

## Ancient FanFiction: Riverbank Clay A Story by EL Meszaros

Before I was unceremoniously plucked from the river bank, grasped in two rough hands so tightly that I oozed a bit between the calloused fingers, I was already written on. The rising and receding water levels, the lifecycles of all sorts of creatures, and the relentless erosion as the river wore its path deep into the earth had inscribed their stories into my being. I was a testament to countless years and countless journeys, each one carefully etched across my surface.

But now I bore *words*.

The hands that separated me from the bank were not content with the meagre humiliation of removing me from the collected library of an eon's worth of gathered knowledge. I, a composite creation of time, was pulled apart, separated into multiple selves, some of which were discarded without a second thought. What was left of me was pulverized, ground up into a fineness like nothing I had ever known in my river. And then I was kneaded, bent in on myself again and again and again until my million fine and separate beings coalesced once more into a whole.

But even this whole was not complete — I was joined with others, our newly returned and strengthened selves criss-crossed into a mesh until we could no longer keep separate and cohered into an even greater whole. I had begun complete; but now, through targeted excision and grafting I was more robust than ever before, like a carefully pruned tree. Strong, yes, but empty — the evidence of the millions of tiny stories wiped from my bones.

Only then, after hours of deconstruction and reconstruction, did the magic happen. At first with hesitant precision, then with a growing confidence like a carefree dance, a reed was laid against my newly erased surface. I was familiar with reeds — they used to grow in me and through me, with networks of roots embedded like veins into my unbleeding body. But this sensation was new, like a scratching against my surface.

Each independent mark was nothing, one tiny action in a life that had accumulated more deeds than the hands that held me could comprehend. But as they collected, mark after mark, scratch after scratch, wedge after wedge, they combined into something *more*. They were no longer the reminder of an individual act but patterns that represented a collected and agreed upon language. The scratches coalesced into words, and I found inscribed upon me not the weightless memories of ephemeral moments but the residue of a culture. The markings on my surface were not deep, but they were weighed down with a meaning more rich than I had ever experienced.

I used to bear the record of thousands of stories that only I could ever read. But now — now, I was the record of someone else's tale, the collection of someone else's words that reached beyond me and my river bank.

And I could not wait to share them with the world.

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