

BRANDON KILBOURNE

# Our Gilled Forebear

*On uncovering a specimen of Tiktaalik roseae*

Your time capsule broken open,  
we breathe in the Devonian, taste  
on our tongues the dust stirred up  
from the siltstone relief you've become:  
a jaw's wreckage, the brittle shroud  
of scales overlying ribs, your retrofitted  
fins and their newly crafted wrists, all  
that once glided through shallows now  
stone, like some unfortunate victim  
happening to glance upon a gorgon.  
Before continuing to rob you  
from your grave, we stay our chisels—  
Moments like this, I imagine,  
should be akin to setting foot inside  
a queen's hoard-filled sepulchre  
or finding a monument's ruins  
hidden away amidst jungled cliffs,  
lost epics depicted on its friezes  
crumbled by the grip of tree roots.  
Yet in restoring you to sunlight,  
I also feel a touch of the angler's rush  
of the submerged pull, the bowed rod  
and taut line, wavelet waters broken  
by sun-silvered scales writhing in air,  
our eyes captivated by the anatomy

crowning you as our ancestral chimera,  
ancient amalgam of land and water.  
Our gilled forebear, long slumbering  
in the safety of your stratum, know  
that the legacy unfolded from your wrists  
today dares the clouds as an owl's wings,  
tunnels through soil as a mole's paws,  
sculls among reefs as a turtle's flippers,  
your subsequent dynasty even finding  
among its glory of fur, scales, and feathers  
my own hand's thumb and four fingers  
clutching a tool to release you from rock.  
With your heirloom nubbins of bone  
that braced your fins on streamside mud,  
you bestowed to your descendants  
the sky, the earth, and all the oceans,  
as if some primordial and doting  
parent that had wished for its children  
lives redefining what can even be  
imagined, giving them and the branching  
lines of their progeny possibilities  
ever evolving, whole worlds beyond  
the reach of a fish, realms entered  
just by stepping out of the water.

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