

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Perhaps arranged in the fifteenth century B.C., *The Epic of Gilgamesh* draws on even more ancient traditions of a Sumerian king who ruled a great city in what is now southern Iraq around 2800 B.C. This poem (more lyric than epic, in fact) is the earliest extant monument of great literature, presenting archetypal themes of friendship, renown, and facing up to mortality, and it may well have exercised influence on both Genesis and the Homeric epics.

Prologue

He had seen everything, had experienced all emotions, from exaltation to despair, had been granted a vision into the great mystery, the secret places, the primeval days before the Flood. He had journeyed to the edge of the world and made his way back, exhausted but whole. He had carved his trials on stone tablets, had restored the holy Eanna Temple and the massive wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun. Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine, approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar, a temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty, walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built, observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares. Find the cornerstone and under it the copper box that is marked with his name. Unlock it. Open the lid. Take out the tablet of lapis lazuli. Read how Gilgamesh suffered all and accomplished all.

Book I

Surpassing all kings, powerful and tall beyond all others, violent, splendid, a wild bull of a man, unvanquished leader, hero in the front lines, beloved by his soldiers—fortress they called him, protector of the people, raging flood that destroys all defenses—two-thirds divine and one-third human, son of King Lugalbanda, who became a god, and of the goddess Ninsun, he opened the mountain passes, dug wells on the slopes, crossed the vast ocean, sailed to the rising sun, journeyed to the edge of the world, in search of eternal life, and once he found Utnapishtim—the man who survived the Great Flood and was made immortal—he brought back the ancient, forgotten rites, restoring the temples that the Flood had destroyed, renewing the statutes and sacraments for the welfare of the people and the sacred land. Who is like Gilgamesh? What other king has inspired such awe? Who else can say, “I alone rule, supreme among mankind”? The goddess Aruru, mother of creation, had designed his body, had made him the strongest of men—huge, handsome, radiant, perfect.

The city is his possession, he struts through it, arrogant, his head raised high, trampling its citizens like a wild bull. He is king, he does whatever he wants, takes the son from his father and crushes him, takes the girl from her mother and uses her, the warrior’s daughter, the young man’s bride, he uses her, no one dares to oppose him. But

the people of Uruk cried out to heaven, and their lamentation was heard, the gods are not unfeeling, their hearts were touched, they went to Anu, father of them all, protector of the realm of sacred Uruk, and spoke to him on the people's behalf: "Heavenly Father, Gilgamesh—noble as he is, splendid as he is—has exceeded all bounds. The people suffer from his tyranny, the people cry out that he takes the son from his father and crushes him, takes the girl from her mother and uses her, the warrior's daughter, the young man's bride, he uses her, no one dares to oppose him. Is this how you want your king to rule? Should a shepherd savage his own flock? Father, do something, quickly, before the people overwhelm heaven with their heartrending cries."

Anu heard them, he nodded his head, then to the goddess, mother of creation, he called out: "Aruru, you are the one who created humans. Now go and create a double for Gilgamesh, his second self, a man who equals his strength and courage, a man who equals his stormy heart. Create a new hero, let them balance each other perfectly, so that Uruk has peace."

When Aruru heard this, she closed her eyes, and what Anu had commanded she formed in her mind. She moistened her hands, she pinched off some clay, she threw it into the wilderness, kneaded it, shaped it to her idea, and fashioned a man, a warrior, a hero: Enkidu the brave, as powerful and fierce as the war god Ninurta. Hair covered his body, hair grew thick on his head and hung down to his waist, like a woman's hair. He roamed all over the wilderness, naked, far from the cities of men, ate grass with gazelles, and when he was thirsty he drank clear water from the waterholes, kneeling beside the antelope and deer.

One day, a human—a trapper—saw him drinking with the animals at a waterhole. The trapper's heart pounded, his face went white, his legs shook, he was numb with terror. The same thing happened a second, a third day. Fear gripped his belly, he looked drained and haggard like someone who has been on a long, hard journey.

He went to his father. "Father, I have seen a savage man at the waterhole. He must be the strongest man in the world, with muscles like rock. I have seen him outrun the swiftest animals. He lives among them, eats grass with gazelles, and when he is thirsty he drinks clear water from the waterholes. I haven't approached him—I am too afraid. He fills in the pits I have dug, he tears out the traps I have set, he frees the animals, and I can catch nothing. My livelihood is gone."

"Son, in Uruk there lives a man named Gilgamesh. He is king of that city and the strongest man in the world, they say, with muscles like

rock. Go now to Uruk, go to Gilgamesh, tell him what happened, then follow his advice. He will know what to do.”

He made the journey, he stood before Gilgamesh in the center of Uruk, he told him about the savage man. The king said, “Go to the temple of Ishtar, ask them there for a woman named Shamhat, one of the priestesses who give their bodies to any man, in honor of the goddess. Take her into the wilderness. When the animals are drinking at the waterhole, tell her to strip off her robe and lie there naked, ready, with her legs apart. The wild man will approach. Let her use her love-arts. Nature will take its course, and then the animals who knew him in the wilderness will be bewildered, and will leave him forever.”

The trapper found Shamhat, Ishtar’s priestess, and they went off into the wilderness. For three days they walked. On the third day they reached the waterhole. There they waited. For two days they sat as the animals came to drink clear water. Early in the morning of the third day, Enkidu came and knelt down to drink clear water with the antelope and deer. They looked in amazement. The man was huge and beautiful. Deep in Shamhat’s loins desire stirred. Her breath quickened as she stared at this primordial being. “Look,” the trapper said, “there he is. Now use your love-arts. Strip off your robe and lie here naked, with your legs apart. Stir up his lust when he approaches, touch him, excite him, take his breath with your kisses, show him what a woman is. The animals who knew him in the wilderness will be bewildered, and will leave him forever.”

She stripped off her robe and lay there naked, with her legs apart, touching herself. Enkidu saw her and warily approached. He sniffed the air. He gazed at her body. He drew close, Shamhat touched him on the thigh, touched his penis, and put him inside her. She used her love-arts, she took his breath with her kisses, held nothing back, and showed him what a woman is. For seven days he stayed erect and made love with her, until he had had enough. At last he stood up and walked toward the waterhole to rejoin his animals. But the gazelles saw him and scattered, the antelope and deer bounded away. He tried to catch up, but his body was exhausted, his life-force was spent, his knees trembled, he could no longer run like an animal, as he had before. He turned back to Shamhat, and as he walked he knew that his mind had somehow grown larger, he knew things now that an animal can’t know.

Enkidu sat down at Shamhat’s feet. He looked at her, and he understood all the words she was speaking to him. “Now, Enkidu, you know what it is to be with a woman, to unite with her. You are beau-

tiful, you are like a god. Why should you roam the wilderness and live like an animal? Let me take you to great-walled Uruk, to the temple of Ishtar, to the palace of Gilgamesh the mighty king, who in his arrogance oppresses the people, trampling upon them like a wild bull.”

She finished, and Enkidu nodded his head. Deep in his heart he felt something stir, a longing he had never known before, the longing for a true friend. Enkidu said, “I will go, Shamhat. Take me with you to great-walled Uruk, to the temple of Ishtar, to the palace of Gilgamesh the mighty king. I will challenge him. I will shout to his face: ‘I am the mightiest! I am the man who can make the world tremble! I am supreme!’”

“Come,” said Shamhat, “let us go to Uruk, I will lead you to Gilgamesh the mighty king. You will see the great city with its massive wall, you will see the young men dressed in their splendor, in the finest linen and embroidered wool, brilliantly colored, with fringed shawls and wide belts. Every day is a festival in Uruk, with people singing and dancing in the streets, musicians playing their lyres and drums, the lovely priestesses standing before the temple of Ishtar, chatting and laughing, flushed with sexual joy, and ready to serve men’s pleasure, in honor of the goddess, so that even old men are aroused from their beds. You who are still so ignorant of life, I will show you Gilgamesh the mighty king, the hero destined for both joy and grief. You will stand before him and gaze with wonder, you will see how handsome, how virile he is, how his body pulses with erotic power. He is even taller and stronger than you—so full of life-force that he needs no sleep. Enkidu, put aside your aggression. Shamash, the sun god, loves him, and his mind has been made large by Anu, father of the gods, made large by Enlil, the god of earth, and by Ea, the god of water and wisdom. Even before you came down from the hills, you had come to Gilgamesh in a dream.” And she told Enkidu what she had heard. “He went to his mother, the goddess Ninsun, and asked her to interpret the dream. ‘I saw a bright star, it shot across the morning sky, it fell at my feet and lay before me like a huge boulder. I tried to lift it, but it was too heavy. I tried to move it, but it would not budge. A crowd of people gathered around me, the people of Uruk pressed in to see it, like a little baby they kissed its feet. This boulder, this star that had fallen to earth—I took it in my arms, I embraced and caressed it the way a man caresses his wife. Then I took it and laid it before you. You told me that it was my double, my second self.’ The mother of Gilgamesh, Lady Ninsun, the wise, the all-knowing, said to her son, ‘Dearest child, this bright star from heaven, this huge boulder that

you could not lift—it stands for a dear friend, a mighty hero. You will take him in your arms, embrace and caress him the way a man caresses his wife. He will be your double, your second self, a man who is loyal, who will stand at your side through the greatest dangers. Soon you will meet him, the companion of your heart. Your dream has said so.’ Gilgamesh said, ‘May the dream come true. May the true friend appear, the true companion, who through every danger will stand at my side.’”

When Shamhat had finished speaking, Enkidu turned to her, and again they made love.

Book II

Then Shamhat gave Enkidu one of her robes and he put it on. Taking his hand, she led him like a child to some shepherds’ huts.

Marveling, the shepherds crowded around him. “What an enormous man!” they whispered. “How much like Gilgamesh he is—tall and strong, with muscles like rock.” They led him to their table, they put bread and beer in front of him. Enkidu sat and stared. He had never seen human food, he didn’t know what to do. Then Shamhat said, “Go ahead, Enkidu. This is food, we humans eat and drink this.” Warily he tasted the bread. Then he ate a piece, he ate a whole loaf, then ate another, he ate until he was full, drank seven pitchers of the beer, his heart grew light, his face glowed, and he sang out with joy. He had his hair cut, he washed, he rubbed sweet oil into his skin, and became fully human. Shining, he looked handsome as a bridegroom. When the shepherds lay down, Enkidu went out with sword and spear. He chased off lions and wolves, all night he guarded the flocks, he stayed awake and guarded them while the shepherds slept.

One day, while he was making love, he looked up and saw a young man pass by. “Shamhat,” he said, “bring that man here. I want to talk to him. Where is he going?” She called out, then went to the man and said, “Where are you going in such a rush?” The man said to Enkidu, “I am on my way to a wedding banquet. I have piled the table with exquisite food for the ceremony. The priest will bless the young couple, the guests will rejoice, the bridegroom will step aside, and the virgin will wait in the marriage bed for Gilgamesh, king of great-walled Uruk. It is he who mates first with the lawful wife. After he is done, the bridegroom follows. This is the order that the gods have decreed. From the moment the king’s birth-cord was cut, every girl’s hymen has belonged to him.”

As he listened, Enkidu's face went pale with anger. "I will go to Uruk now, to the palace of Gilgamesh the mighty king. I will challenge him. I will shout to his face: 'I am the mightiest! I am the man who can make the world tremble! I am supreme!'"

Together they went to great-walled Uruk, Enkidu in front, Shamhat behind him.

When he walked into the main street of Uruk, the people gathered around him, marveling, the crowds kept pressing closer to see him, like a little baby they kissed his feet. "What an enormous man!" they whispered. "How much like Gilgamesh—not quite so tall but stronger-boned. In the wilderness he grew up eating grass with gazelles, he was nursed on the milk of antelope and deer. Gilgamesh truly has met his match. This wild man can rival the mightiest of kings."

The wedding ritual had taken place, the musicians were playing their drums and lyres, the guests were eating, singing and laughing, the bride was ready for Gilgamesh as though for a god, she was waiting in her bed to open to him, in honor of Ishtar, to forget her husband and open to the king.

When Gilgamesh reached the marriage house, Enkidu was there. He stood like a boulder, blocking the door. Gilgamesh, raging, stepped up and seized him, huge arms gripped huge arms, foreheads crashed like wild bulls, the two men staggered, they pitched against houses, the doorposts trembled, the outer walls shook, they careened through the streets, they grappled each other, limbs intertwined, each huge body straining to break free from the other's embrace. Finally, Gilgamesh threw the wild man and with his right knee pinned him to the ground. His anger left him. He turned away. The contest was over. Enkidu said, "Gilgamesh, you are unique among humans. Your mother, the goddess Ninsun, made you stronger and braver than any mortal, and rightly has Enlil granted you the kingship, since you are destined to rule over men." They embraced and kissed. They held hands like brothers. They walked side by side. They became true friends.

Book III

Time passed quickly. Gilgamesh said, "Now we must travel to the Cedar Forest, where the fierce monster Humbaba lives. We must kill him and drive out evil from the world."

Enkidu sighed. His eyes filled with tears. Gilgamesh said, "Why are you sighing? Why, dear friend, do your eyes fill with tears?"

Enkidu answered, “Dear friend, a scream sticks in my throat, my arms are limp. I knew that country when I roamed the hills with the antelope and deer. The forest is endless, it spreads far and wide for a thousand miles. What man would dare to penetrate its depths?”

Gilgamesh said, “Listen, dear friend, even if the forest goes on forever, I have to enter it, climb its slopes, cut down a cedar that is tall enough to make a whirlwind as it falls to earth.”

Enkidu said, “But how can any man dare to enter the Cedar Forest? It is sacred to Enlil. Hasn’t he declared its entrance forbidden, hasn’t he put Humbaba there to terrify men? We must not go on this journey, we must not fight this creature. His breath spews fire, his voice booms like thunder, his jaws are death. He can hear all sounds in the forest, even the faintest rustling among the leaves, he will hear us a hundred miles away. Who among men or gods could defeat him? Humbaba is the forest’s guardian, Enlil put him there to terrify men. Whoever enters will be struck down by fear.”

Gilgamesh answered, “Why, dear friend, do you speak like a coward? What you just said is unworthy of you, it grieves my heart.

We are not gods, we cannot ascend to heaven. No, we are mortal men.

Only the gods live forever. Our days are few in number, and whatever we achieve is a puff of wind. Why be afraid then, since sooner or later death must come? Where is the courage you have always had? If I die in the forest on this great adventure, won’t you be ashamed when people say, ‘Gilgamesh met a hero’s death battling the monster Humbaba. And where was Enkidu? He was safe at home!’ You were raised in the mountains, with your own hands you have killed marauding lions and wolves, you are brave, your heart has been tested in combat. But whether you come along or not, I will cut down the tree, I will kill Humbaba, I will make a lasting name for myself, I will stamp my fame on men’s minds forever.”

Gilgamesh bolted the seven gates of great-walled Uruk, and the people gathered, crowds of them poured out into the streets. Gilgamesh sat on his throne. The crowds pressed in to hear him. Gilgamesh spoke: “Hear me, elders of great-walled Uruk. I must travel now to the Cedar Forest, where the fierce monster Humbaba lives. I will conquer him in the Cedar Forest, I will cut down the tree, I will kill Humbaba, the whole world will know how mighty I am. I will make a lasting name for myself, I will stamp my fame on men’s minds forever.”

Then Gilgamesh turned to the young men and spoke: “Hear me, young men of great-walled Uruk, warriors and comrades who have fought at

my side. I will journey to meet the monster Humbaba, I will walk a road that no man has traveled, I will face a combat that no man has known. Give me your blessing before I leave, so that I may come back from the Cedar Forest victorious, and see your faces again. Once again may I celebrate the New Year with you, in the streets of great-walled Uruk, to the lyre's sound and the beat of the drums."

Enkidu stood up. There were tears in his eyes. "Elders of Uruk, persuade the king not to go to the Cedar Forest, not to fight the fierce monster Humbaba, whose roar booms forth like a thunderclap, whose breath spews fire, whose jaws are death, who can hear all sounds in the forest, even the faintest rustling among the leaves. Who among men or gods could defeat him? Humbaba is the forest's guardian, Enlil put him there to terrify men."

The elders bowed to the king and said, "You are young, Sire, your heart beats high and runs away with you. Why do you wish to embark on this folly? We have heard of Humbaba, he is dangerous, he is horrible to look at, his breath spews fire, his jaws are death. How can any man, even you, dare to enter the Cedar Forest? Who among men or gods could defeat him? Humbaba is the forest's guardian, Enlil put him there to terrify men."

After he had listened to the elders' words, Gilgamesh laughed. He got up and said, "Dear friend, tell me, has your courage returned? Are you ready to leave? Or are you still afraid of dying a hero's death? Enkidu, let us go to the forge and order the smiths to make us weapons that only the mightiest heroes could use."

Enkidu listened gravely. He stood silent there for a long time. At last he nodded. Gilgamesh took his hand.

The smiths listened to their instructions. They cast huge weapons that ordinary men could never carry: axes that weighed two hundred pounds each, knives with cross guards and heavy mountings of solid gold. Each man carried weapons and armor weighing more than six hundred pounds.

Gilgamesh said, "Before we leave, let us pay a visit to my mother's temple, let us go and speak to the lady Ninsun, the wise, the all-knowing. Let us bow before her, let us ask for her blessing and her advice."

Hand in hand, the two friends walked to Ninsun's temple. Gilgamesh bowed to his mother, the goddess Ninsun, and said, "I must travel now to the Cedar Forest, I must journey to meet the fierce monster Humbaba, I must walk a road that no man has traveled, I must face

a combat that no man has known. Dear mother, great goddess, help me in this, give me your blessing before I leave, so that I may come back from the Cedar Forest victorious, and see your face again.”

Ninsun listened to his words with sorrow. With sorrow she entered her inner room, she bathed in water of tamarisk and soapwort, she put on her finest robe, a wide belt, a jeweled necklace, then put on her crown. She climbed the stairs and went up to the roof, she lit sweet incense in honor of Shamash, she lifted her arms in prayer and said, “Lord of heaven, you have granted my son beauty and strength and courage—why have you burdened him with a restless heart? Now you have stirred him up to attack the monster Humbaba, to make a long journey from which he may not return. Since he has resolved to go, protect him until he arrives at the Cedar Forest, until he kills the monster Humbaba and drives from the world the evil that you hate. Protect him each day as you cross the sky, and at twilight may Aya your bride entrust him to the valiant stars, the watchmen of the night. O Lord Shamash, glorious sun, delight of the gods, illuminator of the world, who rise and the light is born, it fills the heavens, the whole earth takes shape, the mountains form, the valleys grow bright, darkness vanishes, evil retreats, all creatures wake up and open their eyes, they see you, they are filled with joy—protect my son. On his dangerous journey let the days be long, let the nights be short, let his stride be vigorous and his legs sturdy. When he and his dear friend Enkidu arrive, stir up strong winds against Humbaba, the south wind, the north wind, the east and the west, storm wind, gale wind, hurricane, tornado, to pin Humbaba, to paralyze his steps and make it easy for my son kill him. Then your swift mules will carry you onward to your stopping place and bed for the night, the gods will bring luscious food to delight you, Aya will dry your face with the fringe of her pure white robe. Hear me, O Lord, protect my son, in your great mercy lead him to the Forest, then bring him home.”

After she had prayed, the goddess Ninsun, the wise, the all-knowing, came down from the roof and summoned Enkidu. “Dear child,” she said, “you were not born from my womb, but now I adopt you as my son.” She hung a jeweled amulet around Enkidu’s neck. “As a priestess takes in an abandoned child, I have taken in Enkidu as my own son. May he be a brother for Gilgamesh. May he guide him to the Forest, and bring him home.”

Enkidu listened. Tears filled his eyes. He and Gilgamesh clasped hands like brothers.

They took their weapons: the massive axes, the massive knives, the

quivers, the bows. The elders made way. The young men cheered.

The elders stood up and addressed the king: “Come back safely to great-walled Uruk. Do not rely on your strength alone, but be watchful, be wary, make each blow count. Remember what the ancient proverb says: ‘If you walk in front, you protect your comrade; if you know the route, you safeguard your friend.’ Let Enkidu go ahead as you walk, he knows the way to the Cedar Forest, he is tested in battle, he is brave and strong, he will guard you at every stage of the journey, through every danger he will stand at your side. May Shamash grant you your heart’s desire, may the path to the Cedar Forest be straight, may the nights be safe, with no dangers lurking, may your father Lugalbanda protect you, may you conquer Humbaba, may the battle be quick, may you joyfully wash your feet in his river. Dig a well when you stop for the night, fill your waterskins with fresh water, each day make an offering to Shamash, and remember Lugalbanda your father, who journeyed to far-off mountains himself.”

The elders turned to Enkidu and said, “We leave the king in your care. Protect him, guide him through all the treacherous passes, show him where to find food and where to dig for fresh water, lead him to the forest and fight at his side. May Shamash help you, may the gods grant your heart’s desire and bring you back safe to great-walled Uruk.”

Enkidu said to Gilgamesh, “Since you must do this, I must go with you. So let us leave. Let our hearts be fearless. I will go first, since I know the way to the Cedar Forest, where Humbaba lives.”

Book IV

At four hundred miles they stopped to eat, at a thousand miles they pitched their camp. They had traveled for just three days and nights, a six weeks’ journey for ordinary men. When the sun was setting, they dug a well, they filled their waterskins with fresh water, Gilgamesh climbed to the mountaintop, he poured out flour as an offering and said, “Mountain, bring me a favorable dream.” Enkidu did the ritual for dreams, praying for a sign. A gust of wind passed. He built a shelter for the night, placed Gilgamesh on the floor and spread a magic circle of flour around him, then sprawled like a net across the doorway. Gilgamesh sat there, with his chin on his knees, and sleep overcame him, as it does all men.

At midnight he awoke. He said to Enkidu, “What happened? Did you touch me? Did a god pass by? What makes my skin creep? Why am

I cold? Enkidu, dear friend, I have had a dream, a horrible dream. We were walking in a gorge, and when I looked up, a huge mountain loomed, so huge that we were as small as flies. Then the mountain fell down on top of us. Dear friend, tell me, what does this mean?"

Enkidu said, "Don't worry, my friend, the dream you had is a favorable one. The mountain stands for Humbaba. He will fall just like that mountain. Lord Shamash will grant us victory, we will kill the monster and leave his corpse on the battlefield." Gilgamesh, happy with his good dream, smiled, and his face lit up with pleasure.

At four hundred miles they stopped to eat, at a thousand miles they pitched their camp. They had traveled for just three days and nights, a six weeks' journey for ordinary men. When the sun was setting, they dug a well, they filled their waterskins with fresh water, Gilgamesh climbed to the mountaintop, he poured out flour as an offering and said, "Mountain, bring me a favorable dream." Enkidu did the ritual for dreams, praying for a sign. A gust of wind passed. He built a shelter for the night, placed Gilgamesh on the floor and spread a magic circle of flour around him, then sprawled like a net across the doorway. Gilgamesh sat there, with his chin on his knees, and sleep overcame him, as it does all men.

At midnight he awoke. He said to Enkidu, "What happened? Did you touch me? Did a god pass by? What makes my skin creep? Why am I cold? Enkidu, dear friend, I have had a dream, a dream more horrible than the first. I looked up and a huge mountain loomed, it threw me down, it pinned me by the feet, a terrifying brightness hurt my eyes, suddenly a young man appeared, he was shining and handsome, he took me by the arm, he pulled me out from under the mountain, he gave me water, my heart grew calm. Dear friend, tell me, what does this mean?"

Enkidu said, "Don't worry, my friend, the dream you had is a favorable one. Again, the mountain stands for Humbaba. He threw you down, but he could not kill you. As for the handsome young man who appeared, he stands for Lord Shamash, who will rescue you and grant you everything you desire." Gilgamesh, happy with his good dream, smiled, and his face lit up with pleasure.

At four hundred miles they stopped to eat, at a thousand miles they pitched their camp. They had traveled for just three days and nights, a six weeks' journey for ordinary men. When the sun was setting, they dug a well, they filled their waterskins with fresh water, Gilgamesh climbed to the mountaintop, he poured out flour as an offering and said, "Mountain, bring me a favorable dream." Enkidu did the ritual

for dreams, praying for a sign. A gust of wind passed. He built a shelter for the night, placed Gilgamesh on the floor and spread a magic circle of flour around him, then sprawled like a net across the doorway. Gilgamesh sat there, with his chin on his knees, and sleep overcame him, as it does all men.

At midnight he awoke. He said to Enkidu, "What happened? Did you touch me? Did a god pass by? What makes my skin creep? Why am I cold? Enkidu, dear friend, I have had a dream, a dream more horrible than both the others. The heavens roared and the earth heaved, then darkness, silence. Lightning flashed, igniting the trees. By the time the flames died out, the ground was covered with ash. Dear friend, tell me, what does this mean?"

Enkidu said, "Don't worry, my friend, the dream you had is a favorable one. The fiery heavens stand for Humbaba, who tried to kill you with lightning and flames. But in spite of the fire, he could not harm you. We will kill Humbaba. Success is ours. However he attacks us, we will prevail." Gilgamesh, happy with his good dream, smiled, and his face lit up with pleasure.

At four hundred miles they stopped to eat, at a thousand miles they pitched their camp. They had traveled for just three days and nights, a six weeks' journey for ordinary men. When the sun was setting, they dug a well, they filled their waterskins with fresh water, Gilgamesh climbed to the mountaintop, he poured out flour as an offering and said, "Mountain, bring me a favorable dream." Enkidu did the ritual for dreams, praying for a sign. A gust of wind passed. He built a shelter for the night, placed Gilgamesh on the floor and spread a magic circle of flour around him, then sprawled like a net across the doorway. Gilgamesh sat there, with his chin on his knees, and sleep overcame him, as it does all men.

At midnight he awoke. He said to Enkidu, "What happened? Did you touch me? Did a god pass by? What makes my skin creep? Why am I cold? Enkidu, dear friend, I have had a fourth dream, a dream more horrible than the three others. I saw a fierce eagle with a lion's head, it floated down toward me like a huge cloud, it grimaced at me, terrifying flames shot from its mouth, then beside me I saw a young man with an unearthly glow, he seized the creature, he broke its wings, he wrung its neck and threw it to the ground. Dear friend, tell me, what does this mean?"

Enkidu said, "Don't worry, my friend, the dream you had is a favorable one. The eagle that you saw, with a lion's head, stands for Humbaba. Though it dived straight toward you and terrifying flames shot from

its mouth, nothing could cause you harm. The young man who came to your rescue was our lord, Shamash. He will stand beside us when the monster attacks. Whatever happens, we will prevail." Gilgamesh, happy with his good dream, smiled, and his face lit up with pleasure.

At four hundred miles they stopped to eat, at a thousand miles they pitched their camp. They had traveled for just three days and nights, a six weeks' journey for ordinary men. When the sun was setting, they dug a well, they filled their waterskins with fresh water, Gilgamesh climbed to the mountaintop, he poured out flour as an offering and said, "Mountain, bring me a favorable dream." Enkidu did the ritual for dreams, praying for a sign. A gust of wind passed. He built a shelter for the night, placed Gilgamesh on the floor and spread a magic circle of flour around him, then sprawled like a net across the doorway. Gilgamesh sat there, with his chin on his knees, and sleep overcame him, as it does all men.

At midnight he awoke. He said to Enkidu, "What happened? Did you touch me? Did a god pass by? What makes my skin creep? Why am I cold? Enkidu, dear friend, I have had a fifth dream, a dream more horrible than all the others. I was wrestling with a gigantic bull, its bellow shattered the ground and raised clouds of dust that darkened the sky, it pinned me down, it crushed me, I felt its breath on my face, then suddenly a man pulled me up, put his arms around me, and gave me fresh water from his waterskin. Dear friend, tell me, what does this mean?"

Enkidu said, "Don't worry, my friend, the dream you had is a favorable one. The gigantic bull is no enemy of ours. He stands for the very god who has helped us, bright Shamash, our protector, lord of the sky, who in every danger will come to our aid. The man who pulled you up from the ground and gave you fresh water from his waterskin is Lugalbanda, your personal god. With his help, we will achieve a triumph greater than any man has achieved."

They had reached the edge of the Cedar Forest. They could hear Humbaba's terrifying roar. Gilgamesh stopped. He was trembling. Tears flowed down his cheeks. "O Shamash," he cried, "protect me on this dangerous journey. Remember me, help me, hear my prayer." They stood and listened. A moment passed. Then, from heaven, the voice of the god called to Gilgamesh: "Hurry, attack, attack Humbaba while the time is right, before he enters the depths of the forest, before he can hide there and wrap himself in his seven auras with their paralyzing glare.

He is wearing just one now. Attack him! Now!" They stood at the

edge of the Cedar Forest, gazing, silent. There was nothing to say.

Book V

They stood at the edge of the Cedar Forest, marveling at the great height of the trees. They could see, before them, a well-marked trail beaten by Humbaba as he came and went. From far off they saw the Cedar Mountain, sacred to Ishtar, where the gods dwell, the slopes of it steep, and rich in cedars with their sharp fragrance and pleasant shade. Gripping their axes, their knives unsheathed, they entered the Forest and made their way through the tangle of thorn bushes underfoot.

Suddenly Enkidu was seized by terror, his face turned pale like a severed head. He said to Gilgamesh, "Dear friend, I cannot continue, I am frightened, I cannot go on. You go into the dreadful forest, you kill Humbaba and win the fame. I will return now to great-walled Uruk, and all men will know what a coward I have been."

Gilgamesh answered, "Dear friend, dear brother, I cannot kill Humbaba alone. Please stay here with me. Stand at my side. 'Two boats lashed together will never sink. A three-ply rope is not easily broken.' If we help each other and fight side by side, what harm can come to us? Let us go on and attack the monster. We have come so far. Whatever you are feeling, let us go on."

Enkidu said, "You have never met him, so you don't know the horror that lurks ahead. But when I saw him, my blood ran cold. His teeth are knife-sharp, they stick out like tusks, his face, blood-smeared, is a lion's face, he charges ahead like a raging torrent, his forehead ablaze. Who can withstand him? I am terrified. I cannot go on."

Gilgamesh said, "Courage, dear brother, this is no time to give in to fear. We have come so far, across so many mountains, and our journey is about to reach its goal. You were raised in the wild, with your own hands you have killed marauding lions and wolves, you are brave, your heart has been tested in combat. Though your arms feel weak now and your legs tremble, you are a warrior, you know what to do. Shout out your battle-cry, let your voice pound like a kettle drum. Let your heart inspire you to be joyous in battle, to forget about death. If we help each other and fight side by side, we will make a lasting name for ourselves, we will stamp our fame on men's minds forever."

They walked deep into the Cedar Forest, gripping their axes, their knives unsheathed, following the trail that Humbaba had made.

They came within sight of the monster's den. He was waiting inside it. Their blood ran cold. He saw the two friends, he grimaced, he bared his teeth, he let out a deafening roar. He glared at Gilgamesh. "Young man," he said, "you will never go home. Prepare to die." Dread surged through Gilgamesh, terror flooded his muscles, his heart froze, his mouth went dry, his legs shook, his feet were rooted to the ground.

Enkidu saw his dismay and said, "Dear friend, great warrior, noble hero, don't lose courage, remember this: 'Two boats lashed together will never sink. A three-ply rope is not easily broken.' If we help each other and fight side by side, what harm can come to us? Let us go on."

They advanced to the monster's den. Humbaba charged out roaring at them and said, "I know you, Gilgamesh. Don't be a fool. Go away. Leave the Cedar Forest. Have madmen told you to confront me here? I will tear you limb from limb, I will crush you and leave you bloody and mangled on the ground. And you, Enkidu, you son of a fish or a turtle, you gutless, fatherless spawn who never suckled on mother's milk, I saw you in the pastures when you were young, I saw you graze with the wandering herds but I didn't kill you, you were too scrawny, you wouldn't have made a decent meal. And now you dare to lead Gilgamesh here, you both stand before me looking like a pair of frightened girls. I will slit your throats, I will cut off your heads, I will feed your stinking guts to the shrieking vultures and crows."

Gilgamesh backed away. He said, "How dreadful Humbaba's face has become! It is changing into a thousand nightmare faces, more horrible than I can bear. I feel haunted. I am too afraid to go on."

Enkidu answered, "Why, dear friend, do you speak like a coward? What you just said is unworthy of you. It grieves my heart. We must not hesitate or retreat."

Two intimate friends cannot be defeated. Be courageous. Remember how strong you are. I will stand by you. Now let us attack."

Gilgamesh felt his courage return. They charged at Humbaba like two wild bulls. The monster let out a deafening cry, his roar boomed forth like a blast of thunder, he stamped and the ground burst open, his steps split the mountains of Lebanon, the clouds turned black, a sulfurous fog descended on them and made their eyes ache. Then Shamash threw strong winds at Humbaba, the south wind, the north wind, the east and the west, storm wind, gale wind, hurricane, tornado, to pin him down and paralyze his steps. He could not move forward,

could not retreat. Gilgamesh saw it, he leaped upon him, he held a knife to Humbaba's throat.

Humbaba said, "Gilgamesh, have mercy. Let me live here in the Cedar Forest. If you spare my life, I will be your slave, I will give you as many cedars as you wish. You are king of Uruk by the grace of Shamash, honor him with a cedar temple and a glorious cedar palace for yourself. All this is yours, if only you spare me."

Enkidu said, "Dear friend, don't listen to anything that the monster says. Kill him before you become confused."

Humbaba said, "If any mortal, Enkidu, knows the rules of my forest, it is you. You know that this is my place and that I am the forest's guardian. Enlil put me here to terrify men, and I guard the forest as Enlil ordains. If you kill me, you will call down the gods' wrath, and their judgment will be severe. I could have killed you at the forest's edge, I could have hung you from a cedar and fed your guts to the shrieking vultures and crows. Now it is your turn to show me mercy. Speak to him, beg him to spare my life."

Enkidu said, "Dear friend, quickly, before another moment goes by, kill Humbaba, don't listen to his words, don't hesitate, slaughter him, slit his throat, before the great god Enlil can stop us, before the great gods can get enraged, Enlil in Nippur, Shamash in Larsa. Establish your fame, so that forever men will speak of brave Gilgamesh, who killed Humbaba in the Cedar Forest."

Knowing he was doomed, Humbaba cried out, "I curse you both. Because you have done this, may Enkidu die, may he die in great pain, may Gilgamesh be inconsolable, may his merciless heart be crushed with grief."

Gilgamesh dropped his axe, appalled. Enkidu said, "Courage, dear friend. Close your ears to Humbaba's curses. Don't listen to a word. Slaughter him! Now!"

Gilgamesh, hearing his beloved friend, came to himself. He yelled, he lifted his massive axe, he swung it, it tore into Humbaba's neck, the blood shot out, again the axe bit flesh and bone, the monster staggered, his eyes rolled, and at the axe's third stroke he toppled like a cedar and crashed to the ground. At his death-roar the mountains of Lebanon shook, the valleys ran with his blood, for ten miles the forest resounded. Then the two friends sliced him open, pulled out his intestines, cut off his head with its knife-sharp teeth and horrible bloodshot staring eyes. A gentle rain fell onto the mountains. A gentle rain fell onto the mountains.

They took their axes and penetrated deeper into the forest, they went chopping down cedars, the woods chips flew, Gilgamesh chopped down the mighty trees, Enkidu hewed the trunks into timbers. Enkidu said, "By your great strength you have killed Humbaba, the forest's watchman. What could bring you dishonor now? We have chopped down the trees of the Cedar Forest, we have brought to earth the highest of the trees, the cedar whose top once pierced the sky. We will make it into a gigantic door, a hundred feet high and thirty feet wide, we will float it down the Euphrates to Enlil's temple in Nippur. No men shall go through it, but only the gods. May Enlil delight in it, may it be a joy to the people of Nippur."

They bound logs together and built a raft. Enkidu steered it down the great river. Gilgamesh carried Humbaba's head.

Book VI

When he returned to great-walled Uruk, Gilgamesh bathed, he washed his matted hair and shook it over his back, he took off his filthy, blood-spattered clothes, put on a tunic of the finest wool, wrapped himself in a glorious gold-trimmed purple robe and fastened it with a wide fringed belt, then put on his crown.

The goddess Ishtar caught sight of him, she saw how splendid a man he was, her heart was smitten, her loins caught fire.

"Come here, Gilgamesh," Ishtar said, "marry me, give me your luscious fruits, be my husband, be my sweet man. I will give you abundance beyond your dreams: marble and alabaster, ivory and jade, gorgeous servants with blue-green eyes, a chariot of lapis lazuli with golden wheels and guide-horns of amber, pulled by storm-demons like giant mules. When you enter my temple and its cedar fragrance, high priests will bow down and kiss your feet, kings and princes will kneel before you, bringing you tribute from east and west. And I will bless everything that you own, your goats will bear triplets, your ewes will twin, your donkeys will be faster than any mule, your chariot-horses will win every race, your oxen will be the envy of the world. These are the least of the gifts I will shower upon you. Come here. Be my sweet man."

Gilgamesh said, "Your price is too high, such riches are far beyond my means. Tell me, how could I ever repay you, even if I gave you jewels, perfumes, rich robes? And what will happen to me when your heart turns elsewhere and your lust burns out?"

"Why would I want to be the lover of a broken oven that fails in the

cold, a flimsy door that the wind blows through, a palace that falls on its staunchest defenders, a mouse that gnaws through its thin reed shelter, tar that blackens the workman's hands, a waterskin that is full of holes and leaks all over its bearer, a piece of limestone that crumbles and undermines a solid stone wall, a battering ram that knocks down the rampart of an allied city, a shoe that mangles its owner's foot?

“Which of your husbands did you love forever? Which could satisfy your endless desires? Let me remind you of how they suffered, how each one came to a bitter end. Remember what happened to that beautiful boy Tammuz: you loved him when you were both young, then you changed, you sent him to the underworld and doomed him to be wailed for, year after year. You loved the bright-speckled roller bird, then you changed, you attacked him and broke his wings, and he sits in the woods crying Ow-ee! Ow-ee! You loved the lion, matchless in strength, then you changed, you dug seven pits for him, and when he fell, you left him to die. You loved the hot-blooded, war-bold stallion, then you changed, you doomed him to whip and spurs, to endlessly gallop, with a bit in his mouth, to muddy his own water when he drinks from a pool, and for his mother, the goddess Silili, you ordained a weeping that will never end. You loved the shepherd, the master of the flocks, who every day would bake bread for you and would bring you a fresh-slaughtered, roasted lamb, then you changed, you touched him, he became a wolf, and now his own shepherd boys drive him away and his own dogs snap at his hairy thighs. You loved the gardener Ishullanu, who would bring you baskets of fresh-picked dates, every day, to brighten your table, you lusted for him, you drew close and said, ‘Sweet Ishullanu, let me suck your rod, touch my vagina, caress my jewel,’ and he frowned and answered, ‘Why should I eat this rotten meal of yours? What can you offer but the bread of dishonor, the beer of shame, and thin reeds as covers when the cold wind blows?’ But you kept up your sweet-talk and at last he gave in, then you changed, you turned him into a toad and doomed him to live in his devastated garden. And why would my fate be any different? If I too became your lover, you would treat me as cruelly as you treated them.”

Ishtar shrieked, she exploded with fury. Raging, weeping, she went up to heaven, to her father, Anu, and Antu, her mother, as tears of anger poured down her cheeks. “Father, Gilgamesh slandered me! He hurled the worst insults at me, he said horrible, unforgivable things!”

Anu said to the princess Ishtar, “But might you not have provoked this? Did you try to seduce him? Or did he just start insulting you for no reason at all?”

Ishtar said, "Please, Father, I beg you, give me the Bull of Heaven, just for a little while. I want to bring it to the earth, I want it to kill that liar Gilgamesh and destroy his palace. If you say no, I will smash the gates of the underworld, and a million famished ghouls will ascend to devour the living, and the living will be outnumbered by the dead."

Anu said to the princess Ishtar, "But if I give you the Bull of Heaven, Uruk will have famine for seven long years. Have you provided the people with grain for seven years, and the cattle with fodder?"

Ishtar said, "Yes, of course I have gathered grain and fodder, I have stored up enough—more than enough—for seven years."

When Anu heard this, he called for the Bull and handed its nose rope to the princess Ishtar. Ishtar led the Bull down to the earth, it entered and bellowed, the whole land shook, the streams and marshes dried up, the Euphrates' water level dropped by ten feet. When the Bull snorted, the earth cracked open and a hundred warriors fell in and died. It snorted again, the earth cracked open and two hundred warriors fell in and died. When it snorted a third time, the earth cracked open and Enkidu fell in, up to his waist, he jumped out and grabbed the Bull's horns, it spat its slobber into his face, it lifted its tail and spewed dung all over him. Gilgamesh rushed in and shouted, "Dear friend, keep fighting, together we are sure to win." Enkidu circled behind the Bull, seized it by the tail and set his foot on its haunch, then Gilgamesh skillfully, like a butcher, strode up and thrust his knife between its shoulders and the base of its horns.

After they had killed the Bull of Heaven, they ripped out its heart and they offered it to Shamash. Then they both bowed before him and sat down like brothers, side by side.

Ishtar was outraged. She climbed to the top of Uruk's great wall, she writhed in grief and wailed, "Not only did Gilgamesh slander me—now the brute has killed his own punishment, the Bull of Heaven."

When Enkidu heard these words, he laughed, he reached down, ripped off one of the Bull's thighs, and flung it in Ishtar's face. "If only I could catch you, this is what I would do to you, I would rip you apart and drape the Bull's guts over your arms!"

Ishtar assembled her priestesses, those who offer themselves to all men in her honor. They placed the Bull's gory thigh on the altar, and began a solemn lament.

Gilgamesh summoned his master craftsmen. They marveled at the gigantic horns. Each horn was made from thirty pounds of lapis lazuli,

each was as thick as the length of two thumbs, together they held four hundred gallons. He called for that much oil to anoint his father's statue, then hung the two massive horns in the chapel dedicated to Lugalbanda.

The two friends washed themselves in the river and returned to the palace, hand in hand. They rode in a chariot through the main streets, the people shouted and cheered as they passed.

Gilgamesh said to his singing girls, "Tell me: Who is the handsomest of men? Tell me: Who is the bravest of heroes? Gilgamesh-he is the handsomest of men, Enkidu-he is the bravest of heroes. We are the victors who in our fury flung the Bull's thigh in Ishtar's face, and now, in the streets, she has no one to avenge her."

There was singing and feasting in the palace that night. Later, when the warriors were stretched out asleep, Enkidu had a terrifying dream. When he woke up, he said to Gilgamesh, "Dear friend, why are the great gods assembled?"

Book VII

"Beloved brother," Enkidu said, "last night I had a terrifying dream. I dreamed that we had offended the gods, they met in council and Anu said, 'They have slaughtered the Bull of Heaven and killed Humbaba, watchman of the Cedar Forest. Therefore one of the two must die.' Then Enlil said to him, 'Enkidu, not Gilgamesh, is the one who must die.'"

Enkidu fell sick. He lay on his bed, sick at heart, and his tears flowed like streams. He said to Gilgamesh, "Dear friend, dear brother, they are taking me from you. I will not return. I will sit with the dead in the underworld, and never will I see my dear brother again."

When Gilgamesh heard his friend's words, he wept, swiftly the tears flowed down his cheeks. He said to Enkidu, "Dearest brother, you have been a reasonable man, but now you are talking nonsense. How do you know that your dream is not a favorable one? Fear has set your lips buzzing like flies."

Enkidu said, "Beloved brother, last night I had a second bad dream. The heavens thundered, the earth replied, and I was standing on a shadowy plain. A creature appeared with a lion's head, his face was ghastly, he had a lion's paws, an eagle's talons and wings. He flew at me, he seized me by the hair, I tried to struggle, but with one blow he capsized me like a raft, he leaped upon me, like a bull he trampled

my bones. ‘Gilgamesh, save me, save me!’ I cried. But you didn’t save me. You were afraid and you didn’t come. The creature touched me and suddenly feathers covered my arms, he bound them behind me and forced me down to the underworld, the house of darkness, the home of the dead, where all who enter never return to the sweet earth again. Those who dwell there squat in the darkness, dirt is their food, their drink is clay, they are dressed in feathered garments like birds, they never see light, and on door and bolt the dust lies thick. When I entered that house, I looked, and around me were piles of crowns, I saw proud kings who had ruled the land, who had set out roast meat before the gods and offered cool water and cakes for the dead. I saw high priests and acolytes squatting, exorcists and prophets, the ecstatic and the dull, I saw Etana, the primeval king, Sumuqan, the wild animals’ god, and Ereshkigal, the somber queen of the underworld. Belet-seri, her scribe, was kneeling before her, reading from the tablet on which each mortal’s death is inscribed. When the queen saw me, she glared and said, ‘Who has brought this new resident here?’”

Gilgamesh said, “Though it sounds bad, this dream may be a good omen. The gods send dreams just to the healthy, never to the weak, so it is a healthy man who has dreamed this. Now I will pray to the great gods for help, I will pray to Shamash and to your god, to Anu, father of the gods, to Enlil the counselor, and to Ea the wise, I will beg them to show you mercy, then I will have a gold statue made in your image. Don’t worry, dear friend, you will soon get better, this votive image will restore you to health.”

Enkidu said, “There is no gold statue that can cure this illness, beloved friend. What Enlil has decided cannot be changed. My fate is settled. There is nothing you can do.”

At the first glow of dawn, Enkidu cried out to Shamash, he raised his head, and the tears poured down his cheeks. “I turn to you, Lord, since suddenly fate has turned against me. As for that wretched trapper who found me when I was free in the wilderness-because he destroyed my life, destroy his livelihood, may he go home empty, may no animals ever enter his traps, or if they do, may they vanish like mist, and may he starve for bringing me here.”

After he had cursed him to his heart’s content, he then cursed Shamhat, the priestess of Ishtar. “Shamhat, I assign you an eternal fate, I curse you with the ultimate curse, may it seize you instantly, as it leaves my mouth. Never may you have a home and family, never caress a child of your own, may your man prefer younger, prettier girls, may he beat you as a housewife beats a rug, may you never acquire bright alabaster

or shining silver, the delight of men, may your roof keep leaking and no carpenter fix it, may wild dogs camp in your bedroom, may owls nest in your attic, may drunkards vomit all over you, may a tavern wall be your place of business, may you be dressed in torn robes and filthy underwear, may angry wives sue you, may thorns and briars make your feet bloody, may young men jeer and the rabble mock you as you walk the streets. Shamhat, may all this be your reward for seducing me in the wilderness when I was strong and innocent and free.”

Bright Shamash, the protector, heard his prayer. Then from heaven the voice of the god called out: “Enkidu, why are you cursing the priestess Shamhat? Wasn’t it she who gave you fine bread fit for a god and fine beer fit for a king, who clothed you in a glorious robe and gave you splendid Gilgamesh as your intimate friend? He will lay you down on a bed of honor, he will put you on a royal bier, on his left he will place your statue in the seat of repose, the princes of the earth will kiss its feet, the people of Uruk will mourn you, and when you are gone, he will roam the wilderness with matted hair, in a lion skin.”

When Enkidu heard this, his raging heart grew calm. He thought of Shamhat and said, “Shamhat, I assign you a different fate, my mouth that cursed you will bless you now. May you be adored by nobles and princes, two miles away from you may your lover tremble with excitement, one mile away may he bite his lip in anticipation, may the warrior long to be naked beside you, may Ishtar give you generous lovers whose treasure chests brim with jewels and gold, may the mother of seven be abandoned for your sake.”

Then Enkidu said to Gilgamesh, “You who have walked beside me, steadfast through so many dangers, remember me, never forget what I have endured.”

The day that Enkidu had his dreams, his strength began failing. For twelve long days he was deathly sick, he lay in his bed in agony, unable to rest, and every day he grew worse. At last he sat up and called out to Gilgamesh: “Have you abandoned me now, dear friend? You told me that you would come to help me when I was afraid. But I cannot see you, you have not come to fight off this danger. Yet weren’t we to remain forever inseparable, you and I?”

When he heard the death rattle, Gilgamesh moaned like a dove. His face grew dark. “Beloved, wait, don’t leave me. Dearest of men, don’t die, don’t let them take you from me.”

Book VIII

All through the long night, Gilgamesh wept for his dead friend. At the first glow of dawn, he cried out, “Enkidu, dearest brother, you came to Uruk from the wilderness, your mother was a gazelle, your father a wild ass, you were raised on the milk of antelope and deer, and the wandering herds taught you where the best pastures were. May the paths that led you to the Cedar Forest mourn you constantly, day and night, may the elders of great-walled Uruk mourn you, who gave us their blessing when we departed, may the hills mourn you and the mountains we climbed, may the pastures mourn you as their own son, may the forest we slashed in our fury mourn you, may the bear mourn you, the hyena, the panther, the leopard, deer, jackal, lion, wild bull, gazelle, may the rivers Ulaya and Euphrates mourn you, whose sacred waters we offered to the gods, may the young men of great-walled Uruk mourn you, who cheered when we slaughtered the Bull of Heaven, may the farmer mourn you, who praised you to the skies in his harvest song, may the shepherd mourn you, who brought you milk, may the brewer mourn you, who made you fine beer, may Ishtar’s priestess mourn you, who massaged you with sweet-smelling oil, may the wedding guests mourn you like their own brother, may the temple priests mourn you, loosening their hair.

“Hear me, elders, hear me, young men, my beloved friend is dead, he is dead, my beloved brother is dead, I will mourn as long as I breathe, I will sob for him like a woman who has lost her only child. O Enkidu, you were the axe at my side in which my arm trusted, the knife in my sheath, the shield I carried, my glorious robe, the wide belt around my loins, and now a harsh fate has torn you from me, forever. Beloved friend, swift stallion, wild deer, leopard ranging in the wilderness—Enkidu, my friend, swift stallion, wild deer, leopard ranging in the wilderness—together we crossed the mountains, together we slaughtered the Bull of Heaven, we killed Humbaba, who guarded the Cedar Forest—O Enkidu, what is this sleep that has seized you, that has darkened your face and stopped your breath?”

But Enkidu did not answer. Gilgamesh touched his heart, but it did not beat.

Then he veiled Enkidu’s face like a bride’s. Like an eagle Gilgamesh circled around him, he paced in front of him, back and forth, like a lioness whose cubs are trapped in a pit, he tore out clumps of his hair, tore off his magnificent robes as though they were cursed.

At the first glow of dawn, Gilgamesh sent out a proclamation: “Blacksmiths, goldsmiths, workers in silver, metal, and gems—create a statue

of Enkidu, my friend, make it more splendid than any statue that has ever been made. Cover his beard with lapis lazuli, his chest with gold. Let obsidian and all other beautiful stones—a thousand jewels of every color—be piled along with the silver and gold and sent on a barge, down the Euphrates to great-walled Uruk, for Enkidu’s statue. I will lay him down on a bed of honor, I will put him on a royal bier, on my left I will place his statue in the seat of repose, the princes of the earth will kiss its feet, the people of Uruk will mourn him, and when he is gone, I will roam the wilderness with matted hair, in a lion skin.”

After he sent out the proclamation, he went to the treasury, unlocked the door and surveyed his riches, then he brought out priceless, jewel-studded weapons and tools, with inlaid handles of ivory and gold, and he heaped them up for Enkidu, his friend, as an offering to the gods of the underworld. He gathered fattened oxen and sheep, he butchered them, and he piled them high for Enkidu, his beloved friend. He closed his eyes, in his mind he formed an image of the infernal river, then he opened the palace gate, brought out an offering table of precious yew wood, filled a carnelian bowl with honey, filled a lapis lazuli bowl with butter, and when the offerings were ready he spread out each one in front of Shamash.

To the great queen Ishtar his offering was a polished javelin of pure cedar. “Let Ishtar accept this, let her welcome my friend and walk at his side in the underworld, so that Enkidu may not be sick at heart.” To Sîn, the god of the moon, he offered a knife with a curved obsidian blade. “Let Sîn accept this, let him welcome my friend and walk at his side in the underworld, so that Enkidu may not be sick at heart.” To Ereshkigal, the dark queen of the dead, he offered a lapis lazuli flask. “Let the queen accept this, let her welcome my friend and walk at his side in the underworld, so that Enkidu may not be sick at heart.” To Tammuz, the shepherd beloved by Ishtar, his offering was a carnelian flute; to Namtar, vizier of the dark gods, a lapis lazuli chair and scepter; to Hushbishag, handmaid of the dark gods, a golden necklace; to Qassa-tabat, the infernal sweeper, a silver bracelet; to the housekeeper, Ninshuluhha, a mirror of alabaster, on the back of which was a picture of the Cedar Forest, inlaid with rubies and lapis lazuli; to the butcher, Bibbu, a double-edged knife with a haft of lapis lazuli bearing a picture of the holy Euphrates. When all the offerings were set out, he prayed, “Let the gods accept these, let them welcome my friend and walk at his side in the underworld, so that Enkidu may not be sick at heart.”

After the funeral, Gilgamesh went out from Uruk, into the wilderness with matted hair, in a lion skin.

Book IX

Gilgamesh wept over Enkidu his friend, bitterly he wept through the wilderness. “Must I die too? Must I be as lifeless as Enkidu? How can I bear this sorrow that gnaws at my belly, this fear of death that restlessly drives me onward? If only I could find the one man whom the gods made immortal, I would ask him how to overcome death.”

So Gilgamesh roamed, his heart full of anguish, wandering, always eastward, in search of Utnapishtim, whom the gods made immortal.

Finally he arrived at the two high mountains called the Twin Peaks. Their summits touch the vault of heaven, their bases reach down to the underworld, they keep watch over the sun’s departure and its return. Two scorpion people were posted at the entrance, guarding the tunnel into which the sun plunges when it sets and moves through the earth to emerge above the horizon at dawn. The sight of these two inspired such terror that it could kill an ordinary man. Their auras shimmered over the mountains. When Gilgamesh saw them, he was pierced with dread, but he steadied himself and headed toward them.

The scorpion man called out to his wife, “This one who approaches—he must be a god.”

The scorpion woman called back to him, “He is two-thirds divine and one-third human.”

The scorpion man said, “What is your name? How have you dared to come here? Why have you traveled so far, over seas and mountains difficult to cross, through wastelands and deserts no mortal has ever entered? Tell me the goal of your journey. I want to know.”

“Gilgamesh is my name,” he answered, “I am the king of great-walled Uruk and have come here to find my ancestor Utnapishtim, who joined the assembly of the gods, and was granted eternal life. He is my last hope. I want to ask him how he managed to overcome death.”

The scorpion man said, “No one is able to cross the Twin Peaks, nor has anyone ever entered the tunnel into which the sun plunges when it sets and moves through the earth. Inside the tunnel there is total darkness: deep is the darkness, with no light at all.”

The scorpion woman said, “This brave man, driven by despair, his body frost-chilled, exhausted, and burnt by the desert sun—show him the way to Utnapishtim.”

The scorpion man said, “Ever downward through the deep darkness the tunnel leads. All will be pitch black before and behind you, all

will be pitch black to either side. You must run through the tunnel faster than the wind. You have just twelve hours. If you don't emerge from the tunnel before the sun sets and enters, you will find no refuge from its deadly fire. Penetrate into the mountains' depths, may the Twin Peaks lead you safely to your goal, may they safely take you to the edge of the world. The gate to the tunnel lies here before you. Go now in peace, and return in peace."

As the sun was rising, Gilgamesh entered. He began to run. For one hour he ran, deep was the darkness, with no light at all before and behind him and to either side. For a second and a third hour Gilgamesh ran, deep was the darkness, with no light at all before and behind him and to either side. For a fourth and a fifth hour Gilgamesh ran, deep was the darkness, with no light at all before and behind him and to either side. For a sixth and a seventh hour Gilgamesh ran, deep was the darkness, with no light at all before and behind him and to either side. At the eighth hour Gilgamesh cried out with fear, deep was the darkness, with no light at all before and behind him and to either side. At the ninth hour he felt a breeze on his face, deep was the darkness, with no light at all before and behind him and to either side. For a tenth and eleventh hour Gilgamesh ran, deep was the darkness, with no light at all before and behind him and to either side. At the twelfth hour he emerged from the tunnel into the light. The sun was hurtling toward the entrance. He had barely escaped.

Before him the garden of the gods appeared, with gem-trees of all colors, dazzling to see. There were trees that grew rubies, trees with lapis lazuli flowers, trees that dangled gigantic coral clusters like dates. Everywhere, sparkling on all the branches, were enormous jewels: emeralds, sapphires, hematite, diamonds, carnelians, pearls. Gilgamesh looked up and marveled at it all.

Book X

At the edge of the ocean, the tavern keeper Shiduri was sitting. Her face was veiled, her golden pot-stand and brewing vat stood at her side. As Gilgamesh came toward her, worn out, his heart full of anguish, she thought, "This desperate man must be a murderer. Why else is he heading straight toward me?" She rushed into her tavern, locked the door, then climbed to the roof. Gilgamesh heard the noise, he looked up and saw her standing there, staring at him. "Why did you lock yourself in?" he shouted. "I want to enter now. If you don't let me, I will smash your locks and break down your door."

Shiduri answered, "You seemed so wild that I locked my door and

climbed to the roof. Tell me your name now. Where you are going?”

“Gilgamesh is my name,” he said. “I am the king of great-walled Uruk. I am the man who killed Humbaba in the Cedar Forest, I am the man who triumphed over the Bull of Heaven.”

Shiduri said, “Why are your cheeks so hollow and your features so ravaged? Why is your face frost-chilled, and burnt by the desert sun? Why is there so much grief in your heart? Why are you worn out and ready to collapse, like someone who has been on a long, hard journey?”

Gilgamesh said, “Shouldn’t my cheeks be hollow, shouldn’t my face be ravaged, frost-chilled, and burnt by the desert sun? Shouldn’t my heart be filled with grief? Shouldn’t I be worn out and ready to collapse? My friend, my brother, whom I loved so dearly, who accompanied me through every danger—Enkidu, my brother, whom I loved so dearly, who accompanied me through every danger—the fate of mankind has overwhelmed him. For six days I would not let him be buried, thinking, ‘If my grief is violent enough, perhaps he will come back to life again.’ For six days and seven nights I mourned him, until a maggot fell out of his nose. Then I was frightened, I was terrified by death, and I set out to roam the wilderness. I cannot bear what happened to my friend—I cannot bear what happened to Enkidu—so I roam the wilderness in my grief. How can my mind have any rest? My beloved friend has turned into clay—my beloved Enkidu has turned into clay. And won’t I too lie down in the dirt like him, and never arise again?”

Shiduri said, “Gilgamesh, where are you roaming? You will never find the eternal life that you seek. When the gods created mankind, they also created death, and they held back eternal life for themselves alone. Humans are born, they live, then they die, this is the order that the gods have decreed. But until the end comes, enjoy your life, spend it in happiness, not despair. Savor your food, make each of your days a delight, bathe and anoint yourself, wear bright clothes that are sparkling clean, let music and dancing fill your house, love the child who holds you by the hand, and give your wife pleasure in your embrace. That is the best way for a man to live.”

Gilgamesh cried out, “What are you saying, tavern keeper? My heart is sick for my friend who died. What can your words mean when my heart is sick for Enkidu who died? Show me the road to Utnapishtim. I will cross the vast ocean if I can. If not, I will roam the wilderness in my grief.”

Shiduri said, “Never has there been a path across the vast ocean, nor

has there ever been any human who was able to cross it. Only brave Shamash as he climbs the sky can cross the vast ocean—who else can do it? The crossing is harsh, the danger is great, and midway lie the Waters of Death, whose touch kills instantly. Even if you manage to sail that distance, what will you do when you reach the Waters of Death? The one man who can help you is Urshanabi, Utnapishtim’s boatman. He is trimming pine branches down in the forest, and he has the Stone Men with him. Go to him. Ask. If he says yes, you can cross the vast ocean. If he says no, you will have to turn back.”

At these words, Gilgamesh gripped his axe, drew his knife, and crept down toward them. When he was close, he fell upon them like an arrow. His battle-cry rang through the forest. Urshanabi saw the bright knife, saw the axe flash, and he stood there, dazed. Fear gripped the Stone Men who crewed the boat. Gilgamesh smashed them to pieces, then threw them into the sea. They sank in the water.

Gilgamesh came back and stood before him. Urshanabi stared, then he said, “Who are you? Tell me. What is your name? I am Urshanabi, the servant of Utnapishtim, the Distant One.”

“Gilgamesh is my name,” he answered, “I am the king of great-walled Uruk. I have traveled here across the high mountains, I have traveled here on the hidden road through the underworld, where the sun comes forth. Show me the way to Utnapishtim.”

Urshanabi said, “Your own hands have prevented the crossing, since in your fury you have smashed the Stone Men, who crewed my boat and could not be injured by the Waters of Death. But don’t despair. There is one more way we can cross the vast ocean. Take your axe, cut down three hundred punting poles, each a hundred feet long, strip them, make grips, and bring them to me. I will wait for you here.”

Gilgamesh went deep into the forest, he cut down three hundred punting poles, each a hundred feet long, he stripped them, made grips, and brought them to Urshanabi the boatman. They boarded the boat and sailed away.

They sailed, without stopping, for three days and nights, a six weeks’ journey for ordinary men, until they reached the Waters of Death. Urshanabi said, “Now be careful, take up the first pole, push us forward, and do not touch the Waters of Death. When you come to the end of the first pole, drop it, take up a second and a third one, until you come to the end of the three-hundredth pole and the Waters of Death are well behind us.”

When all three hundred poles had been used, Gilgamesh took Urshan-

abi's robe. He held it as a sail, with both arms extended, and the little boat moved on toward the shore.

Alone on the shore stood Utnapishtim, wondering as he watched them approach. "Where are the Stone Men who crew the boat? Why is there a stranger on board? I have never seen him. Who can he be?"

Gilgamesh landed. When he saw the old man, he said to him, "Tell me, where can I find Utnapishtim, who joined the assembly of the gods, and was granted eternal life?"

Utnapishtim said, "Why are your cheeks so hollow? Why is your face so ravaged, frost-chilled, and burnt by the desert sun? Why is there so much grief in your heart? Why are you worn out and ready to collapse, like someone who has been on a long, hard journey?"

Gilgamesh said, "Shouldn't my cheeks be hollow, shouldn't my face be ravaged, frost-chilled, and burnt by the desert sun? Shouldn't my heart be filled with grief? Shouldn't I be worn out and ready to collapse? My friend, my brother, whom I loved so dearly, who accompanied me through every danger—Enkidu, my brother, whom I loved so dearly, who accompanied me through every danger—the fate of mankind has overwhelmed him. For six days I would not let him be buried, thinking, 'If my grief is violent enough, perhaps he will come back to life again.' For six days and seven nights I mourned him, until a maggot fell out of his nose. Then I was frightened, I was terrified by death, and I set out to roam the wilderness. I cannot bear what happened to my friend—I cannot bear what happened to Enkidu—so I roam the wilderness in my grief. How can my mind have any rest? My beloved friend has turned into clay—my beloved Enkidu has turned into clay. And won't I too lie down in the dirt like him, and never arise again? That is why I must find Utnapishtim, whom men call 'The Distant One.' I must ask him how he managed to overcome death. I have wandered the world, climbed the most treacherous mountains, crossed deserts, sailed the vast ocean, and sweet sleep has rarely softened my face. I have worn myself out through ceaseless striving, I have filled my muscles with pain and anguish. I have killed bear, lion, hyena, leopard, tiger, deer, antelope, ibex, I have eaten their meat and have wrapped their rough skins around me. And what in the end have I achieved? When I reached Shiduri the tavern keeper, I was filthy, exhausted, heartsick. Now let the gate of sorrow be closed behind me, and let it be sealed shut with tar and pitch."

Utnapishtim said, "Gilgamesh, why prolong your grief? Have you ever paused to compare your own blessed lot with a fool's? You were made from the flesh of both gods and humans, the gods have lavished you

with their gifts as though they were your fathers and mothers, from your birth they assigned you a throne and told you, 'Rule over men!' To the fool they gave beer dregs instead of butter, stale crusts instead of bread that is fit for gods, rags instead of magnificent garments, instead of a wide fringed belt an old rope, and a frantic, senseless, dissatisfied mind. Can't you see how fortunate you are? You have worn yourself out through ceaseless striving, you have filled your muscles with pain and anguish. And what have you achieved but to bring yourself one day nearer to the end of your days? At night the moon travels across the sky, the gods of heaven stay awake and watch us, unsleeping, undying. This is the way the world is established, from ancient times.

"Yes: the gods took Enkidu's life. But man's life is short, at any moment it can be snapped, like a reed in a canebrake. The handsome young man, the lovely young woman—in their prime, death comes and drags them away. Though no one has seen death's face or heard death's voice, suddenly, savagely, death destroys us, all of us, old or young. And yet we build houses, make contracts, brothers divide their inheritance, conflicts occur—as though this human life lasted forever. The river rises, flows over its banks and carries us all away, like mayflies floating downstream: they stare at the sun, then all at once there is nothing.

"The sleeper and the dead, how alike they are! Yet the sleeper wakes up and opens his eyes, while no one returns from death. And who can know when the last of his days will come? When the gods assemble, they decide your fate, they establish both life and death for you, but the time of death they do not reveal."

Book XI

Gilgamesh said to Utnapishtim, "I imagined that you would look like a god. But you look like me, you are not any different. I intended to fight you, yet now that I stand before you, now that I see who you are, I can't fight, something is holding me back. Tell me, how is it that you, a mortal, overcame death and joined the assembly of the gods and were granted eternal life?"

Utnapishtim said, "I will tell you a mystery, a secret of the gods. You know Shuruppak, that ancient city on the Euphrates. I lived there once. I was its king once, a long time ago, when the great gods decided to send the Flood. Five gods decided, and they took an oath to keep the plan secret: Anu their father, the counselor Enlil, Ninurta the gods' chamberlain, and Ennugi the sheriff. Ea also, the cleverest

of the gods, had taken the oath, but I heard him whisper the secret to the reed fence around my house. ‘Reed fence, reed fence, listen to my words. King of Shuruppak, quickly, quickly tear down your house and build a great ship, leave your possessions, save your life. The ship must be square, so that its length equals its width. Build a roof over it, just as the Great Deep is covered by the earth. Then gather and take aboard the ship examples of every living creature.’

“I understood Ea’s words, and I said, ‘My lord, I will obey your command, exactly as you have spoken it. But what shall I say when the people ask me why I am building such a large ship?’

“Ea said, ‘Tell them that Enlil hates you, that you can no longer live in their city or walk on the earth, which belongs to Enlil, that it is your fate to go down into the Great Deep and live with Ea your lord, and that Ea will rain abundance upon them. They will all have all that they want, and more.’

“I laid out the structure, I drafted plans. At the first glow of dawn, everyone gathered—carpenters brought their saws and axes, reed workers brought their flattening-stones, rope makers brought their ropes, and children carried the tar. The poor helped also, however they could—some carried timber, some hammered nails, some cut wood. By the end of the fifth day the hull had been built: the decks were an acre large, the sides two hundred feet high. I built six decks, so that the ship’s height was divided in seven. I divided each deck into nine compartments, drove water plugs into all the holes, brought aboard spars and other equipment, had three thousand gallons of tar poured into the furnace, and three thousand gallons of pitch poured out. The bucket carriers brought three thousand gallons of oil—a thousand were used for the caulking, two thousand were left, which the boatman stored. Each day I slaughtered bulls for my workmen, I slaughtered sheep, I gave them barrels of beer and ale and wine, and they drank it like river water. When all our work on the ship was finished, we feasted as though it were New Year’s Day. At sunrise I handed out oil for the ritual, by sunset the ship was ready. The launching was difficult. We rolled her on logs down to the river and eased her in until two-thirds was under the water. I loaded onto her everything precious that I owned: all my silver and gold, all my family, all my kinfolk, all kinds of animals, wild and tame, craftsmen and artisans of every kind.

“Then Shamash announced that the time had come. ‘Enter the ship now. Seal the hatch.’ I gazed at the sky—it was terrifying. I entered the ship. To Puzur-amurri the shipwright, the man who sealed the hatch, I gave my palace, with all its contents.

“At the first glow of dawn, an immense black cloud rose on the horizon and crossed the sky. Inside it the storm god Adad was thundering, while Shullat and Hanish, twin gods of destruction, went first, tearing through mountains and valleys. Nergal, the god of pestilence, ripped out the dams of the Great Deep, Ninurta opened the floodgates of heaven, the infernal gods blazed and set the whole land on fire. A deadly silence spread through the sky and what had been bright now turned to darkness. The land was shattered like a clay pot. All day, ceaselessly, the storm winds blew, the rain fell, then the Flood burst forth, overwhelming the people like war. No one could see through the rain, it fell harder and harder, so thick that you couldn’t see your own hand before your eyes. Even the gods were afraid. The water rose higher and higher until the gods fled to Anu’s palace in the highest heaven. But Anu had shut the gates. The gods cowered by the palace wall, like dogs.

“Sweet-voiced Aruru, mother of men, screamed out, like a woman in childbirth: ‘If only that day had never been, when I spoke up for evil in the council of the gods! How could I have agreed to destroy my children by sending the Great Flood upon them? I have given birth to the human race, only to see them fill the ocean like fish.’ The other gods were lamenting with her. They sat and listened to her and wept. Their lips were parched, crusted with scabs.

“For six days and seven nights, the storm demolished the earth. On the seventh day, the downpour stopped. The ocean grew calm. No land could be seen, just water on all sides, as flat as a roof. There was no life at all. The human race had turned into clay. I opened a hatch and the blessed sunlight streamed upon me, I fell to my knees and wept. When I got up and looked around, a coastline appeared, a half mile away. On Mount Nimush the ship ran aground, the mountain held it and would not release it. For six days and seven nights, the mountain would not release it. On the seventh day, I brought out a dove and set it free. The dove flew off, then flew back to the ship, because there was no place to land. I waited, then I brought out a swallow and set it free. The swallow flew off, then flew back to the ship, because there was no place to land. I waited, then I brought out a raven and set it free. The raven flew off, and because the water had receded, it found a branch, it sat there, it ate, it flew off and didn’t return.

“When the waters had dried up and land appeared, I set free the animals I had taken, I slaughtered a sheep on the mountaintop and offered it to the gods, I arranged two rows of seven ritual vases, I burned reeds, cedar, and myrtle branches. The gods smelled the fragrance,

they smelled the sweet fragrance and clustered around the offering like flies.

“When Aruru came, she held up in the air her necklace of lapis lazuli, Anu’s gift when their love was new. ‘I swear by this precious ornament that never will I forget these days. Let all the gods come to the sacrifice, except for Enlil, because he recklessly sent the Great Flood and destroyed my children.’

“Then Enlil arrived. When he saw the ship, he was angry, he raged at the other gods. ‘Who helped these humans escape? Wasn’t the Flood supposed to destroy them all?’

“Ninurta answered, ‘Who else but Ea, the cleverest of us, could devise such a thing?’

“Ea said to the counselor Enlil, ‘You, the wisest and bravest of the gods, how did it happen that you so recklessly sent the Great Flood to destroy mankind? It is right to punish the sinner for his sins, to punish the criminal for his crime, but be merciful, do not allow all men to die because of the sins of some. Instead of a flood, you should have sent lions to decimate the human race, or wolves, or a famine, or a deadly plague. As for my taking the solemn oath, I didn’t reveal the secret of the gods, I only whispered it to a fence and Utnapishtim happened to hear. Now you must decide what his fate will be.’

“Then Enlil boarded, he took my hand, he led me out, then he led out my wife. He had us kneel down in front of him, he touched our foreheads and, standing between us, he blessed us. ‘Hear me, you gods: Until now, Utnapishtim was a mortal man. But from now on, he and his wife shall be gods like us, they shall live forever, at the source of the rivers, far away.’ Then they brought us to this distant place at the source of the rivers. Here we live.

“Now then, Gilgamesh, who will assemble the gods for your sake? Who will convince them to grant you the eternal life that you seek? How would they know that you deserve it? First pass this test: Just stay awake for seven days. Prevail against sleep, and perhaps you will prevail against death.”

So Gilgamesh sat down against a wall to begin the test. The moment he sat down, sleep swirled over him, like a fog.

Utnapishtim said to his wife, “Look at this fellow! He wanted to live forever, but the very moment he sat down, sleep swirled over him, like a fog.”

His wife said, “Touch him on the shoulder, wake him, let him depart and go back safely to his own land, by the gate he came through.”

Utnapishtim said, “All men are liars. When he wakes up, watch how he tries to deceive us. So bake a loaf for each day he sleeps, put them in a row beside him, and make a mark on the wall for every loaf.”

She baked the loaves and put them beside him, she made a mark for each day he slept. The first loaf was rock-hard, the second loaf was dried out like leather, the third had shrunk, the fourth had a whitish covering, the fifth was spotted with mold, the sixth was stale, the seventh loaf was still on the coals when he reached out and touched him. Gilgamesh woke with a start and said, “I was almost falling asleep when I felt your touch.”

Utnapishtim said, “Look down, friend, count these loaves that my wife baked and put here while you sat sleeping. This first one, rock-hard, was baked seven days ago, this leathery one was baked six days ago, and so on for all the rest of the days you sat here sleeping. Look. They are marked on the wall behind you.”

Gilgamesh cried out, “What shall I do, where shall I go now? Death has caught me, it lurks in my bedroom, and everywhere I look, everywhere I turn, there is only death.”

Utnapishtim said to the boatman, “This is the last time, Urshanabi, that you are allowed to cross the vast ocean and reach these shores. As for this man, he is filthy and tired, his hair is matted, animal skins have obscured his beauty. Bring him to the tub and wash out his hair, take off his animal skin and let the waves of the ocean carry it away, moisten his body with sweet-smelling oil, bind his hair in a bright new headband, dress him in fine robes fit for a king. Until he comes to the end of his journey let his robes be spotless, as though they were new.”

He brought him to the tub, he washed out his hair, he took off his animal skin and let the waves of the ocean carry it away, he moistened his body with sweet-smelling oil, he bound his hair in a bright new headband, he dressed him in fine robes fit for a king. Then Gilgamesh and Urshanabi boarded, pushed off, and the little boat began to move away from the shore.

But the wife of Utnapishtim said, “Wait, this man came a very long way, he endured many hardships to get here. Won’t you give him something for his journey home?”

When he heard this, Gilgamesh turned the boat around, and he brought it back to the shore. Utnapishtim said, “Gilgamesh, you came a very

long way, you endured many hardships to get here. Now I will give you something for your journey home, a mystery, a secret of the gods. There is a small spiny bush that grows in the waters of the Great Deep, it has sharp spikes that will prick your fingers like a rose's thorns. If you find this plant and bring it to the surface, you will have found the secret of youth."

Gilgamesh dug a pit on the shore that led down into the Great Deep. He tied two heavy stones to his feet, they pulled him downward into the water's depths. He found the plant, he grasped it, it tore his fingers, they bled, he cut off the stones, his body shot up to the surface, and the waves cast him back, gasping, onto the shore.

Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi, "Come here, look at this marvelous plant, the antidote to the fear of death. With it we return to the youth we once had. I will take it to Uruk, I will test its power by seeing what happens when an old man eats it. If that succeeds, I will eat some myself and become a carefree young man again."

At four hundred miles they stopped to eat, at a thousand miles they pitched their camp. Gilgamesh saw a pond of cool water. He left the plant on the ground and bathed. A snake smelled its fragrance, stealthily it crawled up and carried the plant away. As it disappeared, it cast off its skin.

When Gilgamesh saw what the snake had done, he sat down and wept. He said to the boatman, "What shall I do now? All my hardships have been for nothing. O Urshanabi, was it for this that my hands have labored, was it for this that I gave my heart's blood? I have gained no benefit for myself but have lost the marvelous plant to a reptile. I plucked it from the depths, and how could I ever manage to find that place again? And our little boat—we left it on the shore."

At four hundred miles they stopped to eat, at a thousand miles they pitched their camp.

When at last they arrived, Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi, "This is the wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun. Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine, approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar, a temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty, walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built, observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares."