Epic of Gilgamesh

Notes: The Epic of Gilgamesh was an orally-transmitted epic poem of ancient origin written down in Akkadian ca. 2000 BCE. It is a fragmentary written text in cuneiform on clay tablets found at Nineveh, Mesopotamia, in the nineteenth century. The following version is a composite translation of several text fragments discovered since that first fragment was found at Nineveh. It adds even older Sumerian fragments to the later Akkadian. There seems never to have been an "authentic" version of the poem - fragments indicate that the poem evolved and branched out from basic themes through oral transmission, creating a variety of retellings.

Agon - A conflict, especially between the protagonist and antagonist in a work of literature; a battle or fight. It is the root of the word agony.

~ Tablet 1 ~

[Column I] Fame haunts the man who visits Hell, who lives to tell my entire tale identically. So like a sage, a trickster or saint, Gilgamesh was a hero who knew secrets and saw forbidden places, who could even speak of the time before the Flood because he lived long, learned much, and spoke his life to those who first cut into clay his bird-like words. He commanded walls for Uruk and for Eanna, our holy ground, walls that you can see still; walls where weep the weary widows of dead soldiers. Go to them and touch their immovable presence with gentle fingers to find yourself. No one else ever built such walls. Climb Uruk's Tower and walk about on a windy night. Look. Touch. Taste. Sense. What force created such mass? Open up the special box that's hidden in the wall and read aloud the story of Gilgamesh's life. Learn what sorrow taught him; learn of those he overcame by wit or force or fear as he, a town's best child, acted nobly in the way one should to lead and acted wisely too as one who sought no fame. Child of Lugalbanda's wife and some great force, Gilgamesh is a fate alive, the finest babe of Ninsun, she who never let a man touch her, indeed so sure and heavenly; so without sin. He knew the secret paths that reached the eagle's nest above the mountain and knew too how just to drop a well into the chilly earth. He sailed the sea to where Shamash comes, explored the world, sought life, and came at last to Utnapishtim far away who did bring back to life the flooded earth. Is there anywhere a greater king who can say, as Gilgamesh may "I am supreme"?

[Column II] The bigger part of him was made in heaven and the smaller part somewhere on earth. She-who-must-be-obeyed fashioned his body's self. She endowed him. Gilgamesh watches the flocks of Uruk himself as if he were a loose bull, nose up in open field. No one else could come close to fighting like that. His clan is roused by howling dreams and with them all he goes howling through sanctuaries. But would he ever let his child come to see him ravish others?

"Is this shepherd of Uruk's flocks, our strength, our light, our reason, who hoards the girls of other men for his own purpose?"

When Anu in the sky heard this, he said to Aruru, great goddess of creation: "You created humans; create again in the image of Gilgamesh and let this imitation be as quick in heart and as strong in arm so that these counterforces might first engage, then disengage, and finally let Uruk's children live in peace."
Hearing that, Aruru thought of Anu. Then she wet her creative fingers, fashioned a rock, and tossed it as far as she could into the woods. Thus she fathered Enkidu, a forester, and gave birth in terror and in fright without a single cry of pain, bringing forth another likeness of Ninurta, god of war. Hair covered his body and his curls resembled those of any good girl, growing swiftly like the fair hair of Nisaba-giver-of-grain. This Enkidu had neither clan nor race. He went clothed as one who shepherds well, eating the food of grass, drinking from the watery holes of herds and racing swift as wind or silent water.

Then Enkidu met a hunter at the watery hole on three consecutive days. And each time the face of the hunter signaled recognition of Enkidu. The herds were uninvited at the hunter's oasis and the hunter was disturbed by this intrusion. His quiet heart rushed up in trouble. His eyes darkened. Fear leaped forth onto a face that looks as if it expects to doubt for a long, long time.

[Column III] Then with trembling lips the hunter told his father this complaint: "Sir, one has come to my watery hole from afar and he is the biggest and best throughout the land. He feels power. His is a strength like that of Ana's swift star, and tirelessly does he roam across the land. He eats the food of beasts and, like the beasts, he comes at will to drink from my watery hole. In fear do I see him come to undo what I have done by wrecking traps, by busting mounds, by letting animals slip through my grasp, beasts that I would bind."

Then with hateful lips, the father told the hunter his reply: "Boy, your answer lies in Uruk where there stalks a man of endless strength named Gilgamesh. He is the biggest and best throughout the land. He feels power. His is a strength like that of Anu's swift star. Start out toward Uruk's ancient palace and tell your tale to Gilgamesh. In turn he'll say to set a trap; take back with you a fine lover. some sacred temple girl. who might let him see what force and charm a girl can have. Then as Enkidu comes again to the watery hole, let her strip in nearby isolation to show him all her grace. If he is drawn toward her, and leaves the herd to mate, his beasts on high will leave him then behind."

The hunter heard his father well and went that very night to Uruk where he said this to Gilgamesh: "There is someone from afar whose force is great throughout our land. His is a great strength. He feels power. His is a strength like that of Anu's swift star, and tirelessly does he roam across the land. He eats the food of beasts and, like the beasts, he comes at will to drink from my watery hole. In fear do I see him come to undo what I have done by wrecking traps, by busting mounds, by letting animals slip through my grasp, beasts that I would bind."

So Gilgamesh replied: "Go set a trap; take back with you a fine lover, Shamhat, the sacred temple girl, who might let him see what charm and force a girl can have. Then as Enkidu comes again to the watery hole, let her strip in nearby isolation to show him all her grace. If he is drawn toward her, and leaves the herd to mate, his beasts on high will leave him then behind."

The hunter returned, bringing with him the sacred temple girl, and swift was their journey. Three days later, at the watery hole, they set their trap for Enkidu and spoke no word for two whole days waiting and waiting and waiting. Then the herd came slowly in to drink. Beasts arose and sleepy limbs began to flutter [Column IV] then. Enkidu, the boy who walked on mountains, who eats the food of beasts and, like the beasts, comes down at will to drink from the watery hole, with the beasts arose and stretched his tired limbs to start the day.
She beheld him, as he was in his beginning, the one who gave and took life from the far woods. (lines omitted contain explicit sexual instructions given to the girl by the hunter. She is told to seduce Enkidu and "Let him see what force a girl can have." She does this and Enkidu stays with her for seven nights.)

After that week of pleasure, Enkidu returned to the herds but the beasts fled from him in haste. They stampeded away from his new self. He could no longer race as he had once, legs soft now and ankles stiff. The beasts left him behind and he grew sad that he could no longer speed with them.

But he enjoyed the memory that no virgin has and, returning to his fine lover, he once more knelt between her legs as she spoke these words to him: "Now you are like a god, my boy, with no more need of dumb beasts, however fair. We can now ascend the road to Uruk's palace, the immaculate domicile, where Anu and Ishtar dwell, and there we will see Gilgamesh, the powerful, who rides over the herd like any great king."

These words he heard and he stared at her. For the first time he wished for just one friend. Then Enkidu asked the love who was so fine: "Please come with me and be my love at the immaculate domicile, where Anu and Ishtar dwell, and there we will see Gilgamesh, the powerful, who rides over the herd like any great king. I wish to call on him; to proclaim all things aloud and find a friend in him."

Enkidu continued: "Uruk will hear me say, 'I am the strongest. I alone can do all I wish.' Forester that I am, a mountainous power is mine. We should march together, face-by-face, so I can promote your fame."

Then fine lover said these words in invitation: "Enter Uruk of the herds, Enkidu, where costumes bright are worn, where it is always time to party, where merry music never fades, where graceful girls do ever play with toys and boys and men; for in the night these revelers do their best to rule the town. There, with a smile, Enkidu will see his other self, great Gilgamesh. Watch him all, please. Note his face, his fists, his fairest sword, and all the strength that dwells in him. Could he be greater than you, this one who's up and down all day and night? Fear your own anger, boy; for great Gilgamesh adores fair Shamash and is adored in turn. Anu of the blue sky, Enlil from the clouds and clever Ea have empowered him. And before he even sees you, this great Gilgamesh will have first envisioned you in Uruk as a rival in a dream."

Gilgamesh awakens to ask his mother, Ninsun, to leave off the dream. "Mother," says he, "I saw a star within my head in sleep just now that fell at me like Anu's dart and I could not escape. Uruk was on high of it, our people did applaud, and gathered Lip to praise his force. Men clenched fists; women danced. And I too embraced this rising star, as a man does the woman he loves best, then took the new one here to you so that you could see us both at once."

Gilgamesh’s 's mother who is wise in all and worries not, replied: "This bright; new star is your true friend who fell at you like Anu's dart, whom you could not escape." Then she who is wise in all and worries not continued: "So say this friend is one who is almighty, with strength renowned around the world, like Anu's dart his force is real so that he draws you in, as does a wife, though he is sure to race away, like that most distant star, with the secrets of your origin. This dissolves your sleep."

Then again, Gilgamesh said to her in reply: "Mother, I slept when some with axes then attacked the herds of Uruk." So Ninsun reassured the frightened king: "Enkidu will help. He will guard his loves or rescue them from danger; he is your most faithful
friend. Expect him to shepherd you and to be sure that all goes well." Gilgamesh said to his fond source: "I pray for fortune and for fate to send me such a one that I may have a friend who's as kind and patient as a brother." Then in sleep full of repose the temple girl enchanted Enkidu where they lay smiling.

~ Tablet 2 ~

[Column I] Then Gilgamesh explained his dream to Ninsun: "Last night a vision filled my head with sights of stars and one sent down from heaven. At first I tried and failed to carry forth these signs with me. Then all citizens of Uruk here assisted in my efforts. So I was able then to bring these omens near to you."

And she said in reply: "Wisely done, fair son, and rightly so for one well reared as you were. All others too will soon acclaim this god-sent gift to you."

Then Gilgamesh concluded: "In another dream I saw an ax and bent toward it with manly interest; so fair was its appearance that it seemed wholesome, young and ready as a woman."

[Column II] The day came when the fine lover of Enkidu said: "Now come with me to enter into Uruk where we shall meet the mighty king, enormous Gilgamesh. Now you are like a god, my boy, with no more need of dumb beasts, however fair. We can ascend the road to Uruk's palace, the immaculate domicile, where Anu and Ishtar dwell and there we will see Gilgamesh, the powerful, who rides over the herd like any great king. You will see in him a power rare and fairly learn to love him like yourself."

They journeyed from the forest far and wide to venture on toward Uruk. The girl led forth the naked boy as gently as a mother would, tearing her garment right in two to hide their native beauty and clothed his splendid body then with her own cloak as they approached. [Column III] Along the way he learned new human ways... tracking down the gentle sheep and using weapons for the first time to fight away the savage beasts that do attack the [Column IV] herds and farms of men. Along the way he also learned to eat and drink as men and women do. The girl did teach all these things too for Enkidu's first lessons.

And with a man upon the road they spoke to learn of customs new to one from far off woods. So Enkidu came then to know of Gilgamesh who harshly ruled and was not loved by those men whose girls he often played with all night long. And before they entered through the gates of Uruk’s mighty walls, Enkidu was hailed as one who might be sent to rival [Column V] any king who might treat gentle folk unfairly.

In the alleys of Uruk during a display of force the approach of Enkidu stopped everything. Uruk rose before him. The mountain beyond stretched skyward. All creatures worshiped him. Youths rallied round. People adored him as they adore a newborn babe. For so it is when one comes from nowhere to do what no one thought could be done. For Ishara then a wedding bed is set this night because a guest has come who is as strong as any king.

And Enkidu stood before the gate where new lovers go and stopped Gilgamesh from being with nighttime girls. It is there where they first fight throughout the night and round about Uruk's walls which they [Column VI] chipped and wrecked in places. So the mighty brothers fought at first pushing and shoving each other for hours and hours...
enraged. Then a calm force gently soothed the well-matched spirits to bring a peace and rest to their strife.

It was Enkidu who sued for rest saying: "Gilgamesh, enough! I am here to match some fate with you, not to destroy or rival any king."

~ Tablet 3 ~

[Column I, II] Then Enkidu and Gilgamesh joined in sacred friendship and sealed their solemn bond with noble kiss. Enkidu and Gilgamesh often sat then together, visited Ninsun's shrine, conversed of many plans and fashioned a future together.

Once, in formed by fears of future sorrow, Enkidu began to weep and warn his friend of coming horror. He said: "If we go there beyond here to where Humbaba-the-awful lives, there will be a gruesome war in a place no one calls home, where no one wants to stay for long or go to rest or rest to gain the strength to reach the forests."

The Great One rose within and robed herself appropriately covering herself, ringing her curls beneath her crown to ascend the altar, where she stood lighting the first signals of charcoal for the incense and preparing sacred cups that hold the precious liquids which will be spilled. Then Ninsun asked Shamash: "Why? Why have you called my only son away and shaped his mind in so disturbed a way? For now, he says, you invite him to begin a pilgrimage that ends where Humbaba directs a never ending battle, along a foreign, lonely road far within the forests dark and damp where a man like him might just kill a god like [Column III] Humbaba or be killed to dissolve the pain that you, Shamash, oppose."

Humbaba stirs within the darkened wood and in the hearts of men there rises fear. When Enkidu spoke at last to Gilgamesh he said these words of warning: "I knew this monster's reputation long ago. Fire and death mix in his breath, and I for one do not wish now to challenge such a demon."

But Gilgamesh retorted: "All glory will be ours if now we conquer this unprecedented foe and risk the woe that frightens others."

And Enkidu said then in swift [Column IV] reply: "How shall we go towards woods so fiercely guarded?" Enlil it was who sent Humbaba there to scare away intruders with fierce and frightening howls.

Great Gilgamesh remembered that when he spoke words like these to Enkidu: "Only gods live forever with Shamash, my friend; for even our longest days are numbered. Why worry over being like dust in the wind? Leap up for this great threat. Fear not. Even if I were to fail and fall in combat, all future clans would say I did the job."

Special weapons then were ordered to be made for their assault upon Humbaba. Axes, swords, and combat saddles were prepared and [Column V] all of Uruk's population flocked round their great departure. The awful monster's reputation made Uruk's gentle people fear for their great king. And after all the plans were made to start out to fight Humbaba, a group came forward to see the king.

The elders spoke to Gilgamesh: "Fear the force that you control, hot-headed boy. Be sure you watch where you direct your every, heavy swing in battle. Vanguards protect. Friends save friends. Let Enkidu lead on the way through forests that he knows. He knows how to fight in woodlands; he knows where to pick his fight. Enkidu will shield
his bosom too as well as that of his companion so as to protect them both. He'll traverse any ditch of any width. Enkidu will guard our king. Be sure to bring him safely back."

Gilgamesh said to Enkidu: "Arise, my other self, and speed your way to Egalmah to where my mother sits, kind Ninsun. She understands all I need to know. She'll tell us where we should go and what to do." Again the men embraced as teammates do.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu set out to Egalmah. [Column VI] Upset by all his thoughts of coming battles and concerned by his consultations with the gods, Gilgamesh then sadly set his palace rooms in order. His weapons were prepared, his helmet shined and garments freshly cleaned. Citizens of Uruk came to say good-bye and wish their daring king farewell. "Go careful through this risky, bold adventure, mighty lord. Be sure of your own safety first of all." So spoke the elders of his town and then continued: "Let Enkidu take risks for you and have him lead the way through woods he knows so well. Pray that Shamash show him, as your guide, the nearest path and choicest route to where you dare to go. May great Lugalbanda favor you in combat with Humbaba."

Then Enkidu himself spoke finally to his king: "The time is right for us to now depart. Follow me, sir, along the . savage way to where a worthy opponent, the awful beast Humbaba, waits for your challenge in the dark woodlands that he guards. Do not fear this. Rely on me in every matter for your most and let me act as careful guide for your most daring venture."

~ Tablet 4 ~

[Column I, II] Ten miles into the march, they stopped to chat. After thirty miles, they rested, then finished another twenty miles that day. Within three days they covered what would take others a month and a half to travel. They dug for water where there appeared to be none in the dry desert on their way to challenge Humbaba. [Column III, IV, V] Onward ventured Gilgamesh and Enkidu and they both knew where danger lurked at their first destination. As up they climbed upon the final hill, they saw a guard put out by Humbaba as fierce as any watchdog. Gilgamesh pursued first.

Gilgamesh heard shouts from Enkidu who said to his companion: "Remember promises we made in the city where we live. Recall the courage and the force we vowed to bring upon this mission." These words dispelled the fear felt in his heart and Gilgamesh in return then shouted back: "Quick. Grab the guard and don't let go. Race fearlessly and don't let go. Our enemy, Humbaba, has set out seven uniforms but has only dressed in one so far. So six layers of strength are yet unused by him."

As one mad brute he is enraged, bellowing loudly [Column VI] while the foresters warn each other what he's like. Wounded in combat with the guard they killed, Enkidu uses words to say: "I lost my strength in this crushed hand when the gate slammed shut. What shall I do?"

Then Gilgamesh spoke: "Brother, as a man in tears would, you transcend all the rest who've gathered, for you can cry and kill with equal force. Hold my hand in yours, and we will not fear what hands like ours can do. Scream in unison, we will ascend to death or love, to say in song what we shall do. Our cry will shoot afar so this new weakness, awful doubt, will pass through you. Stay, brother, let us ascend as one."
[Column I] Gilgamesh and Enkidu froze and stared into the woods' great depth and height. When they spied Humbaba's path, they found the opening toward straight passage. Then they were able to find and see the home of the gods, the paradise of Ishtar's other self, called Inini-most-attractive. All beauty true is ever there where gods do dwell, where there is cool shade and harmony and sweet-odored food to match their mood. [Column III] Then Gilgamesh envisioned yet again another dream high up in the hills where boulders crashed.

Again Enkidu said to his brother, as he unraveled this dreary story for his king: "Brother, your song is a fine omen. This dream will make you well. Brother, that vision you saw is rich for on that mountain top we can capture Humbaba and hurl his earthly form from towering cliffs through sky to earth, making his shape as flat and wide as it is round and high." "Mountain, mountain in the sky, Break the god and make him die." [Column IV] Mountain-on-high then sent the myth into Enkidu's sleep, and a chill from the high winds forced him to rest, since he was blown around as grain is on open field. Curled up in a ball, Gilgamesh rested in blessed sleep, the best of friends at the worst of times.

But by the moon's half way course, he rose and then began to speak: "Brother, if you made no noise, what sound woke me? If you didn't jostle me, what shook my body? There was no god nearby, so why am I so stunned? Brother, I've had a third vision in sleep and I am deeply frightened to recall it all. Sky screamed. And Mother Earth moaned. Sun went out of light and blackest night enveloped the heavens. Then came flashes of lightning, source of fire. Storm clouds raced nearby and swept life away from out of the sky above our heads. Brightness dissolved, light evaporated; cinders turned to ash. When we leave the mountain, this is what we will remember."

When Enkidu learned this myth as told, he replied to Gilgamesh: "Shamash, your god, creates a great attraction for both of us. Shamash now approves of this attack upon Humbaba. Take the sign as some divine dream to urge us on." Shamash himself said such words to Gilgamesh as if in prayer: "Do not balk now, favored one. Brace yourself for battle and proceed."

Heavenly winds blasted down from out of the sky about and all around Humbaba. From east and west, with sand and grain, they blew him back and forth. His giant self became fatigued. His awesome strength dwindled. Not even his great right foot could step away in flight. So in this way, by Shamash's intervention, Humbaba-the-awful beast was brought so low. The dying beast called out for mercy once and part of what he said could still be heard over the howling winds: "Please, Gilgamesh! Have mercy on me, wounded. I shall freely give you all the Lumber of my mighty realm and work for you both day and night."

It was Enkidu then who shouted louder than the beast and with his words he urged a swift conclusion: "Kill the beast now, Gilgamesh. Show no weak or silly mercy toward so sly a foe." Taking his companion's mean advice, Gilgamesh swiftly cut the beast, splattering blood upon his cloak and sandals.
Soiled by this violent conflict, the friends began their journey back to Uruk's towering walls expecting now to be received as heroes who had fought and won a legendary battle.

~ Tablet 6 ~

Gilgamesh bathed himself and cleaned his hair, as beautiful as it was long. He cast off bloodied robes and put on his favorite gown, secured the cincture and stood royal. Then Gilgamesh put on his crown. Ishtar looked up at Gilgamesh's handsome pride.

"Come to me," she whispered. "Come to me and be my groom. Let me taste all parts of you, treat you as husband, be treated as your wife. And as a gift I'd give to you one regal coach of gold and blue with wheels of yellow and all so new that I would flatter all your might with the sight of demons driven off by my own god, by my own man. Come to my home, most sweetly scented of all places, where holy faces wash your feet with tears as do the priests and priestesses of gods lie Anu. All mighty hands of kings and queens will open doors for you. So too will all the countryside donate in duplicate to your fold. And the slow will race ahead for you, so that by association, all that you touch will turn to gold."

Gilgamesh replied to mighty Ishtar thus: "But how could I repay you as a wife and still avoid the bitterness and strife that follow you? Is it perfume for a dress you want, or me? Myself or something wrapped around a tree? Do I offer you food, sweet nuts or grapes? Are those for gods or for the savage apes? And who will pour a treat to us in bed, you dressed for life and me as if I'm dead? Here's a song I made for you.

Ishtar's the hearth gone cold, a broken door, without the gold; a fort that shuts its soldiers out, a water well that's filled with doubt; tar that can't be washed away, a broken cup, stained and gray; rock that shatters to dust and sand, a useless weapon in the hand; and worse than that or even this, a god's own sandal filled with piss. You've had your share of boys, that's true, but which of them called twice for you? Let me now list the ones that you just blew away.

First was Tammuz, the virgin boy you took after a three-year long seductive look. Then you lusted for a fancy, a colored bird and cut its wing so it could not herd. Thus in the lovely woods at night bird sings, 'I'm blind. I have no sight.' You trapped a lion in the past. It fell for you - and then fell flat. Because you dug him seven holes in which to fall on sharpened poles. You let a horse in your door by dancing on the stable floor; but then you built the world's first chain to choke his throat and end his reign. You let him run with all his might, as boys will sometimes do at night, before you harnessed his brute force with labor fierce, a mean divorce.

So did a mother weep and wail to see her child's foot set with a nail. You fondled once a shepherd boy who baked buns for your tongue's joy and daily killed his lambs so coy. So in return for gifts like those you chose to damage his toy. And when his brothers saw this change they knew you'd done something deranged. Ishullanu trimmed your father's trees and brought you carrots, dates and peas. So mighty you sat down to feasts, then turned your thoughts to raping beasts. You saw him naked once and said: 'Come, Ishullanu, into my bed and force your self upon me.' And he in turn said this to you: 'What is it that you'd have me do? I know, kind mother, I won't eat if I can't match your female heat.' So since he balked to play that role, you switched his jewel
into a mole; stuck in the muck of a marshy town his pleasure can't go up or down. And that is how you'd deal with me if we got friendly, warm, and free,"

When Ishtar heard his words so cruel, she turned deep red and lost her cool by blasting off for daddy's distant star, where she said: "Daddy, please, Gilgamesh called me a tease. Gilgamesh said I sinned and lived without faith in myself or others," she pouted.

Her father, Anu, said these exact words to Ishtar: "Now, daughter, did you first insult him, this Gilgamesh who then began to taunt you with jibes about your inclinations?"

Ishtar shouted back at him-who-is-her father: "You! Now! Make him stop! Loose the bull that could trample him at once. Let the bull spill his blood. And you'd better do this now or I'll wreak havoc of my own right down to Hell. I'll loose the damned devil. I'll rain corpses. I'll make zombies eat infants and there will be more dead souls than living ones!"

Her father, Anu, said these exact words to Ishtar: "But if I do what you seem now to want, there/would be long years of drought and sorrow. Have you stored enough reserve to feed the people who deserve your close protection?"

And she said: "Yes, I have reserved a plan for those I love. Now do as I demand and punish all who insult me."

Then her father, Anu, heard Ishtar's cry and Ishtar forced her will. Anu set loose a bull from out of the sky and, at the bull's proclamation, there cracks the earth to swallow up nine dozen citizens of Uruk! An earthquake fixed a grave for nine dozen citizens of Uruk. Two or three or four hundred victims, maybe more than that, fell into Hell. And when the quake returned for a third time it was near to Enkidu, he who fell upon the Abyss so wide and grim. Enkidu collapsed near the earth-shaking bull. Then he leaped to grab the bull by his long horns even with spit upon his face from out the savage mouth, even with the stench of bowels near his nose.

Then Enkidu said to Gilgamesh: "Brother, you and I are now hailed as one. How could we defeat a god? Brother, I see great challenge here, but can we dare defy such force? Let's kill it if we can right now. Be unrelenting and hope that god gives us the strength. We must be cold and strong to cut our enemy's weak neck."

Enkidu surrounds the bull, pursuing Heaven's beast and finally catches him. So Gilgamesh, like a bull dancer, svelte and mighty then, plunged his sword into the throat held fast by Enkidu. They butchered and bled the bull and then cut out its heart to offer as sacrifice before Shamash. Then Gilgamesh and Enkidu retreated from the altar itself and stood afar in deep respect as they did pray. At last the two sat down, bound by war, bound by worship.

Ishtar appeared upon Uruk's walls looking like a wailing widow. She shrieked this curse aloud: "Damn Gilgamesh, who injured me, by slaughtering a divine bull."

Enkidu reacted to these words of Ishtar quick by hurling at her head a hunk of meat from the bull's thigh. And from afar he shouted up to her: "This bloody mess of a plain bull would be about what I could make of you if you came near. I'd tie your hands with these rope-like intestines."

Ishtar signaled then for her attendants: coiffured bishops, cantors, and girls whose charms keep worshippers coming. Then atop the great wall above the city high standing by the severed part of its right thigh, she had them shriek laments for the bull who had died. So to complete this ritual and adorn his throne Gilgamesh
summoned artisans of all kinds. Some measured the diameter of the bull’s horns, each containing thirty pounds of lapis lazuli. Together those horns could hollow hold half a dozen quarts of oil. And that is what Gilgamesh brought as potion to the altar of Lugalbanda, his special protector. He carried the horns and enshrined them in a palace of honor where his clan held rites.

Then Enkidu and Gilgamesh absolved their bloody hands in the forgiving river, the deep, eternal Euphrates that does not change. At last relieved of such a stain, the friends renew their vows with a brief embrace before riding through Uruk’s crowded streets amid acclaim.

There, Gilgamesh stops to give this speech to gathered girls: "What man is most impressive now? Who ’is finest, firmest, and most fair? Isn’t Gilgamesh that man above men and isn’t Enkidu the strongest of all?" Then they party loudly throughout the day so that, come night, they drop down dead in sleep. But Enkidu is resurrected quickly to relieve his soul of fright and sadly he asks Gilgamesh in tears: "Oh brother, why would I dream that gods sat round to set my fate?"

~ Tablet 7 ~

[Column I] Enkidu confessed this dream to Gilgamesh: "The gods all gathered round last night and Anu told Enlil that one of us should die because of what we’ve done against their names. Though Shamash intervened for us, saying we had slain Humbaba and the bull with his consent, the others sought revenge."

Then Enkidu fell ill and soon lost his full strength. Saying words like these as his friend lay dying, Gilgamesh intoned: "Why should you be so condemned and why should I go right on living? Will my own sad eyes soon never look on you again? Shall I descend to depths beneath this earth to visit worlds reserved for those who’ve died?"

Enkidu glanced up, addressing the entryway on which his hand was morbidly crushed: "Door of all forests, that confuses wind and rain - deaf, dumb, and blind portal; I admired your firm texture before I first saw the mighty trees aloft that gave force to you. There is nothing on earth that could replace your splendor or your worth. At two hundred feet in height, at forty feet around are your mighty posts, your priceless hinge cut and crafted in Nippur’s holy ground. If I had guessed that you’d become this, I would have shattered you to pieces with my ax and been more careful not to wound my hand so [Column III] badly on your frame."

Then cursing the hunter whom he first met and the girl whom he first loved, Enkidu raged: "Slash him. Cut half his face. Raise up floods beneath his feet so that no animal is safe."

And at his sacred, former lover Enkidu did swear: "Get up, witch, and hear your fortune guaranteed now and forever. I damn you off and damn you down. I’d break your teeth with stones and let your mouth hang open until you’d say thanks to your killer who would favor you by letting you lie homeless on an open road in some foul ditch. May all and any who can hurt you now often cross the paths you take. I hope you live in fright, unsure of hope and starved always for the touch of love."

“The fine lover, my thoughtless boy, invested you with robes of gold, robes of blue and, more important, gave your dear friend the thought that he should do whatever need be done and still more too. Did your brother, Gilgamesh, give you as fine a bed
as any on earth or any there in heaven? Did he promote the likes of you to fame unrivaled, so that rulers kneel to kiss the ground you walk upon? He will also show the Uruk people how to mourn for you. An entire people will cry upon your death and he will go in tears ignoring the dirt and dust arid mud that stain his hands and hair. So in despair will his mind be as off he roams in lonely woods wearing rags."

Shamash responded from on high: "The fine lover, my Enkidu, is cursed by you who gave you bread and meat and stew, the same who offered you some wine." When Enkidu heard these sad words he was speechless and in his heart he knew that Shamash spoke the truth. His anger fled and Enkidu resolved to die in peace. With these last words the dying Enkidu did pray and say to his beloved companion: "In dreams last night [Column IV] the heavens and the earth poured out great groans while I alone stood facing devastation. Some fierce and threatening creature flew down at me and pushed me with its talons toward the horror-filled house of death wherein Irkalla, queen of shades, stands in command. There is darkness that lets no person again see light of day. There is a road leading away from bright and lively life. There dwell those who eat dry dust and have no cooling water to quench their awful thirst. As I stood there I saw all those who've died and even kings among those darkened souls have none of their remote and former glory. All earthly greatness was forfeit and I entered then into the house of death. Others who have been there long did rise to welcome me."

Hearing this, great Gilgamesh said to his handsome mother: "My friend, dear Enkidu, has seen his passing now and he lies dying here upon a sad and lonely cot. Each day he ' weakens more and wonders how much more life may yet belong to his hands and eyes and tongue."

Then Enkidu resumed his last remarks and said: "Oh Gilgamesh, some destiny has robbed me of the honor fixed for those who die in battle. I lie now in slow disgrace, withering day by day, deprived as I am of the peace that comes to one who dies suddenly in a swift clash of arms."

~ Tablet 8 ~

[Column I] Then once again at break of day did Gilgamesh conclude the silent night by being first to raise his hands and voice and he said: "Oh Enkidu, whose own mother's grace was every bit as sweet as any deer's and whose father raced just as swift and stood as strong as any horse that ever ran, accept all natural customs within the limitless confines of the wild where you were raised by those with tails, by those with hooves, by those with fur and whiskers. All the roads in and out of your great forest now lie silent, but for the sobbing done by your wild friends. The aged men and women of Uruk mourn today and raise their withered palms in prayer as we carry you by, toward Mount Kur. Grottos weep for you and valleys too and so do those great trees upon the shore where you loved to run. And also crying now are large bears, little dogs, baby cubs of lions and of tigers, and even the hyena now has ceased its laugh. Wild bull and the rapidest of deer ... All, all, all sigh, All, all, all cry for you. Ulay's lovely riverbanks are swollen on this day where you did walk as boys alone can do upon the banks of rivers that mother their young thoughts about life and death. Yes, that great god, the river Ulay today mourns for you as does the true Euphrates eternal and silent. Uruk's rugged men mourn for you who killed that sacrificial bull.
They all weep tears today and those in Eridu, who loved your fame, and say your name aloud, they too weep tears today—and all in days to come, even those who knew you not, all may weep tears someday for your sad lot. Your favorite aunt, your blessed servant, your first girlfriend, your inspiration, your companion, your darling dear and she you feared to be alone with, all women who ever sat and ate with you, all men you ever helped with food or drink, every one and all, lovers fast and strangers slow. Those you touched or who touched you and those who never knew just how you felt. All and every burst into tears today because they heard that you were [Column II] suddenly dead."

"I'll cry now, citizens of Uruk, and you will finally hear what no one else has ever had the nerve to say in sorrow. I was family and friend to Enkidu and I shall fill the woodlands where we stalked with loud, sad sobs today. I cry now, Enkidu, like some crazed woman. I howl. I screech for you because you were the ax upon my belt and the bow in my weak hand; the sword within my sheath, the shield that covered me in battle; my happiest robe, the finest clothes I ever wore, the ones that made me look best in the eyes of the world. That is what you were; that is what you'll always be. What devil came to take you off from me? Brother, you chased down the strongest mule, the swiftest horse on mountains high, and the quickest panthers in the flatlands. And they in turn will weep for you. Birds in the air cry aloud. Fish in the lake gather together near the shore. What else heeds this sorrow? The leaves of the trees and the paths you loved in the forest grow dark. Night itself murmurs and so too does the day. All the eyes of the city that once saw your kind face begin to weep. Why? Because you were my brother and you died. When we met and fought and loved, we went up on mountains high to where we dared to capture god's own strength in one great beast and then to cut its throat, thus humbling Humbaba, green god of woodlands steep. Now there is a sleep-like spell on you, and you are dark as well as deaf."

Enkidu can move no more. Enkidu can lift his head no more. "Now there is a sound throughout the land that can mean only one thing. I hear the voice of grief and I know that you have been taken somewhere by death. Weep. Let the roads we walked together flood themselves with tears. Let the beasts we hunted cry out for this: the lion and the leopard, the tiger and the panther. Let their strength be put into their tears. Let the cloud-like mountain where you killed the guardian of woodland treasures place grief upon its sky-blue top. Let the river which soothed our feet overflow its banks as tears do that swell and rush across my dusty cheeks. Let the clouds and stars race swiftly with you into death. Let the rain that makes us dream tell the story of your life tonight. Who mourns for you now, Brother? Everyone who knew you does. The harvesters and the farmers who used to bring you grain are standing alone in their fields. The servants who worked in your house today whispered your name in empty rooms. The lover who kissed every part of you touches her chilled lips with scented fingers. The women of the palace sit and stare at the queen of the city. She sobs and sobs and sobs. The men with whom you played so bold speak fondly of your name. Thus they deal with this misfortune. But what do I do? I only know that a cruel fate robbed me of my dearest friend too soon. What state of being holds you now? Are you lost forever? Do you hear my song? I placed my hand upon your quiet heart. One brother covered the set face of another with a bride-white veil. I flew above you then as if I were an eagle."

Then, like some great cat whose darling young have died, Gilgamesh slides back and forth fixed mindlessly on grief. He commands many men to erect statues of honor,
saying: "Make his chest a noble blue and on his honored body place a jewel as will allow all viewers then to see how great he was, how great he'll always be."

Next day, [Column III] Gilgamesh rose from a restless sleep. Then Gilgamesh continued with his bird-like words: "On a pedestal I will honor your corpse by setting you above all earthly princes who will celebrate you when people from all distant lands both rich and poor in spirit acclaim your memory. And when you are gone, never again to wear good clothes or care for food, I'll still remember how you dressed and how you ate.

When day did break again next morn, Gilgamesh stripped off the lion's cloak and rose to say this prayer: "Your [Column V] funeral is a precious gesture I made to hide my own guilt. Goodbye, dear brother."

Still grieving reverently, after he arose next day, Gilgamesh imagined the Annunaki who decide the fate of those who go to the underworld. After learning how to pause his heart, Gilgamesh created just the same image in the face of a river.

At break of day, on the sacred table' made of special wood, the grieving king placed a consecrated bowl of blue filled with butter and with honey and this he offered up in solemn prayer to Shamash, lord god.

~ Tablet 9 ~

[Column I] Then Gilgamesh wept some more for his dead friend. He wandered over barren hills, mumbling to his own spirit: "Will you too die as Enkidu did? Will grief become your food? Will we both fear the, lonely hills, so vacant? I now race from place to place, dissatisfied with wherever I am and turn my step toward Utnapishtim, godchild of Ubaratutu, who lives a pious life in fair Dilmun where the morning sun arises as it does in paradises lost and won. As if in sleep I come upon the mountain door at midnight where I face wild-eyed lions and I am afraid. Then to Sin, the god of mighty light, I raise my solemn chant to beg: 'Save me, please, my god.'"

Despite respite he could not sleep or dream that night. Instead he wandered through the woods so like a savage beast just then did he bring death again and again upon the lions' heads with an ax he drew from off his [Column II] belt. When he finally reached the base of Mt. Mashu, Gilgamesh began to climb the double cliff that guides the rising and setting of Shamash. Now these identical towers touch the distant, distant sky, and far below, their breasts descend toward Hell.

Those who guard the gate are poison scorpions that terrorize all, whose spells bring death. And then resplendent power thrives all across the town where I was born and rises farther still to mountaintops. At dawn and dark they shield Shamash. And when he sensed them there, Gilgamesh could not dare to look upon their threat; but held his glance away, suspended fear, and then approached in dread.

One among the guardians there said this to his wife: "The one who comes toward us is partly divine, my dear." And then the same one said to the god-like part of Gilgamesh: "Eternal heart, why make this long, long trip trying to come to us through travail? Speak now."

[Column III] Gilgamesh said: "I come by here to visit my elder, my Utnapishtim, the epitome of both life everlasting and death that is eternal."
The poison scorpion guardian said: "No mortal man has ever come to know what you seek here. Not one of all your kind has come so far, the distance you would fall if you fell all day and all night into the pit and through great darkness where there is no light without Shamash who raises and lowers the sun; to where I let no one go, to where I forbid anyone to enter. Heartache pain abounds with ice or fire all around."

The scorpion one, I do not know whether a man or a woman, said then: "Gilgamesh, I command you to proceed to highest peaks over hills toward heaven. Godspeed! With all permissions given here, I approve your venture."

So Gilgamesh set out then over that sacred, sacred path within the mountains of Mashu, near that incarnate ray of sunshine precious to Shamash. Oh dark, dark, dark, dark. Oh the night, unholy and blind, that wrapped him as soon as he stepped forth upon that path. Darkness. Beneath a moonless, starless sky, Gilgamesh was frozen and unseeing by time before midnight, by midnight's hollow eye he was unseen and frozen. At 1 a.m. he tripped and fell blinded and frozen. At 2 a.m. he staggered on blinded and frozen. At 3 a.m. he faltered not blinded and frozen. By 4 a.m. his second wind warmed him who still was blinded and frozen. And at your final dawn, son of man, you will see only a heap of broken images in an ascending light that gives you sight you may not want, for you will then behold all precious goods and gardens sweet as home to you, as exile, boughs of blue, oh unforgotten gem, as true as any other memory from any other previous life. Then along the path Gilgamesh traveled fast and came at length to shorelines fresh with dew. And there he met a maiden, one who knows the secrets of the sea.

~ Tablet 10 ~

[Column I] This gentle girl is called Siduri and she sits by the sea where she sways from side to side. She made the water pale; she crafted the first gold bowl while peeking at the sun through a slit across her face veil. King Gilgamesh approached the girl's small cottage by the sea dressed as a mountain man, a meat-eater, with an aching heart and the stare of one setting out upon some arduous, horrid trek.

The girl who gives her men lifesaving drinks said to herself, "Beware of the one coming now. He walks as if he'd kill." And so Siduri locked the door, put stones in place, and lay on the floor.

When Gilgamesh heard sounds inside he yelled at her. "Why do you hide? Shall I have to break through this door?"

The girl whose drinks refresh the soul then said these words to Gilgamesh: "Is there a simple reason, sir, why you're so sad or why your face is drawn and thin? Has chance worn out your youth or did some wicked sorrow consume you like food? You look like one setting out on some arduous, horrid trek, like one exposed to extremes of hot and cold, like one who searches everywhere for grace."

He responded then to her who gives her men lifesaving drinks: "Girl, there is no simple reason why I'm so sad or why my face is drawn and thin. Chance alone did not wear out my youth. Some wicked sorrow consumes me like food. But I do look like one setting out on some arduous, horrid trek, like one exposed to extreme hot or cold, like one who searches everywhere for the breath of life because my brother, my only true
friend, met death; he who raced wild horses there, who caught orange tigers here. This was Enkidu, my soul's good halt: who did all things while he conquered mountains and divine bulls that race across the sky like clouds; who gave Humbaba, the woodland god, reason to weep when he stole through the wooded path to slaughter lions."

[Column II] Gilgamesh continued: "I greatly loved my friend who was always there for me. I loved Enkidu who was always there for me. What awaits us all caught him first and I did thirst for one whole week to see him once again in splendor until his body decomposed. Then I wept for my future death and I fled home for mountaintops to breathe when my friend's death choked off my wind. On mountaintops I roamed content to breathe again when my friend's death choked off my wind. Walking. Walking. Walking over hills. Could I sit down to rest? Could I stop crying then when my best friend had died as I will someday do?"

Then Gilgamesh said to the fair girl whose saving drinks gave life to men: "Tell me, girl, how to get to Utnapishtim. Where do I look for signs? Show me directions. Help, please let me have safe passage over seas. Give me advice to guide me on my way."

She said to him in swift reply: "No man has ever gone that way and lived to say he crossed the sea. Shamash only ventures there, only Shamash would dare to stare into the sun. Pain joins the voyager soon, and soon the traveler grows weary where death surrounds the path on every [Column III] side with danger."

The girl whose drinks refresh the soul then said these words to Gilgamesh: "Remember always, mighty king, that gods decreed the fates of all many years ago. They alone are let to be eternal, while we frail humans die, as you yourself must someday do. What is best for us to do is now to sing and dance. Relish warm food and cool drinks. Cherish children to whom your love gives life. Bathe easily in sweet, refreshing waters. Play joyfully with your chosen wife. It is the will of the gods for you to smile on simple pleasure in the leisure time of your short days.

And what, after all, my fellow man, would you do when you got to that far side where Urshanabi dwells among the hills of Utnapishtim? He knows only the dead weight of what is dead and he is one who plays with deadly snakes. Would you put your lips near his? If he befriends you then, go on. But if he walks away, return to me."

With that in mind Gilgamesh took up his chore, unsheathed his sword, slipped toward the shore and there joined one who rows the seas of death. Gilgamesh sliced through the underbrush as an arrow goes through air while cracking the stones of the sacred columns. And Urshanabi barely saw the arrow's glint and too late heard the ax's thud. And so surprised was he that there was never any chance to hide or to deny the daring man at least a chance at some safe passage. Gilgamesh traveled on to where he found the ferryman of Utnapishtim.

This man, Urshanabi, said to Gilgamesh: "Your face seems tense; your eyes do not glance well and Hell itself is part of how you look. Grief hangs from your shoulders. You look like one who's been without a home, without a bed or roof for a long time, wandering the wilds on some random search."

Gilgamesh replied to the ferryman: "Yes sir, it's true my face is tense and that my eyes seem harsh. My looks are now so hellish, for I wear my grief as well as any other. I'm not this way as some refugee without a bed or roof for a long time, and I don't wander the wilds randomly. I grieve for Enkidu, my fair companion and true friend, who chased the strongest mule, the swiftest horse on mountain high, the quickest panther
of the flatland. Together we did all things, climbing sky-high peaks, stealing divine
70 cattle, humbling the gods, killing Humbaba and the precious lions, guardians of the
sky. All this I did with my best friend who now is dead. Mortality reached him first and
I am left to weep and wail for his shriveling corpse that scares me. I roam aloft and
alone now, by death enthralled, and think of nothing but my dear friend. I roam the
lonely path with death upon my mind and think of nothing but my dear friend. Over
many seas and across many mountains I roam. I can't stop pacing. I can't stop crying.
My friend has died and half my heart is torn from me. Won't I soon be like him, stone-
cold and dead, for all the days to come?"

Urshanabi replied as he had done before: "Your face seems tense; your eyes do not
80 glance well and Hell itself is part of how you look. Grief hangs from your shoulders.
You look like one who's been without a home, without a bed or roof for a long time,
wandering the wilds on some random search."

And Gilgamesh said to him then in swift reply: "Of course my face seems tense and my
eyes seem harsh. Of course I'm worn out weeping. Why should I not cry? I've come to
ask directions to Utnapishtim, who lives so free beyond death's deep, deep lake. Where
can he be? Tell me how to venture there where I may learn his secrets."

Finally, Urshanabi uttered these last words to Gilgamesh: "You yourself have hurt this
effort most, sir, by blasphemy and sacrilege, by breaking idols and by holding the
untouchably sacred stones. You broke stone images! So now, Gilgamesh, raise high
your ax." (Gilgamesh is instructed to cut trees to make oars)

Thus chastised, Gilgamesh raised high his ax, unsheathed his sword, did penance too
as he chopped down many trees; prepared them, and then brought them to Urshanabi.
After this, they cast off together, with push and pull they launched the skiff upon the
waving sea they leaped quickly, in three short days covering a span that any other
would traverse only after months of passage and soon they sailed on to Death's own
sea.

Still directing the [Column IV] king's new efforts, Urshanabi called: "Give me another
pull, Gilgamesh, upon the mighty oar and then another. Give ten times twenty and
then give twenty times ten pulls upon the mighty oars; then ten more twice; then
twice more ten and then confuse the number of the pulls you put upon the oar by
losing count aloud and starting over."

Halfway through all that pulling, Gilgamesh had worn the oars to bits and torn his shirt
from off his back to raise a helping sail upon the mast. Then Utnapishtim glared down
from stars and clouds and mused aloud, as if to coach the world: "How could any
human dare to break the idols or steer the craft that gods and goddesses use? This
stranger is not fit to tie the shoes of servants. I do see, but I am blind. I do know, but
cannot [Column V] understand how he behaves like the beasts of here and there."

Gilgamesh spoke many words to Utnapishtim and told of strife-in-life and battles rare.
He hailed his friend Enkidu, acclaimed their pride and grieved the death that saddened
his great heart.

Gilgamesh raised his prayer to the remote Utnapishtim: "Oh myth-filled god, I have
traveled many roads, crossed many rivers and mountains. I never rested. I never slept. Grief consumed me. My clothing was ragged by the time I met the girl who
would help me. I killed all manner of animal in order to eat and clothe myself. When I
was rejected, I stooped to squalor. Cursed I went, being unholy."
Utnapishtim replied: "Why cry over your fate and nature? Chance fathered you. Your conception was an accidental combination of the divine and mortal. I do not presume to know how to help the likes of you." [Column VI] Utnapishtim continued: "No man has ever seen Death. No one ever heard Death's voice but Death is real and Death is loud. How many times must a home be restored or a contract revised and approved?

How many times must two brothers agree not to dispute what is theirs? How many wars and how many floods must there be with plague and exile in their wake? Shamash is the one who can say. But there is no one else who can see what Shamash only can see within the sun.

Behold the cold, cold corpse from a distance, and then regard the body of one who sleeps. There seems no difference. How can we say which is good and which is bad? And it is also like that with other things as well. Somewhere above us, where the goddess Mammetum decides all things, Mother Chance sits with the Anunnaki and there she settles all decrees of fable and of fortune. There they issue lengths of lives; then they issue times of death. But the last, last matter is always veiled from human beings. The length of lives can only be guessed." Thus spoke Utnapishtim.

~ Tablet 11 ~

[Column I] To the most distant and removed of demigods, to Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh said: "When I regard you now, my god-like man, it's like seeing my own face on calm water where I dare to study myself. Like me, you are first of all a fighter who prefers to war-no-more. How could one like you, so human, all-too-human, ascend to be at one with other gods?"

Utnapishtim said to him in swift reply: "Only one as bold as you would dare expect such knowledge. But I shall tell you what no person has ever been told. High up the constant Euphrates there rests a place you call Shuruppak where gods and goddesses recline. Then came the flood, sent by gods' intent. Mama, Anu, and Enlil were at Shuruppak. So too was their coachman, Ninurta, and Ennugi, and one who watches over precious infants, the ever vigilant Ea.

And Ea refrained their chant to the highly-grown reeds upon the shore, giving this advice to me: 'Arise! Arise! Oh wall-like reeds. Arise and hear my words: Citizen of Shuruppak, child of Ubaratutu, abandon your home and build a boat. Reject the corpse-like stench of wealth. Choose to live and choose to love; choose to rise above and give back what you yourself were given. Be moderate as you flee for survival in a boat that has no place for riches. Take the seed of all you need aboard with you and carefully weigh anchor after securing a roof that will let in no water.'

Then I said back in reverent prayer: 'I understand, great Ea. I shall do just as you say to honor god, but for myself I’ll have to find a reason to give the people.'

Then Ea voiced a fair reply: 'Tell those who’ll need to know that Enlil hates you. Say: I must flee the city now and go by sea to where Enlil waits to take my life. I will descend to the bank of Rell to be with Ea, god, who will send riches to you like the min: all manner of birds ... and the rarest of rare fish: The land will fill with crops full grown at break of day. Ea will begin to shower gifts of life upon you [Column II] all.'"

Then Utnapishtim continued, saying words like these: "By week's end I engineered designs for an acre's worth of floor upon the ark we built so that its walls rose straight
toward heaven; with decks all round did I design its space; 120 cubits measured its
deck. With division of six and of seven I patterned its squares and stairs; left space for
portals too, secured its beams and stockpiled all that ever could be used. Pitch for the
hull I poured into the kiln and ordered three full volumes of oil to start with and two
times three more yet. For what is security? Each day I sacrificed the holy bulls and
chosen sheep for the people and pushed the laborers to great fatigue and thirst,
alayed alone by wine which they drank as if it were water running from barrels set up
for holding cheer in preparation for a New Year's party they expected. I set up an
ointment box and cleaned my fingers with its cream.

"After one week, the ark was done, though launching was more work than fun since
hull boards caught and snapped until the water burst most of its great ton. I supplied
the craft with all I owned of silver, gold, and seed. My clan brought on the food they'd
eat and all the things we thought we'd need. At last, it was my turn just then to
shepherd beasts and birds and babies wet and loud.

It was Shamash who ordained the time, saying: 'Prepare the way for your whole boat
and set to sail when the storm begins to threaten you.'

The Anunnaki too then cried for them. The gods themselves, finally suffering, sat up
and let their first tears flow down cheeks and over lips [Column III] pressed closed.
For the whole next week the sky screamed and storms wrecked the earth and finally
broke the war which groaned as one in labor's throes. Even Ishtar then bemoaned the

Then I see a dawn so still; all humans beaten to dirt and earth itself like some vast
roof. I peeked through the portal into a morning sun then turned, knelt and cried.
Tears flooded down my face. Then I searched high and low for the shoreline, finally
spotting an island near and dear. Our boat stuck fast beside Mt. Nimush. Mt. Nimush
held the hull that could not sway for one whole week.

I released the watch-bird, to soar in search of land. The bird came back within a day
exhausted, unrelieved from lack of rest. I then released a swallow, to soar in search of
hind, The bird came back within a day exhausted, unrelieved from lack of rest. I then
released a raven, to soar in search of land. The bird took flight above more shallow
seas, found food and found release and found no need to fly on back to me. These
birds I then released to earth's four corners and offered sacrifice, a small libation to
the heights of many mountains, from numbered chalices that I arranged. Under these I
spread the scents that gods favored and when the gods smelled the sweet perfume of
sacrifice, they gathered in flight [Column IV] all above, like apparitions.

From distant heights with heavenly sights, the female of all female gods descended
then, Aruru. 'Let me recall with smiles these days in days to come. Gods of my
shoreline, gods of my sky, come round this food that I prepared for you; but do not let
Enlil enjoy this too, since he's the one who drowned my relatives without telling the
gods what he set out to do.'

When Enlil saw the boat, he released his calm reason and let in the Igigi, monsters of
blood. 'What force dares defy my anger!? How dare a man be still alive!?'

Then with these words Ninurta said to Enlil: 'Can any of us besides Ea, maker of
words, create such things as speech?' Then with these words Ea himself said to Enlil:
'Sly god, sky darkener, and tough fighter, how dare you drown so many little people
without consulting me? Why not just kill the one who offended you, drown only the
sinner? Keep hold of his life cord; harness his destiny. Rather than killing rains, set
cats at people's throats. Rather than killing rains, set starvation on dry, parched throats. Rather than killing rains, set sickness on the minds and hearts of people. I was not the one who revealed our god-awful secrets. Blame Utnapishtim, Mr. Know-it-all, who sees everything, who knows everything. Reflect on these stories, my Gilgamesh.

Then Enlil swooped down around my boat; he gently raised me from the slime, placed my wife beside my kneeling form and blessed us both at once with hands upon our bowed heads. So was it ordained. So we were ordained."

Earlier than that time, Utnapishtim was not divine. Then with his wife he was deified and sent to rule the place where rivers start.

"As for you, Gilgamesh, which gods will be called on to direct your path and future life? Arise! Be alert! Stay up with stars for seven long and sleepless nights!"

But even as he tried to stay awake, fog-like sleep rolled over his eyes. Then Utnapishtim said these words: "Dear wife, behold the one who tries to pray while fog-like sleep rolls over his eyes."

She said to him who rarely talks: "Arouse him now and let him leave unharmed. Permit that [Column V] one to go back home at last."

Then Utnapishtim said these words: "An upset soul can upset many gods. Be kind with food and generous to him. But keep a count of how he sleeps and what he eats." She was kind with food and gentle with the man and she kept count of how he slept.

• Note: Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh to stay awake for seven nights, but poor Gilgamesh immediately falls asleep. What this translation doesn't do well is explain why Gilgamesh is given this test. The lesson Utnapishtim teaches Gilgamesh is that he can't stop death any more than he can stop his own body's need for sleep. Death is a natural part of what our bodies do.

"One, two, three, abate, he slept with death-the-fairy. Four, five, six, abate, he looked so cold and wary." Then he returned from death to breath!

So Gilgamesh said to the One-who-rarely-spoke: "Just as I slipped toward sleep, you sent my dream."

And to him in reply, Utnapishtim said these words: "One, two, three, alarie, you slept with death-the-fairy. Four, five, six, alarie, you looked so cold and wary. Then you arose from death to breath."

So Gilgamesh said to the One-who-rarely-speaks: "Help me, Utnapishtim. Where is home for one like me whose self was robbed of life? My own bed is where death sleeps and I crack her spine on every line where my foot falls."

Utnapishtim calls out to the sailor-god: "Urshanabi, dear, you will never land again easily or easily sail the seas to shores where you no more will find safe harbor. Sandy and disheveled hair does not become the one you nearly drowned. Shingles now spoil his hidden beauty. Better find a place to clean him up. Better race to pools of saltless water soon so that by noon he'll shine again for all of us to see. Tie up his curly hair with ribbon fair. Place on his shoulders broad the happy robe so that he may return to his native city easily in triumph. Allow him to wear the sacred elder's cloak and see that it is always kept as clean as it can be."

The sailor-god brought Gilgamesh to where they cleaned his wounds. By noon he shone again for all to see. He tied his curly hair with ribbon fair, and placed upon his shoulder broad the happy robe so he would return to Uruk easily in triumph with a
cloak unstained and unstainable. Urshanabi and Gilgamesh launched the boat over the [Column VI] breakers on the beach and started to depart across the seas.

To her distant husband, Utnapishtim's wife said: "This Gilgamesh has labored much to come here. Can you reward him for traveling back?"

At that very moment, Gilgamesh used paddles to return his craft along the shore. Then Utnapishtim called out to him: "Gilgamesh! You labored much to come here. How can I reward you for traveling back? May I share a special secret, one that the gods alone do know? There is a plant that hides somewhere among the rocks that thirsts and thrusts itself deep in the earth, with thistles that sting. That plant contains eternal life for you."

Immediately, Gilgamesh set out in search. Weighed down carefully, he dove beneath the cold, cold waters and saw the plant. Although it stung him when he grabbed its leaf, he held it fast as be then slipped off his weights and soared back to the surface.

Then Gilgamesh said this to Urshanabi, the sailor-god: "Here is the leaf that begins all life worth having. I am bound now for Uruk, town-so-full-of-shepherds. and there I'll dare to give this plant to aged men as food and they will call it life-giving. I too intend to eat it and to be made forever young."

After 10 miles they ate. After 15 miles they set up camp where Gilgamesh slipped into a pool; but in the pool, a cruel snake slithered by and stole the plant from Gilgamesh who saw the snake grow young again, as off it raced with the special, special plant.

Right there and then Gilgamesh began to weep and, between sobs, said to the sailor-god who held his hand: "Why do I bother working for nothing? Who even notices what I do? I don't value what I did and now only the snake has won eternal life. In minutes, swift currents will lose forever that special sign that god had left for me."

Then they set out again, this time upon the land. After 10 miles they stopped to eat. After 30 miles they set up camp. Next day they came to Uruk, full of shepherds. Then Gilgamesh said this to the boatman: "Rise up now, Urshanabi, and examine Uruk's wall. Study the base, the brick, the old design. Is it permanent as can be? Does it look like wisdom designed it?"

Note: the epic ends quite suddenly upon their return to Uruk. Gilgamesh asks Urshanabi to examine the walls of Uruk.