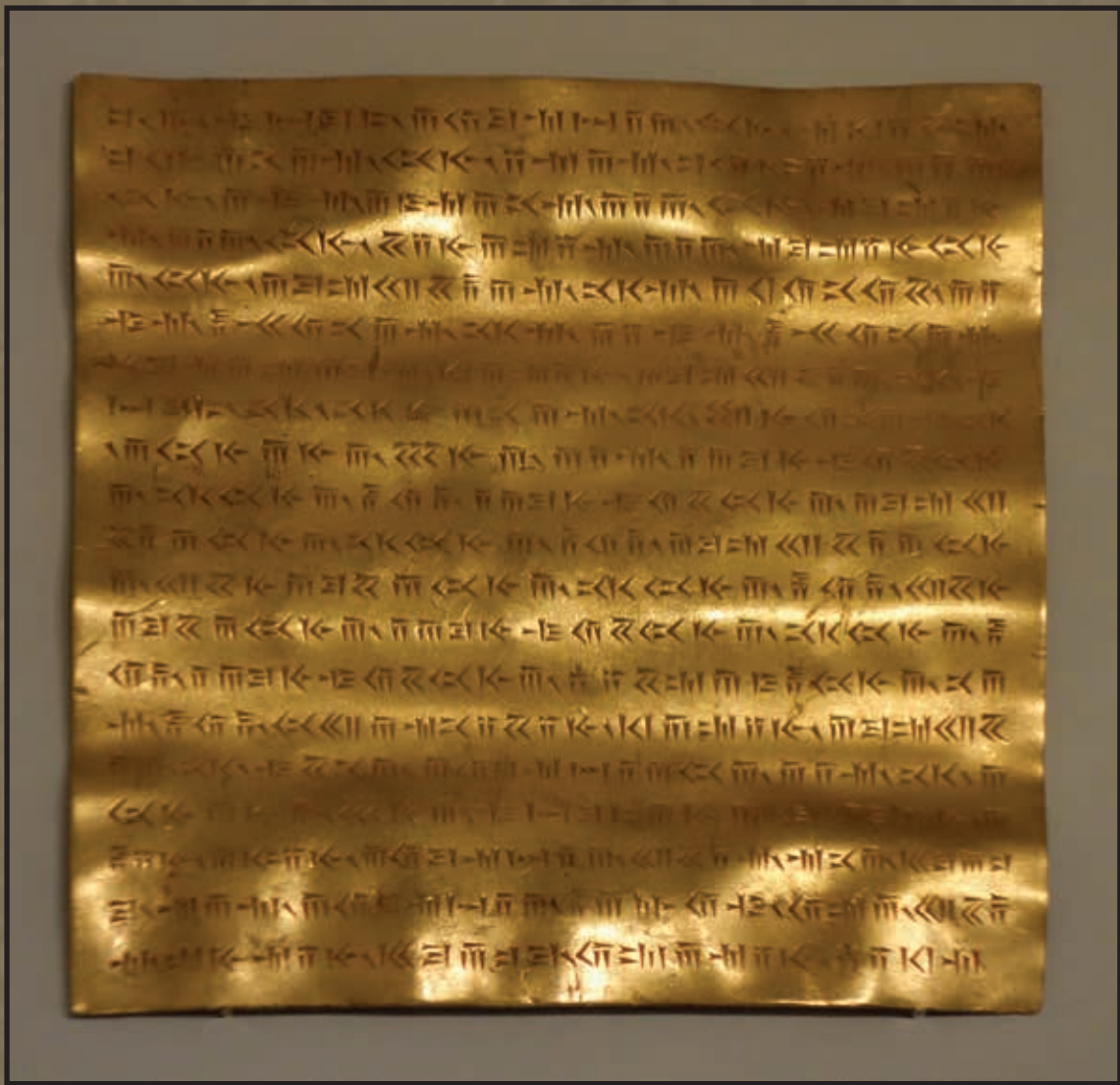


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