

FROM THE BOOKER-SHORTLISTED AUTHOR

THERE  
ARE  
RIVERS  
IN THE  
SKY  
ELIF  
SHAFAK

'A MASTERPIECE'  
RUTH OZEKI

'A POWERFUL VOICE IN WORLD LITERATURE' IAN MCEWAN

## About the Author

ELIF SHAFAK is an award-winning British Turkish novelist, whose work has been translated into fifty-six languages. The author of nineteen books, twelve of which are novels, she is a bestselling author in many countries around the world. Shafak's last novel, *The Island of Missing Trees*, was a top ten *Sunday Times* bestseller and was shortlisted for the Costa Novel Award and the Women's Prize for Fiction. Her previous novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the RSL Ondaatje Prize.

Elif Shafak

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THERE ARE RIVERS IN THE SKY

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To a beloved writer, who, when asked to speak about 'women and fiction', sat down by the banks of a river and wondered what the words meant.

Dripping water hollows out stone,  
not through force but through persistence.

– Ovid

Come away, O human child!  
To the waters and the wild  
With a faery, hand in hand,  
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

– W. B. Yeats

There are different wells within us.  
Some fill with each good rain,  
Others are far, far too deep  
For that.

– Hafiz

In those days, in those far-off days,  
In those nights, in those far-off nights,  
In those years, in those far-off years,  
In olden times ...  
Did you see the sons of Sumer and Akkad?  
I saw them.  
How do they fare?  
They drink water from the place of a massacre.

– Tablet XII, *Epic of Gilgamesh*  
(translated by Andrew George)

I

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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,

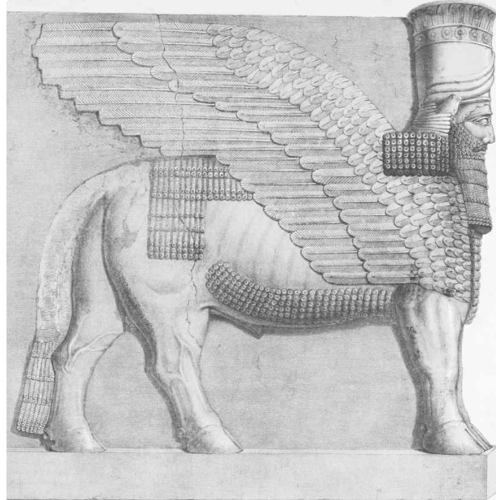
branchless tree – a date palm – whose fronds would make a lovely landing place. To its right is an irrigation canal running through a farmer's field, where it would be welcome, helping this year's harvest grow. It could also come to rest on the stairs of a nearby ziggurat dedicated to Ishtar – the deity 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:

*Now and always,  
Praise be to Nisaba*

The king's expression hardens as he takes in these last words. He frowns, his pulse throbbing angrily in his temples.

Nisaba – the goddess of storytelling – is a numen from a bygone age, a name consigned to oblivion. Her days are over, even though she is still revered in remote corners of the empire by a few ignorant women who cling to the old lore. She was supplanted by another deity long ago. Nowadays all tablets in the kingdom are dedicated to the mighty and masculine Nabu instead of the ethereal and feminine Nisaba. That is the way it should be, the king believes. Writing is a manly task, and it requires a virile patron, a male god. Nabu has become the official custodian of scribes and the guardian of all knowledge worth preserving. Students in schools are instructed to complete their tablets with an appropriate inscription:

*Praise be to Nabu*

Had the blue tablet been old, a relic of the past, the postscript would not have been controversial. But the king is certain that it is a contemporary piece – the penmanship is new. By insisting on revering a forgotten and forbidden goddess and brushing aside the authority of Nabu – and therefore the orders of the king – the scribe who copied this section of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has knowingly defied the rules. Ashurbanipal could have had the tablet destroyed, but he could not bring himself to do that. That is why the offending object must be kept hidden in this room, isolated from the rest of the library, lest the unenlightened masses should catch a glimpse of it. Not every written word is meant for the eyes of every reader. Just as not every spoken word needs to be heard by every eavesdropper. The public must never know of the blue tablet, for they, too, may be led astray. One man's rebellion, if left unchecked and unpunished, can embolden many dissidents.



As the rain continues to fall on Nineveh, the king stays sequestered in his library, absorbed in the blue tablet. For a while he forgets about everything – the conspiracies of his elder brother in Babylon to usurp the throne, the intrigues at the imperial court, the uprisings raging within and beyond the borders of his kingdom in Anatolia, Media, Urartu, Egypt, Syria, Cilicia and Elam ... They can all wait. Nothing can disturb him once he has buried himself in the adventures of

Gilgamesh. But something unexpected does today.

There is a sudden ruckus in the gallery – alarming, jarring sounds. Grabbing the handle of his dagger with one hand, still clutching the tablet with the other, Ashurbanipal darts out.

‘Who dares disturb the king?’

‘My lord, my sun, forgive this intrusion.’ The military commander, a man of few words, bows his head.

Behind him, four soldiers drag a man clad in a coarse cloth stained with dried vomit and fresh blood. He is sobbing and wailing incoherently into the sackcloth hood pulled over his face.

‘Speak and explain this gross transgression,’ orders the king.

‘My lord, we have caught the traitor we have been seeking for so long. He has confessed his evil deeds.’

One of the soldiers pulls back the hood from the prisoner’s head.

A trace of sadness crosses Ashurbanipal’s countenance, disappearing as fast as it appears. The king narrows his eyes as if looking at something that is fast receding into the distance, all the while keeping a steady gaze on the captive – his former mentor, his tutor, his confidant, who was closer to him than his own father. The man has been beaten and tortured so badly that his face is deformed, and there is an ugly gap, crusted with pus and blood, where his teeth used to be. He can barely hold himself straight.

‘My noble king,’ says the military commander, ‘by the gods Ashur, Ishtar, Shamash and Nabu, the chief counsellor is a spy. He was the one who was passing vital secrets to your brother. At first he did not want to admit siding with the enemy. He kept denying his crimes. But we confronted him with unassailable evidence, and he could spew no more lies.’

The commander digs into the bag on his shoulder and produces a tablet. He shows it to the king. It is a letter addressed by the chief counsellor to Ashurbanipal’s brother, pledging allegiance and offering support – a letter that proves beyond doubt the extent of his betrayal.

‘Where did you find this?’ asks the king, his voice dry as driftwood.

‘It was amongst the possessions of an enemy soldier seized whilst crossing the border. He carried the seal of the chief counsellor and confessed he was doing his bidding.’

Slowly, Ashurbanipal turns to the captive. ‘How could you?’

‘My king ...’ the chained man rasps, his breath rattling in his chest. His left eye is swollen shut, and his right eye, bruised and bloodshot, quivers in its socket like a trapped bird. ‘Remember, you were merely a boy when you were brought to me. Did I not instruct you in literacy and numeracy? Did I not teach you how to enjoy balladry and compose poetry ... mercy, for old times’ sake –’

‘I said, how could you!’

Silence gathers in the air.

‘Water ...’ murmurs the captive. For a moment they think he is asking for a drink, but then they hear him say, ‘It is a gift from the gods; it gives us life, joy and riches aplenty. But you, my lord, turned it into a deadly weapon. No more fish left in the River Ulai: you choked it with so many corpses that it flows the colour of dyed-red wool. First the drought, then the famine. My king, your subjects are starving. The plains of Susa are strewn with the dead and the dying. Now, I hear, you will do the same in *Castrum Kefa* ...’

*Castrum Kefa*, the ‘Castle of the Rock’. The large walled city, north of Nineveh, on the banks of the Upper Tigris. A flutter of recognition registers in the king’s eyes. He asks: ‘Wasn’t your father from a village near there?’

‘My people ... You planted guards at every fountain to deny them water. You poisoned the



wells. Families are slaughtering their animals and drinking their blood to quench their thirst. Mothers have no milk to give their babies. My king, there are no bounds to your cruelty.'

The military commander lands a punch below the captive's ribs. The man doubles over, coughing blood. He straightens up surprisingly fast. His one open eye now notices the object the king is holding.

'Ah, the blue tablet ... the little blasphemy,' the captive says, the ghost of a smile lifting the corner of his mouth. 'We studied it together for the first time when my king was a young prince. My lord was always fond of it. Did not our readings of poetry leave unforgettable memories?'

If Ashurbanipal, too, recalls the tranquil afternoons of his boyhood, reciting poetry with his tutor, he does not comment.

'Gilgamesh ...' says the captive. 'He wished to conquer death and so he travelled to the ends of the world – but he failed. He did not see that the only way to become immortal is to be remembered after you have gone, and the only way to be remembered is to leave behind a good story. My king, why is it that you chose to make your story such a heartless one?'

The military commander steps forward, awaiting orders to kill. But Ashurbanipal raises his hand and stops him. Bowing his head, the military commander asks, 'Would my lord like to deliver the final blow?'

The captive begins weeping – a quiet, dignified sound, one that rises from deep inside his chest, and that he cannot control. The soldiers on both sides shift their feet, anxious to hear the king's decision.

But Ashurbanipal will not kill his old teacher. He has never been keen to lead charges into battlefields, preferring to direct massacres, demolitions, plunders and rapes from the safety of his throne – or, as often happens, from the quiet of his library. He has overseen the sacking of cities and the starvation of entire populations, leaving people no choice other than to eat the corpses of their relatives; flattened towns, reduced temples to naught, scattered salt over newly ploughed fields; flayed the skins of rebel leaders and hung their supporters from stakes, feeding their flesh 'to birds of the heavens, fish of the deep'; gored the jaws of his rivals with dog chains and kept them in kennels; desecrated the graves of his enemies' ancestors so that even the ghosts could not sleep in peace – all these acts and many more he has conducted from his reading chamber. He won't dirty his hands. He is an erudite king, after all, an intellectual who has studied celestial and terrestrial portents. Unlike his regal forebears, he can read not only Akkadian but even obscure Sumerian texts that most would find impossible to unravel. He can debate with oracles, priests and philosophers. He is not a man of brute force and raw rage. He is a man of ideas and ideals.

Sensing the king's reservation, the military commander clears his throat and says, 'Should my lord hand over his noble dagger, or allow me to use my own blade, I will pierce his treacherous heart.'

'No need,' says Ashurbanipal. 'We won't spill his blood.'

In that moment the faintest gleam of hope flits across the prisoner's battered features.

Ashurbanipal does not look at his mentor. His stare stays fixed on a bas-relief on the wall behind him. For a while he inspects the image, a hunting party out on the plains of Nineveh: the king is riding a horse at a gallop, clutching a spear that is about to impale a lion trying to escape its fate. As if pulled by an invisible string, he walks towards the impression. Once there, he takes a flaming torch from its mount and holds it close. The figures on the bas-relief come alive in the shifting light – the hunter, the spear, the prey.

Glancing over his shoulder, still clasping the blue tablet with one hand, the king passes the

torch to his military commander. In a voice meant to be obeyed, he utters a single word:

‘Burn!’

All the colour drains from the military commander’s face. He hesitates but only for a second.



A man in flames is running down the galleries of the North Palace in Nineveh. His body ricochets off the murals that decorate the walls, and his screams, loud and piercing, echo down the corridors, reverberating off the high-vaulted ceilings and sending chills down the spines of the servants. Spilling outside the great gates, his desperate cries can be heard as far away as the plantation fields, where wheat and barley grow in profusion, and the sandy coves, where fishing boats unload their daily catches. Disturbed by the terrifying sounds, the seagulls that had fallen quiet earlier in the day take flight at once, wheeling over the city in confused circles.

If the captive could make it to the banks of the Khosr, the tributary of the River Tigris that meanders its way through the centre of the city, or get as far as the Mashki Gate nearby, where there are plenty of water-carriers, there is a chance that he could be saved. But, as he careens back and forth inside his own growing inferno, he crashes into a *lamassu* that guards the royal library, slamming up against its right-front hoof, whilst the fire consumes him with intensifying fury.

Once, it was poems and stories that brought joy into his life, reading as much a part of his being as the instinct to breathe. Nothing gave him more pleasure than mentoring the young prince, the two of them reclining on plump cushions discussing literature, reading the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and marvelling at the beauties of the world – did he create a monster from that softly spoken boy with the gentle smile or was the monster within the boy all along? He will never know. Now his entire body is a furnace scorching words to cinders, turning all the verses he has studied to ash.

This afternoon, as Ashurbanipal – the leader of the wealthiest empire in the world, the last of the great rulers of the kingdom of Assyria, the third-born son of Esarhaddon but the chosen heir to the throne and his father’s favourite, the patron and founder of a magnificent library that will change the course of history – sets fire to his erstwhile teacher and burns his childhood memories along with him, the raindrop remains ensconced inside the king’s hair. Alone, small and terrified, it does not dare to move. It will never forget what it has witnessed today. It has been changed – forever. Even after centuries have passed, a trace of this moment will remain embedded in its elemental form.

As ripples of heat rise into the air, the raindrop will slowly evaporate. But it won’t disappear. Sooner or later, that tiny, translucent bead of water will ascend back to the blue skies. Once there, it will bide its time, waiting to return to this troubled earth again ... and again.

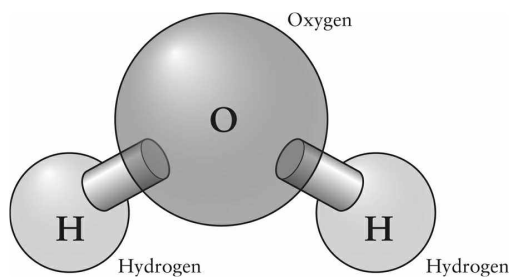
Water remembers.

It is humans who forget.



**W**ater ... the strangest chemical, the great mystery.

With two hydrogen atoms at the tips, each bonded to a single oxygen at the centre, it is a bent molecule, not linear. If it were linear, there would be no life on earth ... no stories to tell.



Three atoms join to form water:  $\text{H-O-H}$ .

Three characters connect across borders of time and place, and together they make this story

...

—O—  
ARTHUR

## By the River Thames, 1840

Winter arrives early in London this year, and once it presents itself it does not wish to leave. The first flurries of snow descend in October, with temperatures dropping day by day. The lichen growing on the walls, the moss blanketing the rocks and the ferns pushing out of the crevices are all covered with rime, glistening like silver needles. Ready for the cold spell, caterpillars and frogs gently allow themselves to freeze, content not to thaw until next spring. Prayers and profanities, as soon as they leave their speakers' mouths, form into icicles that dangle from the bare branches of trees. They tinkle sometimes in the wind – a light, loose, jingling sound. Yet, despite the frigid climate, the Thames does not set firm as it did a few decades ago, when it turned into a sheet of ice so hard that an elephant was marched across for fun and games of hockey were played from bank to bank. This time it is solely the shorelines that solidify, and thus water continues to flow in between stretches of white crystals on either side.

Whether it is chilly or warm, blustery or calm, makes little difference to the smell emanating from the river. Sharp, acrid and vile. A stench that seeps into your pores, clings to your skin, penetrates your lungs. The Thames – ‘Tamesis’, ‘Tems’, ‘Tamasa’, ‘the dark one’ – though once famous for its fresh water and fine salmon, nowadays runs a dirty, murky brown. Polluted by industrial waste, rotting garbage, factory chemicals, animal carcasses, human cadavers and raw sewage, never in its long life has the river been so neglected, lonely and unloved.

A pall of dust, soot and ash hovers over the bell-towers, spires and rooftops of London – the most crowded city in the world. Every week another wave of newcomers turns up with their bundles full of dreams whilst the chimneys pump out more nightmares into the sky. Like stuffing bursting out of an old cushion, as the capital grows and expands beyond its confines, its refuse, excrement and debris spill out through the cracks. Whatever is unwanted is discarded into the river. Spent grain from breweries, pulp from paper mills, offal from slaughterhouses, shavings from tanneries, effluent from distilleries, off-cuts from dye-houses, night-soil from cesspools and discharge from flush toilets (the new inventions enjoyed by the rich and the privileged) – all empty into the Thames, killing the fish, killing the aquatic plants, killing the water.

Yet the river is a giver, and no one understands this better than the people known as *toshers*. They are restless scavengers, foragers of the shorelines. Patiently and purposefully, they wade through miles and miles of fetid sludge. Sometimes they walk the labyrinth of sewers that crisscrosses the city, sifting through rivulets of effluent. Other times they rummage in fluvial deposits, combing the riverine banks. Scouring a liquid world, they search for valuable items, both beneath and above the ground.

They usually set out to work when the tide is low and the wind has subsided, the surface of the stream dull and smooth like a tarnished mirror that no longer reflects the light. Always there