one

It is an old story

But one that can still be told

About a man who loved

And lost a friend to death

And learned he lacked the power

To bring him back to life.

It is the story of Gilgamesh

And his friend Enkidu.

two

Gilgamesh was king of Uruk

A city set between the Tigris

And Euprhates rivers

In ancient Babylonia

Enkidu was born on the Steppe

Where he grew up among the animals.

Gilgamesh was called a god and man

Enkidu was an animal and man.

It is the story

Of their becoming human together.

three

As king, Gilgamesh was a tyrant to his people.

Sometimes he pushed his people half to death

With work rebuilding Uruk's walls,

And then without an explanation let

The walls go unattended and decay,

And left his people dreaming of the past

And longing for a change.

They had grown tired of his contradictions

And his callous ways.

four

Enkidu was ignorant of oldness

He ran with the animals,

Drank at their springs,

Not knowing fear or wisdom

He freed them from the traps

The hunters set.

five

A hunter's son one day

Saw Enkidu opening a trap:

The creature was all covered with hair

And yet his hands had the dexterity of men's;

He ran beside the freed gazelle

Like a brother

And they drank together at a pool

Like two friends

Sharing some common journey.

six

The hunter listened to his son's

Description of Enkidu

And was both angry and afraid.

He told his son to go to Uruk

And to tell what he had seen

To Gilgamesh and to ask him

to send a woman

who would befriend Enkidu

And make the animals turn away from him.

seven

When Enkidu rose again

He felt a strange exhaustion,

As if life had left his body.

His friends

Had left him to a vast aloneness

He had never felt before. The lions returned

To the mountains, the water buffalo

To the rivers, the birds to the sky.

eight

Gilgamesh woke anxiously from a dream

And said to Ninsun: I saw a star

Fall from the sky, and the people

Of Uruk sood around and admired it,

And I was jealous and tried to carry it away

But I was too weak and I failed.

What does it mean? I have not dreamed

Like this before.

nine

That night he had a vision of an axe

What does this mean, he said on waking;

The people stood around the axe

When I tried to lift it, and I failed.

I feel such tiredness. I cannot explain.

ten

Ninsun said: The ax is a man

Who is your friend and equal.

He will come. A graceful man

Who will lift you out of tiredness.

O Ninsun, I want your words to be true.

I am alone and I have longed

For some companionship.

eleven

One day she awoke and said to Enkidu:

Why do you still want to fun with the animals?

You are a human being now, not like them.

You are like a god, like Gilgamesh.

I will lead you to Uruk

Where you belong, to the Temple of Anu.

Where Gilgamesh rules over his people

And is strong, and you will recognize

Yourself in him.

twelve

The marketplace filled with people

When they heard that he was coming

People said: He looks like Gilgamesh

But he is shorter and also stronger

He has the power of the Steppe,

The milk of the animals he sucked.

They hailed him as the equal of their king.

thirteen

Exhausted. He turned to Enkidu who leaned

Against his shoulder and looked into his eyes

And saw himself in the other, just as Enkidu saw

Himself in Gilgamesh.

In the silence of the people they began to laugh

And clutched each other in their breathless exaltation.

fourteen

Gilgamesh spoke then:

We go to kill the Evil One,

Humbaba. We must prove

Ourselves more powerful than he.

Enkidu was afraid of the forest of Humbaba

And urged him not to go.

fifteen

Humbaba never sleeps.

I have learned that from his mouth springs fire

That scorches the earth and in a moment

There is nothing left alive,

No tree, no insect, as in a dream

That makes one wake and cry.

One wakes and everything has vanished.

I have learned Humbaba is the face of death.

sixteen

Why are you worried about death?

Only the gods are immortal anyway,

Sighed Gilgamesh.

What men do is nothing, so fear is never

Justified. What happened to your power

That once could challenge and equal mine?

seventeen

The old men leaned a little forward

Remembering old wars. A flush burned on

Their cheeks. It seemed a little dangerous

And yet they saw their king

Was seized with passion for this fight.

You see, my friend, laughed Gilgamesh,

The wise of Uruk have outnumbered you.

eighteen

After three days they reached the edge

Of the forest where Humbaba’s watchman stood.

Suddenly it was Gilgamesh who was afraid,

Enkidu who reminded him to be fearless,

The watchman sounded his warning to Humbaba.

The two friends moved slowly toward the forest gate.

nineteen

Gilgamesh awoke but could not hear

His friend in agony, he was still captive to his dream

Which he would tell aloud to exorcise:

I saw us standing in a mountain gorge,

A rock slide fell on us, we seemed no more

Than insects under it. And then

A solitary graceful man appeared

And pulled me out from under the mountain

He gave me water and I felt released.

twenty

At dawn, Gilgamesh raised his axe

And struck at the great cedar.

When Humbaba heard the sound of falling trees,

He hurried down the path that they had seen

But only he had traveled. Gilgamesh felt weak

At the sound of Humbaba's footsteps and called to Shamash

Saying, Why am I abandoned now?

Suddenly the winds sprang up.

twenty one

Enkidu slid along the ground

Like a ram making its final lunge

On wounded knees. Humbaba fell and seemed

To crack the ground itself in two, and Gilgamesh,

As if this fall had snapped him from his daze,

Returned to life

And stood over Humbaba with his ax

Raised high above his head watching the monster plead

In strangled sobs and desperate appeals.

twenty two

Anu acceded to Ishtar's wish.

The Bull of Heaven descended

To the earth and killed at once

Three hundred men, and then attacked

King Gilgamesh. Enkidu, to protect his friend,

Found strength and plunged his sword behind its horns.

twenty three

The goddess stood on Uruk’s walls and cried aloud:

Grief to those who have insulted me

And killed the Bull of Heaven!

When Enkidu heard Ishtar's curse

He tore the right thigh from the bull's flesh

And hurled it in her face.

twenty four

I can’t imagine being left alone

I’m less a man without my friend

Gilgamesh did not let himself believe

The gods had chosen one of the them to die.

The fever reached its height

And like a madman talking to a wall

In an asylum Enkidu cursed the gate

As if it were the person he could blame.

twenty five

He looked at Gilgamesh, and said:

You will be left alone, unable to understand

In a world where nothing lives anymore

As you thought it did.

Nothing like yourself, everything like dead

Clay before the river makes the plants

Burst out along its beds, dead and.

He became bitter in his tone again:

twenty six

Gilgamesh wept bitterly for his friend

He felt himself now singled out for loss

Apart from everyone else. The word Enkidu

Streamed through every thought

Like a hungry animal through empty lairs

In search of food. The only nourishment

It knew was grief, endless in its hidden source

And never ending hunger.

twenty seven

The Scorpion man then recognized

In Gilgamesh the flesh of gods and told his wife:

This one is two-thirds god, one third man

And can survive our view, then spoke to him:

Why have you come this route to us?

twenty eight

I have come to see my father,

Utanapishtim,

Who was allowed to go beyond.

I want to ask him about life and death,

To end my loss. My friend has died.

I want to bring him back to life.

twenty nine

The scorpion interrupted him and laughed,

Being impatient with such tales and fearful of

sentiment:

No one in able to explain, no one has gone

Beyond these mountains. There is only death.

There is no light beyond, just darkness

And cold and at daybreak a burning heat.

You will learn nothing that we do not know.

You will only come to grief.

thirty

For days he traveled in this blindness

Without a light to guide him,

Going on with only

the companionship of grief.

Until before him

When it seemed there was no end

To loneliness

A valley came in view

Sprinkled with precious stones

And fruit filled vines.

thirty one

Siduri sighed,

You mist find his boatman Urshanabi;

He has stone images that will show the way.

If it can be arranged for you, who are

so blind with love of self and with rage,

To reach the other side,

It will be through his help, his alone.

thirty two

He felt his head split with the pain

Of making himself heard

By her, by all the world.

It was as if his mind exploded

Into little pieces. He struck at everything

In sight. He hurried with his axe

Drawn from his belt down to the shore.

thirty three

Now Gilgamesh was alone. The boatman’s voice

Could still be heard, but faintly from the shore.

Don’t let the waters touch your hand

Take a second pole, a third, a fourth

When each is rotted by the sea of death.

When he had used each pole but one

He pulled his clothes off his body

And with this last remaining pole

He made a mast, his clothes as sail,

And drifted on the sea of death.

thirty four

Utanapishtim was the only one whom he had met

On his journey who did not add to

His fatigue.

My friend has died so many times in me,

And yet he still seems so alive,

Like a younger brother,

Then suddenly like soft tissue,

A dried leaf.

thirty five

I was afraid.

Is there something more than death?

Some other end to friendship?

I am so tired, so tired. I have

Killed bear, hyena, stag, ibex for food

And clothes. I barely crossed the sea of death.

thirty six

I think love's kiss kills our heart of flesh.

It is the only way to eternal life,

Which should be unbearable if lived

Among the dying flowers

And the shrieking farewells

Of the overstretched arms of our spoiled hopes.

thirty seven

I am downcast because of what I’ve seen,

Not what I still have hope to yearn for.

Lost youths restored to life, Lost children to their crying mothers,

Lost wives, lost friends, lost hopes, lost homes,

I want to bring these back to them.

But now there is you.

We must find something for you.

How will you find eternal life

to bring back your friend?

thirty eight

I know your pain too well to lie,

Said Utanapishtim.

I will tell you a secret I have never told.

Something to take back with you and guard.

There is a plant in the river. Its thorns

Will prick your hands as a rose thorn pricks

But it will give you new life.

thirty nine

Gilgamesh hurried off to find the plant.

He tied stones to his feet and descended

Into the river. When he saw the plant

Of rich rose color and ambrosial

Shimmering in the water like a prism

Of the sunlight, he seized it, and it cut

Into his palms. He saw his blood flow in the water.

forty

A serpent had smelled its sweet fragrance and saw

Its chance to come from the water, and devoured

The plant, shedding its skin as slough.

When Gilgamesh rose from the pool,

His naked body glistening and refreshed,

The plant was gone; the discarded skin

Of a serpent was all he saw. He sat

Down on the ground, and wept.

forty one

He entered the city and asked a blind man

If had ever heard the name Enkidu

And the old man shrugged and shook his head,

Then turned away,

As if to say it is impossible

to keep the names of friends

Whom we have lost.

Gilgamesh said nothing more

To force his sorrow on another.

forty two

He looked at the walls,

Awed at the heights

His people had achieved

And for a moment–just a moment–

All that lay behind him

Passed from view.

"Gilgamesh, whither rovest thou?

The Life thou pursuest thou shalt not find.

When the gods created mankind,

Death for mankind they set aside,

Life in their own hands retaining.

Thou, Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly,

Make thou merry by day and by night.

Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing,

Day and night dance thou and play!

Let thy garments be sparkling fresh,

Thy head be washed; bathe thou in water.

Pay heed to the little one that holds on to thy hand,

Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!

For this is the task of mankind!"

X, iii Old Babylonian version (tr. E.A. Speiser)