

gilgamesh (fossils in the stream)

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gilgamesh (fossils in the stream)

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 layers 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.