

# *Gilgamesh*

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# Gilgamesh

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*To the Memory of*  
*Elizabeth and Michael Cavanagh*  
*Beloved Grandparents*

# GILGAMESH

*Austen Layard and George Smith in Nineveh.*

*4,000 years after Gilgamesh had mourned for Enkidu  
Two men knelt in the Babylonian dust  
Tracing cuneiform inscriptions  
And because of the wedged lines  
Their fingers found that afternoon  
Fellows in high hats in Piccadilly  
Came to believe  
God had not fashioned them from clay  
On which had been inscribed the story of their life.*

## ***Dramatis Personae***

*Gilgamesh: The great king of Uruk. Although born of a goddess, he was only two-thirds divine, and was therefore doomed to die. His humanity binds him to Enkidu, and prompts him to go in search of immortality. It is this which makes the original poem what Rilke called 'the first and greatest epic of the fear of death'.*

*Enkidu: He is the wild man whom the animals adore, until he begins to consort with humanity; then they turn away from him. The gods made him Gilgamesh's equal.*

*Shamhat: One of the temple prostitutes from Uruk, whose mission is to tempt Enkidu from his bond with the animals, so that he will side with humans.*

*Ishtar: Uruk's especial goddess. She commands the realms of love and war. Her favours can be as lethal as her displeasure.*

*Huwawa: The dreadful guardian of the Cedar Forest. His task is to protect timber for a god; then as now logging was a matter of life and death.*

*Siduri: A goddess of some considerable wisdom, who ran an alehouse on the far side of creation.*

*Utnapishtim: Noah's imaginative progenitor. He survived the universal inundation which drowned everyone else. He was reputed to hold the secret of immortality. Gilgamesh journeys to the other side of the world to find out if he does.*



Enkidu, the green man.  
Enkidu, dressed in the skin of the forest.  
He spoke the language of the animals;  
Released them from their traps with his nimble fingers.  
The creatures loved him.  
The hunters didn't.  
What shall we do? they said.  
Our livelihood. This wild man  
Is leaving our tables empty.

Hunters took their petition to Uruk  
Where Gilgamesh, mightiest of kings, reigned supreme.  
He raised a weary finger of command  
And a new trap was set.  
A hunter returned with a temple prostitute  
Whose power kept Enkidu from fields,  
Forests, rivers.  
The dazzle of her breasts  
Transmuted his power into juices  
Flowing out of him and into her.

When they were done he went back to the animals  
His oldest companions  
But the gazelle turned and walked away.  
Deer shook their heads, trembling, and departed.  
Toad and rat vanished into hole and pond before him.  
Even the wind, catching that scent and its ritual trade  
Veered away quickly.  
No animal would speak to him now:  
He had passed beyond their language.  
Seven days and seven nights with Shamhat  
Meant that a new world awaited him.

He laid his bewilderment in her lap, and she told him:  
You are as beautiful as the gods are now.  
So go to Uruk where Gilgamesh, mightiest of kings,  
Is waiting.

That night the king dreamed that a meteorite  
Fell from the sky and he, who could lift anything,  
Couldn't lift it.

Dreams were not dross in those days  
And the king's mother told him:  
The meteorite is a companion falling towards you.  
A companion who will never leave you.

The goddess Aruru had made Enkidu  
The other half of himself  
Gilgamesh the king did not even know  
Was missing—  
Grass to his gold; snake to his torque;  
River to his jewelled streams.  
But Shamhat cut up her robe  
Divided it between herself and Enkidu.  
He whom the brothers and sisters of forest and grassland  
Now shunned, was clothed finally, along with his harlot.  
And Shamhat razored  
The hair from his body.  
Now Enkidu stepped from the trees to the city:  
He was a man.  
And when beer and cooked meats  
Were placed before him  
He stared at them as the animals had stared at him  
Dressed in his new language.  
The beer found a song inside him  
Never sung before.

Now Gilgamesh slept with every beautiful bride  
 The night before her husband could take her.  
 He owned them all and took his possession—his birthright . . .  
 Her breasts, her thighs, the soft warm root  
 Leading down through the underworld, back up to heaven—  
 All these were the king's before the husband's.

Two-thirds divine, the other part human.  
 No one denied him.

But when Enkidu arrived in Uruk  
 On the day of the wedding, the people cried out:  
 Here is one mighty as the king  
 His shoulders, his back, the width of his arm  
 And a face from which a sun shines out.

Now the people of Uruk had wondered for some time  
 If Gilgamesh's world might be dying  
 Whatever his power.  
 He worked them half to death  
 Building the city's famous walls  
 Then let the walls decay for years  
 As though he'd forgotten the murderous labour  
 Involved in putting them up in the first place.  
 The whisky-breath, the silences  
 Colder than that ivory  
 Elephant he'd had them construct  
 Underwater, one grey November  
 When the gods weren't speaking.  
 Except for the nights when he slipped  
 Between sheets with the virgins  
 Gilgamesh spent most of his evenings

Speaking to gods. Mostly they didn't reply  
Acknowledging the force of his own godly thoughts.

One night he saw  
A camel become the sun  
And could not explain it.  
Even his favourite astronomer  
Could not explain it  
And soon beguiled himself  
Instead with mathematics  
Predicting the floods of the Tigris, Euphrates,  
The Arno (1966)  
The Severn and Avon in subsequent years:  
The rise and decline of great dynasties.

The lion goes back to the mountain.  
Enough of the world for now.  
Enough. Gilgamesh felt this way all too often  
As he stared at the stars above Sumer  
Firing off billions of photons a second  
But saying, in the process, very little.

So Gilgamesh had paid little enough attention  
When this wild man's presence in the valleys  
Was announced. Mere gossip for cuneiform columns.  
He'd heard it all before:  
Bigfoot in the forest of believers,  
Loch Ness Monsters, divinities in flying saucers  
Delivering the spores of life.  
He yawned. Horoscopes bored him.  
Almanacs and flaring comets bored him.  
Now and then in the grey gauze of a December afternoon

He'd see an oakman in the palace shadows  
One who could kill a warrior with a single rhyme.  
Would he drop a commendation in my grave  
Thought Gilgamesh, assuming that I can't escape it?

As a king you had to listen  
Over and over again to witless words from *hoi polloi*.  
How a goddess died in a concrete tunnel  
While the lights of the world flashed upon her  
A nation's hopes unresurrected in her womb.  
The people mourned for a week on the vernal plain  
Hardly a mile from the statue of Eros  
And the steel shelves of the London Library.

Uruk had a library, of course,  
The removal of any volume from which  
Meant death. Unless you were Gilgamesh—  
He had recently borrowed  
A handsome biography  
Of himself. In which  
Enkidu as yet did not even  
Merit a mention. As yet.

And now here he was  
The half of himself Gilgamesh  
Did not know was missing.  
Here he was.

Enkidu stood before the bedchamber  
Where the lady awaited the king  
Who would enter her first, so her husband might follow.  
And they fought.

Normal men would have died ten times over  
From a single one of these blows.  
No one died. Gilgamesh won.  
Out in the street the people  
Heard an earthquake thundering beneath them.

‘Ninsun birthed you and said there could not be  
Another one like you.’

Thus Enkidu, as they embraced.  
That night Gilgamesh forgot to take  
The other man’s bride.

Enkidu speaks:

Huwawa is the guardian of the Cedar Forest.  
When he breathes, a dragon's breath flares out  
Scorching an acre with each methylated mouthful.  
When he weeps  
A county the size of Gloucestershire drowns.  
When he frowns, men drop down dead in the next village.  
Enter the Cedar Forest and you're finished.

And Gilgamesh:

Ever tried going to heaven, my friend?  
Only gods arrive there.  
If we are to exist, let's risk everything.  
One of these days I'm off to the Cedar Forest  
To fight Huwawa.  
So follow and remember—  
Our sons will one day sing songs about it.