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There are Rivers in the Sky

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VIKING

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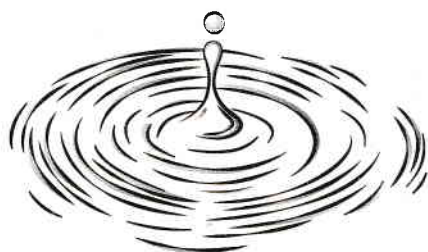
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LBRIS

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I

Raindrop





By the River Tigris, in olden times

Later, when the storm has passed, everyone will talk about the destruction it left behind, though no one, not even the king himself, will remember that it all began with a single raindrop.



It is an early-summer afternoon in Nineveh, the sky swollen with impending rain. A strange, sullen silence has settled on the city: the birds have not sung since the dawn; the butterflies and dragonflies have gone into hiding; the frogs have abandoned their breeding grounds; the geese have fallen quiet, sensing danger. Even the sheep have been muted, urinating frequently, overcome by fear. The air smells different – a sharp, salty scent. All day, dark shadows have been amassing on the horizon, like an enemy army that has set up camp, gathering force. They look remarkably still and calm from a distance, but that is an optical illusion, a trick of the eye: the clouds are rolling steadily closer, propelled by a forceful wind, determined to drench the world and shape it anew. In this region where the summers are long and scorching, the rivers mercurial and unforgiving, and the memory of the last flood not yet washed away, water is both the harbinger of life and the messenger of death.

Nineveh is a place like no other: the world's largest and wealthiest city. Built on a spacious plain on the eastern bank

of the Tigris, it is so close to the river that at night babies are hushed to sleep not by a lullaby but by the sound of the waves lapping at the shoreline. This is the capital of a mighty empire, a citadel protected by solid towers, stately battlements, defensive moats, fortified bastions and colossal walls, each rising ninety feet or more. With a population of 175,000 souls, it is an urban gem at the junction of the prosperous highlands of the north and the fertile lowlands of Chaldea and Babylonia to the south. The year is sometime in the 640s BCE; and this ancient region, which is lush with perfumed gardens, bubbling fountains and irrigation canals, but which will be forgotten and dismissed by future generations as an arid desert and abject wasteland, is Mesopotamia.

One of the clouds advancing towards the city this afternoon is bigger and darker than the others – and more impatient. It scuds across the sky's vast canopy towards its destination. Once there, it slows to a halt and floats suspended thousands of feet above a majestic building adorned with cedar columns, pillared porticos and monumental statues. This is the North Palace, where the king resides in all his might and glory. The mass of condensed vapour settles over the imperial residence, casting a shadow. For, unlike humans, water has no regard for social status or royal titles.

Dangling from the edge of the storm cloud is a single drop of rain – no bigger than a bean and lighter than a chickpea. For a while it quivers precariously – small, spherical and scared. How frightening it is to observe the earth below opening like a lonely lotus flower. Not that this will be the first time: it has made the journey before – ascending to the sky, descending to *terra firma* and rising heavenwards again – and yet it still finds the fall terrifying.

Remember that drop, inconsequential though it may be compared with the magnitude of the universe. Inside its miniature orb, it holds the secret of infinity, a story uniquely its own. When it finally musters the courage, it leaps into the ether. It is falling

now – fast, faster. Gravity always helps. From a height of 3,080 feet it races down. Only three minutes until it reaches the ground.



Down below in Nineveh, the king walks through a double door and steps on to the terrace. Craning his head over the ornamented balustrade, he gazes at the opulence of the city, which spreads out before him as far as the eye can see. Manicured estates, splendid aqueducts, imposing temples, thriving orchards, charming public parks, verdant fields and a royal menagerie where gazelles, deer, ostriches, leopards, lynxes and lions are kept. The sight fills him with pride. He is particularly fond of the gardens, which are brimming with blooming trees and aromatic plants – almond, date, ebony, fir, fig, medlar, mulberry, olive, pear, plum, pomegranate, poplar, quince, rosewood, tamarisk, terebinth, walnut, willow . . . He does not just rule over the land and its people, but also the streams and their tributaries. Directing the River Tigris through an intricate network of canals, weirs and dykes, storing water in cisterns and reservoirs, he and his forefathers have turned this region into a paradise.

The king's name is Ashurbanipal. He has a well-trimmed, curly beard, a broad sweep of a forehead over thick eyebrows and dark, roundly arched eyes lined with black kohl. He is attired in a pointed headdress studded with jewels that glow like distant stars each time the light strikes them. His robe, deep blue and woven of the finest linen, is embroidered with threads of gold and silver, and embellished with hundreds of shiny beads, gemstones and amulets. On his left wrist he wears a bracelet with a flower motif for good luck and protection. He reigns over an empire so immense that they hail him as 'The Emperor of the Four Quarters of the World'. Someday he will also be remembered and renowned as 'The Librarian King', 'The Educated Monarch', 'The Erudite Ruler of Mesopotamia' – titles that will make people forget that, whilst he may have been highly learned and cultured, he was no less cruel than his predecessors.

Tilting his head to the side to scan the cityscape, Ashurbanipal inhales. He does not immediately notice the storm brewing in the distance. The delightful fragrance emanating from the gardens and groves absorbs him. Slowly, he raises his eyes towards the leaden sky. A shiver passes through his sturdy frame, and his thoughts are ambushed by stark warnings and sombre portents. Some soothsayers have predicted that Nineveh is fated to be attacked, sacked and burned to the ground, even its stones borne away. This magnificent city will be wiped off the face of the earth, they said, and beseeched everyone to leave. The king has made sure these doom-mongers were silenced, ordering that their lips be sealed shut and sewn with catgut. But now a sense of foreboding tugs at his insides, like the pull of a river's undercurrent. What if the prophecies were to come true?

Ashurbanipal shakes off the ominous feeling. Although he has enemies aplenty, including his own flesh-and-blood brother, there is no reason to worry. Nothing can destroy this glorious capital so long as the gods are on their side, and he has no doubt that the gods, however capricious and inconsistent in their dealings with mortals, will always come to Nineveh's defence.

Meanwhile, the raindrop is about to arrive on earth. As it gets closer to the ground, for an instant, it feels so free and weightless it could almost alight anywhere it pleases. To its left is a tall, branchless tree – a date palm – whose fronds would make a lovely landing place. To its right is an irrigation canal running through a farmer's field, where it would be welcome, helping this year's harvest grow. It could also come to rest on the stairs of a nearby ziggurat dedicated to Ishtar – the deity of love, sex, beauty, passion and war as well as thunderstorms. That would be an apt destination. Dithering, the droplet has still not resolved where to fall, but that does not matter, for the wind will decide in its stead. A sudden gust lifts and carries its tiny mass straight towards the man standing on a terrace nearby.

A heartbeat later, the king feels something wet plop on to his scalp and nestle in his hair. Annoyed, he tries to wipe it away with

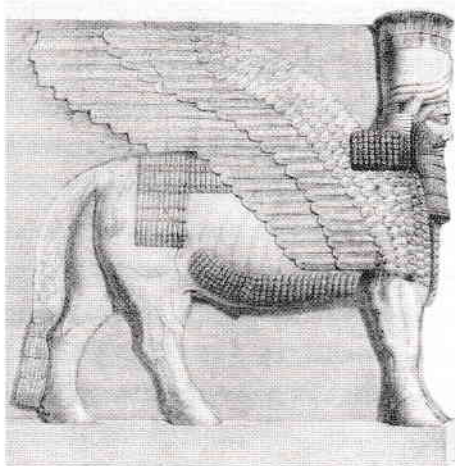
one hand, but his ornate headdress is in the way. Frowning ever so slightly, he glances up at the sky one more time. Just as it starts to pour in earnest, he turns his back to the view and retreats to the safety of his palace.

Through the long galleries Ashurbanipal stalks, listening to the echo of his own footsteps. His servants kneel before him, never daring to look him in the eye. On either side, flaring torches tremble high up in their cast-iron sconces. The eerie light they emit sweeps over the bas-reliefs that are mounted on the walls – carved from gypsum and painted in the brightest colours. In some scenes, the king holds a bow and shoots winged arrows, hunting wild animals or butchering his foes. In others, he drives two-wheeled ceremonial chariots, flogging horses harnessed with triple-tasselled decorations. Yet in others he pours libations over slain lions – offerings to the gods in return for their support and protection. All the pictures depict the splendour of the Assyrian Empire, the superiority of men and the grandeur of the emperor. There are almost no women to be seen. One exception is an image in which Ashurbanipal and his wife are drinking wine and enjoying a picnic in an idyllic garden, whilst from the boughs of a tree nearby, amidst ripe fruits, dangles the decapitated head of their enemy, the Elamite king Teumman.

Oblivious to the raindrop still cradled in his hair, the king keeps walking. Briskly, he passes through richly furnished chambers and arrives at a door adorned with elaborate carvings. This is his favourite part of the palace – the library. Not just a random collection of writings, it is his greatest and proudest creation, his lifetime's ambition, an achievement unrivalled in scope and scale. More than anything he has accomplished, even more significant than his military conquests and political victories, this will be his legacy for future generations – an intellectual monument the likes of which has never been seen before.

The entrance to the library is flanked by two gigantic statues: hybrid creatures – half human, half animal. *Lamassus* are protective spirits. Hewn from a single slab of limestone, such sculptures have the head of a man, the wings of an eagle and the hulking

body of a bull or a lion. Endowed with the best qualities of each of their three species, they represent anthropoid intelligence, avian insight, and taurine or leonine strength. They are the guardians of gateways that open on to other realms.



Most of the *lamassus* in the palace have five legs, so that when viewed from the front they appear to be standing firm, but seen sideways they are stomping forward, ready to trample on even the most fearsome adversary. In this state, they can both confront unwanted visitors and ward off any evil lurking in the shadows. Though he has not told this to anyone, the king feels safer and more at ease with them around, and that is why he has recently commissioned artists to chisel a dozen more sculptures. One can never have too much protection.

With such thoughts in mind, Ashurbanipal enters the library. In room after room, the walls are lined with floor-to-ceiling shelves that hold thousands of clay tablets, arranged in perfect order, organized by subject. They have been collected from near and far. Some were rescued from neglect; others were bought from their former owners for a pittance; but a considerable number were seized by force. They contain all kinds of information, from trade deals to medicinal remedies, from legal contracts to celestial

charts . . . For the king knows that in order to dominate other cultures, you must capture not only their lands, crops and assets but also their collective imagination, their shared memories.

Quickening his steps, Ashurbanipal bypasses the sections of the library dedicated to omens, spells, rituals, cures, curses, litanies, lamentations, incantations, hymns, fables, proverbs and elegies, gathered from all corners of the empire. He wends his way through an extensive collection on the use of the entrails of sacrificial animals to divine the destinies of humans and the intrigues of the gods. Although he sets great store by the tradition of haruspicy, and regularly has sheep and goats slaughtered to have their livers and gallbladders read by the oracles, he won't be studying the auspices today. Instead he heads for a room tucked at the back, half hidden behind a heavy curtain. No one may enter this secluded area apart from the king and his chief counsellor, who is like a second father to him – a deeply learned man who has tutored and mentored Ashurbanipal since he was a boy.

There are bronze lamps set in alcoves at the entrance to this private area, burning sesame oil, sending up coils of smoke. The king selects one and pulls the curtain behind him. It is morbidly quiet inside, as if the shelves have been holding their breath, waiting for him.

The raindrop shivers. With no windows or braziers, the room is so cold that it fears it could harden into ice crystals. Given that it has only recently changed from vapour to liquid, it has no desire to solidify just yet, not before making the most of this new phase of its life. But that is not the only reason why the droplet trembles. This place is unsettling – neither of this world nor of the netherworld, a lacuna betwixt the earthly and the unearthly, somewhere midway between things that are plain to see and things that are not only invisible but are also meant to remain that way.

His movements purposeful and practised, Ashurbanipal strides into the room. There is a table in the middle and, on top of it, a cedar box. The king puts the lamp by his side, and the light chisels shadows across his face, deepening the creases at the corners of

his eyes. As though in a dream, his fingers stroke the wood, which still exudes the aroma of the forest whence it came. Conifers of such high quality being rare in Mesopotamia, it needs to be felled in the Taurus Mountains, and, from there, lashed to the decks of rafts and floated down the River Tigris.

Inside this box is a poem. A section from an epic so old and popular that it has been recited again and again, across Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Persia and the Levant; passed down from grandmothers to grandchildren long before it was written down by scribes. It is the story of a hero called Gilgamesh.

Ashurbanipal knows the entire poem like the lines on his palms. He has studied it since he was a crown prince. As the third royal son, the youngest heir, he was not expected to become king. So, whilst his older brothers were instructed in martial arts, war strategies and diplomatic tactics, he was instead offered a great education in philosophy, history, oil divination, languages and literature. In the end it came as a surprise to everyone – including himself – when his father favoured him as his successor. Thus Ashurbanipal ascended to the throne as the most literate and cultured ruler the empire had ever known. Of the many written works he has pored over since he was a boy, his favourite was, and still is, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The king opens the box, which contains a single tablet. Unlike every other tablet in the library, this one is brightly coloured – the blue of restless rivers. The words have been incised not in red-brown clay but in a slab of lapis lazuli – an extraordinary stone that the gods reserved for themselves. The script is neat and perfectly executed. His touch of the marks is so careful and gentle that it is almost a caress. Slowly, he dips into the verses he has read over and over again but that still stir his heart as if for the first time.

He Who Saw the Deep . . .

He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden,

He brought us a tale of the days before the Flood.

Some kings are fond of gold and rubies, some of silks and tapestries; still others of pleasures of the flesh. Ashurbanipal loves stories. He believes that, in order to succeed as a leader, you do not have to embark on a perilous journey like Gilgamesh. Nor do you have to become a conquering warrior of brawn and sinew. Nor do you have to traverse mountains, deserts and forests, from which few return. All you need is a memorable tale, one that frames you as the hero.

Yet, as much as the king treasures stories, he does not trust storytellers. Their imagination, unable to settle in one place, like the Tigris in springtime, changes course in a manner most unpredictable, meandering in ever-widening curves and twisting in haphazard loops, wild and untamed to the end. When he built this library, he knew there were other versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Copied and recopied by scribes throughout the centuries, the poem emerged in new renderings. Ashurbanipal sent off his emissaries to bring tablets from far and wide with the intention of gathering every possible variation under his roof. He is confident that he has achieved this staggering task. However, the tablet he keeps in the cedar box is different from all the others in his collection – not only because it is written on precious stone instead of clay but also because it is tainted by blasphemy.

Holding the poem up to the lamp, the king inspects the familiar text. The scribe who has produced it, whoever it was, has done his job as one might expect – save for a note at the end.

*This is the work of a junior scribe,
One of the many bards, balladeers and storytellers who
walk the earth.
We weave poems, songs and stories out of every breath.
May you remember us.*

This is a rather unusual thing for a scribe to add, but it is the dedication that follows that is even more disturbing: