gilgamesh (fossils in the stream)

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Eliana Lazzaro

The Euphrates is kind as the ferryman rows you home to Uruk. The river runs clear today, the bottom dotted with stones—you tell Ur-shanabi to stop the boat. He protests. He would have taken you all the way; you think he feels some sympathy, that you came so close to forever-youth, to lose it in a serpent’s jaws. But you tell him to stop his boat in the shallows. You hitch up your robes and step out into the ancient waters.

Enkidu’s death came on like a sandstorm: the build of his sickness was quick and dark and blinding, raged hard and merciless, scraped the strength from his frame and the sight from his eyes. It buried him under layders of dust, until you wore your hands bloody trying to dig him out. The earth took his body and swallowed him whole, stripped the flesh from his bones and spat them out. You couldn’t reach him. You’ll never reach him again.

The flow of the river is quick and cool, but you bear the flesh of gods, and your vision (like his, once,) has always been keen. You crouch in the shallows and flip over rock after rock, the way Enkidu showed you, until your vestments are soaking wet at the hems and your fingers are numb and pale. It doesn’t matter: there are things more important than numbness. You will not take your gaze from the bounty that lies sleeping at the bottom of the river.
Once, one of your attendants brought a strange stone to your throne room as a tribute to the king: they found it near the banks, they said. You took it from their hands and examined it: the silhouette of some long-dead, long-forgotten creature was pressed into the rock, veiled in sediment and clay. You stared at it and felt the crackle of your lungs against your ribs and the creak of your joints as you moved. Your heart twitched in your chest like a cornered animal. You sent the stone away.

At last your ice-chilled fingers pull your prize from the riverbed. You stare at the shape outlined on the underside and you think of Enkidu, fallen god-star, turned to clay. You think of the decay of his body and the wasting of his limbs. You think of your own. You press the stone against your lips and cradle it close to your breast like a treasure. You walk towards the Great Cedar Gate.

When you are dead, mortal, these are the remains which you will leave behind: a skeleton, preserved in the earth. A tablet, engraved with the flowing lifeblood of your story. A whispered tale of love and pain to echo across the ages. The walls of Uruk, standing tall, now crowned with a fossil you pulled from the riverbank: its ghost, enveloped in earth and frozen in its final sleep, looks out over the city and proclaims to all that night is coming soon.