GILGAMESH

Stuart Kendall

"As *Gilgamesh* enters the domain of the classical — as it has for several decades now — each new generation looks for a way to bring it from its ur-world into the living present. Toward this end, Stuart Kendall's is an exemplary version for our time, a reading that allows the mind to see what had been too long lost to us and what we so much need to make us fully human. This is the place to go for further sustenance."

— Jerome Rothenberg

"This new translation of the Gilgamesh tale ventures outside the straitjackets that have often constrained the text, understanding its complicated transmission-history in the Sumerian and East Semitic languages of the ancient New East and the way it evades modern ideas of 'epic' and 'fiction' often foisted upon it. In sharp, imagistic prose, Stuart Kendall shows how Gilgamesh's story is not just an instructive yarn but a concerted act of ontological investigation. A needed provisioning of a much-discussed but little understood work."

— Nicholas Birns, NYU

"In his new translation of the *Gilgamesh* tablets… Stuart Kendall works time in a physical way — takes the ancient tablets and breaks them into pages, pages that shatter the ongoing narrative into (instead) confrontative moments. So that looking at a given page of text (in the strikingly handsome Contra Mundum edition) has the feel of picking up a fragment of the cuneiform tablet, miraculously lucid, magically set in order so the reader can follow the story. The solemn priestly tablets of the "original" (don't ask) are transformed into communiqués from the field of action: the page. The page is the field. The page is space-time itself, your moment. The page (since Gutenberg) has been the only time there is. … By chopping sentences into lines, staggering them down the page, not letting the sentence rest, Kendall keeps us going, each page a reward & a challenge to go on. It's wonderfully unsettling."

— Robert Kelly

Also by Stuart Kendall

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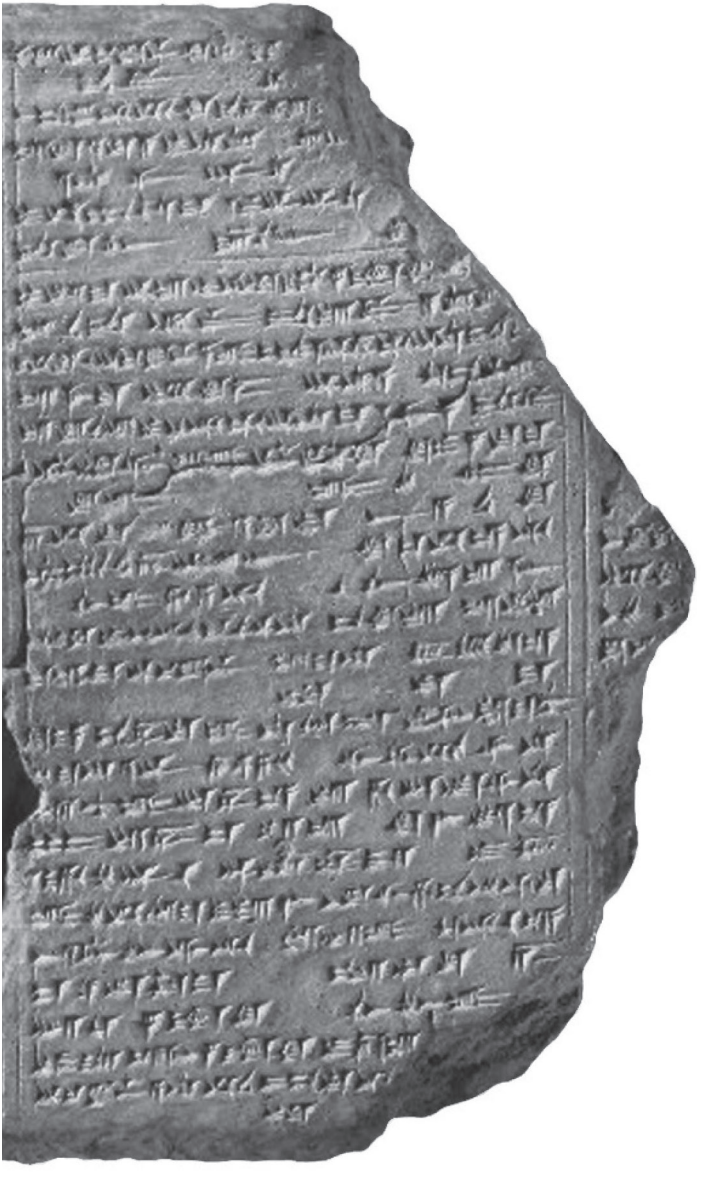

GILGAMESH

Translated with an Introduction by

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Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

First Contra Mundum Press edition, 2012; second edition 2020.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Gilgamesh. English.

Gilgamesh / translated from the Sîn-lēqi-unninni version.

— 2nd Contra Mundum Press Edition

324 pp., 4.37×7 in.

ISBN 9780983697206

I. Kendall, Stuart.
II. Sîn-lēqi-unninni. Gilgamesh. English.
III. Title.

2011944347

This version of *Gilgamesh*
is for Lucie.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Sanctioned Babel

The text of pleasure is sanctioned Babel.
Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* [1]

i.

The Fertile Crescent extends from the Persian Gulf, up through Mesopotamia, across Anatolia, and down the Mediterranean coast to the Nile Delta. It has rightly been called the cradle of civilization.

Around 9,000 BCE, after the retreat of the glaciers at the end of the last ice age, nomadic peoples began to settle there. Supported by the sedimentary fertility of the land, the bed of a vast ancient river, they built permanent structures at places like Göbekli Tepe and Nevali Çori for religious purposes. The availability of adaptable plants and animals facilitated the invention of agriculture, and agriculture in turn required the invention of irrigation systems and, ultimately, a new form of administrative structure — that of the city — to organize construction & the equitable distribution of resources.

The Fertile Crescent was also a crossroads, connecting Africa, Europe, and — through the Khyber Pass and India — Asia. It was a passage point, of rivers and plains, for ancient mass migrations, a trade route for people and their religious and cultural practices. The dynamism of the civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, of the civilizations built along the banks of the Nile and between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, was thus fueled internally by the fertility of the soil and externally by a series of mass migrations.

The Fertile Crescent itself — its geographical location and features, the historic fertility of its soils and the specific plants & animals that thrived there — was both a catalyst and a crucible for the early history of civilization. It focused and contained the energies of

the peoples who settled there as well as of those who simply passed through. One of the earliest civilizations in the region was that of the Sumerians. In his book *History Begins At Sumer*, Samuel Noah Kramer details twenty-seven "firsts" in fields ranging from agriculture and urbanism to literature, philosophy, and religion that can be traced to ancient Sumer.[2] Kramer's points are well taken but the approach that he takes and that many other interpreters of ancient and modern history share with him can be misleading. While it is certainly true that the civilizations of the Fertile Crescent originated many ideas and devices that we still recognize as essential to the way that we live today, such comparisons often obscure the striking differences that separate those civilizations from our own. The artifacts of culture, including those of the history of thought, of religion, philosophy, art and literature, are time bound and place specific. They are the genius of a place. As much as we may be inclined to see continuities among cultures, across time and geographical space, we must also be attentive to discontinuities, to the profound effects of change, even when those changes are masked by adaptation or appropriation. One culture's religious icon often becomes another's aesthetic object. This is of course a weakness of our habits of perception, our inability or reluctance to inhabit other modes of thought. And yet, on the other hand, it must be said, we are also often drawn to and even into this other space. Our culture and our consciousness is nothing if not both inquisitive and, ultimately, acquisitive, assimilative. What does not change, Charles Olson observed, echoing Heraclitus, is the will to change. But how can we learn to resist the will to remake the other in our own image?

This introduction will offer a brief sketch of the history of *Gilgamesh* in the ancient world, describing the points and places in time when the text was written and rewritten over three millennia. But *Gilgamesh* is a modern text as well, of compelling interest to modern

interpreters since its rediscovery in the 19th century, and we will tell that story as well. Both of these tales — the ancient and the modern — are concerned with the ways that cultural artifacts carry meaning within specific contexts. But there are limits to interpretation and a text like *Gilgamesh* offers us an opportunity to encounter those limits. The final sections of the introduction will look at a few major themes in *Gilgamesh* that might challenge our modern modes of thought.

ii.

Bilgames, the Sumerian form of the name Gilgamesh, appears on a list of kings from the second millennium BCE: "The god Lugalbanda, a shepherd, reigned for 1,200 years; the god Dumuzi, a fisherman, whose city was Ku'ara, reigned for 100 years; the god Bilgames, whose father was a phantom, lord of the city of Kulaba, reigned for 126 years."[3] The Sumerians attributed Bilgames with having constructed 10 kilometers of walls, with 900 towers, around ancient Uruk (Biblical Erech, the modern Iraqi city of Warka). The archeological evidence and the King List roughly agree, placing an historical Gilgamesh in Uruk around 2,750 BCE. But, as is abundantly clear from the specific details provided by the King List, whether a real historical figure or not, the life and exploits of Gilgamesh had become the stuff of legend, even myth, within a few centuries of his death. Later kings compared themselves to him.

Other traditions would identify Lugalbanda — himself also already a legendary figure, the subject of epic tales as early as 2,500 BCE — as Gilgamesh's father. Some of these tales bear no relationship to Gilgamesh at all, others are related to him but don't mention him, as in a tale about the relationship between Lugalbanda and Ninsun, the mother of Gilgamesh. Still others would later be retold as tales of Gilgamesh himself. Stories that may once have concerned other kings or heroes also came to concern Gilgamesh as his stories

were told and retold. Stories about Inanna, the Sumerian Ishtar, and Atrahasis, known as Utanapishtim in *Gilgamesh* and Noah in Hebrew scripture, would later be gathered around or incorporated into the stories of Gilgamesh, who, at this point, also became associated with religious practices as a god of judgment in the underworld, as in a poem about the death of Urnammu, the first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, composed around 2,100 BCE. Still other works associate Gilgamesh with the Sumerian shepherd Dumuzi, the spouse of Inanna, who dies and is reborn with the year in the tradition of Shiva, Dionysus, & Osiris. Folk tales, courtly tales, and cultic tales all circulated around the figure of Gilgamesh.

Oral tales about Gilgamesh can be traced back to the third millennium in Sumer. Some of those tales came to be written down around the end of that millennium. Copies of some of these tales survive from as early as 2,094 BCE, and as late as 1,712 BCE, thus from the Third Dynasty of Ur to the time of Hammurabi and Samsu-iluna in Babylon. Real or fictional, or rather perhaps real *and* fictional, Gilgamesh came to figure in many stories, and not only in stories. *Gilgamesh* is an ancient gathering of still more ancient narratives, lyrics, epigrams, parables, and tales.

Writing itself had been invented in Sumer around 3,000 BCE for commercial purposes. Later given the Latin name *Cuneiform* — meaning wedge-shaped — this early form of pictographic writing began simply with images of things impressed into wet clay that was then baked to harden the forms, but it evolved relatively quickly beyond the representation of things to represent sounds, the syllables that make up words. As writing evolved, it surpassed its commercial limits and began to be adapted to incorporate stories, legends, popular and courtly songs, short lyrics and extended narratives, instructional homilies, devotional prayers, hymns, laments, and prophecies, as well as incantations recited in religious and other ceremonial rituals.

These distinct types of writing, each with its own social register, station, and use, lose something of their distinction and diversity if we refer to them simply as literature. Imagine collecting all of the types of writing available in your home — from Bibles to box tops, magazines to menus — and calling them all literature, a word which primarily refers in our culture to novels, plays, and poetry.

Literature, in the 21st century, is something of a neutered word. Works the word describes may be emotionally satisfying, intellectually stimulating, or aesthetically diverting but they are also largely regarded, both popularly and professionally, as inconsequential. Advocates *for* the study of literature in contemporary schools and universities often suggest that this very inconsequentiality is essential to the value of art and literature as spheres of concern unrelated to commerce. This is not the place to argue against this reductive and limited view of literature. It is however the place to suggest that applying this modern view to ancient writing, like *Gilgamesh*, distorts the text in at least two ways. First, it affiliates *Gilgamesh* with fiction even though the ancient text had at least a token relation, for ancient writers, scribes, and listeners, to the realm of fact. Second, by affiliating *Gilgamesh* with inconsequential writing, it denies the religious, philosophical, and pedagogical purposes of the text. Myth, it is often said, is someone else's religion. Philosophy too is a culturally specific form, a distinctly Western form of speculative inquiry. Even pedagogy is culture bound, with unique forms of instructional or didactic writing considered as being effective and appropriate from place to place, period to period. To deny the religious, philosophical or speculative, and pedagogical purposes of the text, or to reduce them to mere themes, as is customary in contemporary literary reading and interpretation, is to profoundly distort the text. I am not suggesting that *Gilgamesh* contains examples of every kind of writing practiced in the ancient world;

it surely does not. But I am suggesting that the unique cultural location of the text as well as the historical facts of its composition should give us pause before we apply contemporary categories of classification to it (literature, philosophy, religion?) or to use contemporary strategies and frameworks of interpretation to begin to understand it.

Moreover, the oldest portions of *Gilgamesh* undoubtedly don't concern the historical Gilgamesh at all, nor even the historical situation of the scribes who transcribed and copied the oral legends associated with him. Rather, the deepest strata of the text reflect the religious culture of a still more ancient world, stretching back in time beyond the Bronze Age, beyond the Neolithic origins of agricultural societies and urbanism, into the Paleolithic roots of imagination and culture. This is a religious culture rooted in shamanism, meditations on the relationship between human beings and animals, and the mastery of altered states of consciousness. The point here is to not limit our approach to *Gilgamesh* through overgeneralization — shamanism is no more monolithic than *Gilgamesh* itself — but rather to suggest pathways along which we might open it.

Five separate Sumerian Gilgamesh stories have survived in copies — or rather thousands of clay fragments of copies — made in Babylonian scribal schools in the late 18th century BCE. Already at that time these texts were the form and focus of pedagogy, bearers of language, if not also information. There may have been more stories, but these five at least were copied and recopied in schools.

As noted, Gilgamesh is known as Bilgames in the Sumerian texts. These stories overlap with the later Gilgamesh compositions in key ways, while also remaining distinct from them. In these stories, Bilgames confronts the guardian of the forest, called Huwawa rather than Humbaba, and he confronts the Sky-Bull,

as he does in the later versions. But they are also substantially different. One of the stories has no clear relationship to the later stories, and all of them differ in matters of detail and perspective. In the confrontation with Huwawa, for example, Bilgames and Enkidu do not confront Huwawa alone: they are accompanied by 50 young men from Uruk. Enkidu is described as Bilgames's servant rather than his friend and the expedition travels east for the necessary wood, rather than west, as it is in the later version. In these stories too, Bilgames undergoes experiences that are later attributed to Enkidu.

All of these changes reflect creative license with the pre-existing material. These stories were obviously in constant transformation even though they were also relatively consistent. Some of the changes heighten the dramatic impact of the later versions, as when the heroes work alone rather than with 50 young men. Other changes reflect environmental issues: the search for cedar, for example, shifted to Mount Lebanon, in the West, once the mountains to the East had been deforested.

Around 1,700 BCE these Sumerian works were translated and adapted into the Akkadian language. The Sumerian empire, based in southern Mesopotamia, had been in decline for centuries, but its works and language were maintained by the scribes and rulers of the region, based in the cities of Akkade and later Babylon. At this point however even the Sumerian language disappeared. Unlike the Sumerians, whose origins remain unknown and whose language is unlike any other, the Akkadians were a Semitic people, their language related to the roots of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. Akkadian not only replaced Sumerian as the language of scribes in Mesopotamia, it became the *lingua franca* of the Fertile Crescent, written for political purposes even by the Pharoahs for the next several hundred years.

Eleven tablets of these Old Babylonian versions of *Gilgamesh* have survived. The two most prominent are held in collections at the University of Pennsylvania and at Yale. Within a few hundred years, as the Hittites overwhelmed Babylon, copies of a Middle Babylonian *Gilgamesh* spread to Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, and throughout Mesopotamia. Fragments of 18 tablets of this version have survived. In the second half of the second millennium, too, the Akkadian *Gilgamesh* came to be translated into Hurrian and Hittite versions, reflecting another stage in the dissemination of the text.

Around 1,300 BCE, a Babylonian exorcist and scribe in the Royal court named Sîn-lēqi-unninni — whose name means "Moon, accept my prayer!" — composed what we now refer to as the Standard Version of *Gilgamesh*. The enduring popularity of this version of the text made it the Standard Version in the ancient world, copied and disseminated throughout the Fertile Crescent for the next 1,100 years. This is the version that is presented in this book.

Sîn-lēqi-unninni composed the work on 12 cuneiform tablets of six columns each, drawing upon the established tradition but also, potentially, adding nuances of detail of his own. The first 11 tablets of the Standard Version represent a relatively coherent narrative concerning episodes in the life of the eponymous hero, culminating in his quest to find Utanapishtim, the legendary survivor of the Flood, and attain eternal life. The 12th tablet of the Standard Version is an Akkadian translation of a Sumerian poem about the descent of Gilgamesh and Enkidu into the underworld. The differences between this tablet and the others — primarily the fact that Enkidu is still alive on tablet 12 even though he died at the end of tablet seven — suggest something of the nature of the Standard Version, and indeed of all ancient copies of *Gilgamesh*. Sîn-lēqi-unninni may have copied his Version from an existing one that has been lost, or he may have forged the many pieces of the story into a more successfully satisfying

whole than had any previous editor or copyist before him, without however gathering every scrap of writing or tradition associated with Gilgamesh and without fully integrating those he did gather as we would expect today. All of this in mind, it is more than a little inappropriate to think of Sîn-lēqi-unninni as the author of *Gilgamesh* in the sense that the word "author" carries today. The ancients did however attribute the Standard Version to him.

Despite the popularity of the work, the oldest extant copies of the Standard Version only date to about 800 BCE. The most recent copies date to around 130 BCE, though the name Gilgamesh continued to appear in some other works for another 400 years. There are currently 73 partial copies of the Standard Version. None of these is complete, nor can all of the clay fragments be pieced together to form a complete edition. Assyriologist Andrew George estimates that 20 per cent of the poem is still missing: this amounts to the absence of some 600 lines out of 3,000, scattered throughout the tablets. Some tablets are far more complete than others and many extant lines of text are badly damaged, so badly damaged in fact that they are largely illegible. Each copy also differs in small matters of detail and even spelling. Some of these may be the kind of mistakes that are inevitable in a work copied by hand in clay. All of this in mind, George suggests that we now have clear copies of about two thirds of the work.[4] Even within the last decade, in 2011 at the Sulaymaniyah Museum in Iraqi Kurdistan, and in 2015, in an overlooked collection at Cornell University, additional fragments of various versions of *Gilgamesh* — sometimes as brief as a few lines — continue to be discovered. Scholars like Andrew George hope that one day we may be able to piece together a complete copy, including all of the lines of the Standard Version.

Many of the best copies of *Gilgamesh* were uncovered with the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE) in Nineveh in northern Iraq.

GILGAMESH

The tablet numbers are given in the footer.
The chapter titles are my own, based on the major episodes of the text. Ellipses indicate gaps in the text. *Italics* indicate interpellations that are my own.

INVOCATION

He who saw the depths
the wellspring
the foundation
Who experienced all things
went everywhere
Saw the hidden
the secret
Returned with word
from before the flood
Who made a distant journey
exhausted
in peace
Left his story
in stone

He built the walls of Uruk-the-Sheepfold
Sacred Eanna
the storehouse
the sanctuary

See the upper wall gleam
the inner wall unequaled
Scale the ancient stone
stairs to Eanna
house of Ishtar
Unmatched by later kings
Study the foundations
the bricks
Kiln fired
laid by seven sages
A square sar each
of city
garden
and quarry
One half sar
Eanna
Three and a half sar square
Uruk

Find the copper tablet box
Release its bronze lock
Raise the lid of secrets
Take and read the tablet of lapis lazuli
The travails of Gilgamesh

ENKIDU

Surpassing all kings
His stature renowned
Heroic child of Uruk
A wild bull
        charging
In front
        leading
Behind
        supporting
                his brothers
A floodbank
        protecting
A flood
        smashing
                stone walls

Wild bull of Lugalbanda
perfect in strength
Suckled by the revered Wild Cow
Ninsun

Towering
awesome
He opened mountain passes
Dug highland wells
Crossed the ocean
the vast sea
where Shamash rises
Sought eternal life
Throughout the world
by force
Reached Utanapishtim
the distant
Restored the sacred places
destroyed by the flood
Restored the people
their rites

Is there any other king
like Gilgamesh
To claim the name
king
From the day of his birth
Gilgamesh
his name

Two thirds god
One third human
Belet-ili
the great goddess
Drew the form of his body
Nudimmud
Wisdom
Perfected him

…

Three cubits tall
His stride six cubits…
Bearded
His hair thick as Nissaba
grain in the field
Perfect in height
The most handsome man

A wild bull pacing
Uruk-the-Sheepfold
Lording
Head high
Drum and staff unequalled
Weapons unequaled
His companions ever ready
for contests
The young men of the city
harried
Beyond reason
Gilgamesh leaves no son to his father
Day and night
endlessly
Gilgamesh
The shepherd of Uruk
The shepherd of the people
Leaves no daughter to her mother
No warrior's daughter
no young man's spouse
No bride to her groom

The goddesses heard their complaints
The gods above
        the gods who command
Spoke to Anu
        keeper of Uruk:
— You bred this bull
        whose weapons are unequalled
Whose companions are ready for contests
        harried beyond reason
Who leaves no son to his father
Day and night more and more
Shepherd of the Sheepfold
                Gilgamesh
        protector
        powerful
        eminent
            able
                wise
Leaves no bride for her groom
No warrior's daughter
        No young man's spouse —

Anu heard their complaints

He spoke:
— Let them summon Aruru
the great one
Who created the teeming human race
Let her create an equal partner
For Gilgamesh
a power
to contend with
That Uruk may be in peace —

They summoned Aruru
the great goddess
And said:
— You created the teeming human race
Now create as Anu commands
The equal of Gilgamesh
in stormy heart
To contend with him
That Uruk may be in peace —

When Aruru heard this
She conceived within her an idea
as Anu asked
She wet her hands
Pinched a piece of clay and cast it
into the wild
She made Enkidu
primeval
in the wild
Born of silence
knit by Ninurta
war
His body covered with hair
On his head as on a woman's
thick as Nissaba
grain
Knowing neither people nor place
Dressed as Sakkan commands
as the god of animals commands
as animals do
He fed on grass with gazelles
He drank at springs with animals
Satisfied his thirst with the herd

A hunter saw him at the spring
One day
the next day
and the next

Seeing Enkidu
The hunter stood still
in terror
Enkidu ran with the animals

The hunter was silent
His face still
distant
His heart in turmoil
Saddened
distant

The hunter spoke to his father:
— Father
        There is a man from the hills
Mightiest in the land
                in strength
        like a piece of Anu
                a stone from the sky
He roams the wild all day
Always grazing with the beasts
His tracks always at the spring
I am too frightened to approach him
He fills my pits
Ruins my traps
He frees the beasts of the hills
                my prey
He won't let me work the wild —

The father spoke to the hunter:
— My son
Gilgamesh lives in Uruk
No one is stronger than he is
Like a stone from the sky
his strength
Take the road to Uruk
the mighty
Return with Shamhat
the harlot
instead of a man
When the beasts approach the spring
reveal her charms
He will see her and approach
And the beasts will reject him —

The hunter listened to his father
He took the road to Uruk
To Gilgamesh
he said:
— There is a man from the hills
Mightiest in the land
in strength
Like a stone from the sky
He roams the wild all day
Always grazing with the beasts
His tracks always at the spring
I am too frightened to approach him
He fills my pits
He ruins my traps
He frees the beasts of the hills that I have caught
He won't let me work the wild —

Gilgamesh spoke to the hunter:
— Go
    Take Shamhat with you
When the beasts come to the spring
Let her strip off her clothing
                reveal her charms
He will see her and approach
And the beasts will reject him —

The hunter went
            taking Shamhat with him
Following the road
They arrived on the third day
They sat down to wait
            one day
                a second day
They sat at the edge of the spring

The beasts came to drink
Satisfied their thirst
And he too from the hills
who grazes with the gazelles
drinks with the beasts
satisfies his thirst

Shamhat saw the rough
Man from the hills
The hunter spoke:
— There he is
Shamhat
Open your arms
Open your legs
Let him take in your charms
Don't be afraid
Take in his scent
He will see you and approach
Strip off your clothes
Let him lie upon you
Do a woman's work for the man
Caress and embrace him
as he embraces you
And the beasts will reject him —

Shamhat stripped off her clothes
Opened her legs
He saw her charms
She was not afraid
She took in his scent
She stripped off her clothes
And he lay down with her
She did a woman's work for the man
Six days
        seven nights
Enkidu coupled with Shamhat
        breathless

When he had satisfied his desire
He faced the wild
The gazelles shunned him and moved away

Exhausted
        Enkidu's legs would not move
As the beasts moved away
He could not run as he had before
But he had reason and broad understanding

He returned and sat at Shamhat's feet
Looked at her face
as she looked at his
He listened to her speak:
— You are handsome
Enkidu
like a god
Why wander the wild
with the beasts?
Come
let me lead you to Uruk-the-Sheepfold
To the temple
home of Anu and Ishtar
Where Gilgamesh is
Perfect in strength
A wild bull
Lording over men —

Enkidu heard her and her words found favor
Aware
        he knew
He should seek a friend
Enkidu said to Shamhat:
— Come
        Shamhat
                lead me to Uruk-the-Sheepfold
To the temple
                home of Anu and Ishtar
Where Gilgamesh is
        Perfect in strength
        A wild bull
        Lording over men
I will challenge him
                boldly
Cry out
        I am the most mighty
The one born wild is most mighty
Come to change the order of things
                destiny —

Shamhat answered:
— Come
        Let the people see your face
I know
Come
        Enkidu
                to Uruk-the-Sheepfold
Where the young men are dressed for feasts
And every day is a feast day
Where they beat the drums
And the women are beautiful
Delights
Enough even for the nobles
                in bed at night
Enkidu
        You know nothing of life
Let me show you Gilgamesh
                the joyful
Look at him
        at his face
Beautiful as a man
                dignified
Seductive body
Mightier in strength than you
Restless day and night
Enkidu
        renounce
Your challenge
Gilgamesh is beloved
Of Shamash
Anu, Enlil, and Ea
        made him wise

Before you came
From the mountains
Gilgamesh saw you
In dreams

Gilgamesh arose and described a dream
to his mother:
— Mother
I had a dream in the night
Of stars in the sky around me
One fell
like a stone
Like a bolt
from Anu
From the sky
before me
I tried to lift it
but it was too heavy
I tried to turn it
but it wouldn't move
The people of the land were gathered around
over it
Kissing its feet
like children
Like a wife
I embraced it
attended to it
Laid it at your feet
You made it my equal —

The mother of Gilgamesh
all-knowing
Ninsun
the Wild Cow
spoke to her son:
— The stars in the sky
falling
You trying to lift it
too heavy
You trying to move it
immovable
You embrace it
caress it

Lay it at my feet
My making it your equal
Means that a strong one
                an equal
Will come
A companion to save
A friend
He will be the most powerful of the land
As strong as a bolt from Anu
Like a wife
You will love him
    attend to him
He will be mighty
    and often save you —

Gilgamesh spoke to his mother:
— Mother
I have had a second dream
An axe fell over Uruk
The people of the land gathered over it
Crowded over it
I carried it and laid it at your feet
I embraced it
like a wife
Attended to it
You made it my equal —

The mother of Gilgamesh
all-knowing
Ninsun
the Wild Cow
spoke to her son:
— The axe you saw is a man
you will attend to him as a wife
and treat him as an equal
A strong one will come to you
A companion to save
A friend
He will be the most powerful of the land
As strong as a stone from Anu —

Gilgamesh spoke to his mother
— Let it fall
By the word of Enlil
the counselor
I will gain a friend
to advise me —

Shamhat told Enkidu
the dreams of Gilgamesh
The two
coming together

Enkidu sat before Shamhat

She spoke:
— Enkidu
        you have become
like a god
        why wander the wild
with the beasts?
Come
        let me lead you to Uruk-the-Sheepfold
To Eanna
        home of Anu
        home of Ishtar
Where skilled men work
Where Gilgamesh is perfect
        in strength
Lording over men
You will find a place for yourself
Come away with me
        from out of the wild —

Enkidu heard her
        and her words found favor in him

Shamhat disrobed and dressed him
in one of her robes
herself in another
She took his hand
and led him
like a god
To a shepherd camp
a sheepfold

Shepherds gathered around
spoke amongst themselves
— How like Gilgamesh he is
in build
Majestic as a battlement
born in the hills
Strong as a stone from the sky —

The shepherds set bread and beer before him

Suckled on the milk
of the wild
Enkidu looked
squinted
stared
He knew nothing
of food

Shamhat spoke to Enkidu:
— Eat the bread
staff of life
Drink the beer
destiny of the land —

Enkidu ate of the bread until sated
He drank of the beer until sated
seven mugs
He felt free
joyful
Happy
his face bright
He anointed himself
his hairy body
with oil
He became a man
dressed in robes
A warrior
who took up his weapons
to fight lions

The shepherds rested at night
Enkidu fought off wolves
and lions
The elder shepherds slept
Enkidu stayed awake

Enkidu lay with Shamhat
raised his eyes
saw a young man
He said to Shamhat:
— Bring that man here!
Why has he come?
Let him give account —
Shamhat called the young man
spoke to him:
— Where are you rushing?
What is your burden? —

The young man spoke:
— I am invited to a wedding feast
the people arranged a marriage
I shall prepare the feast table
with tempting foods
to part the veils of the people
The king of Uruk
Gilgamesh
Will couple with the bride
He first
as Anu's counsel decreed
Destined
from the time
His cord was cut —

At these words
Enkidu's face grew pale
in anger

Enkidu went
        in front
Shamhat
        followed
Entered Uruk
Men gathered around
He stood on the street
        with the people of the land
Gathered around
        like children

The people said:
— He is the image of Gilgamesh
but shorter of build
stronger of bone
born in the wild
suckled on milk
of the wild —

In Uruk
The festival was underway
The sacrifices were constant
For the young men to purify themselves
the flute plays for the one who is
upright
A match
At last
For godlike Gilgamesh
The bed was made
for Ishara
the goddess of coupling
For godlike Gilgamesh
The bed was made
for the bride
that night

Enkidu approached Gilgamesh
in the street
Blocked the door to the wedding chamber
Blocked Gilgamesh
At the center of Uruk
blocked the door

They grappled like bulls
wrestled
Destroyed the door
shook the walls
shook the city

Gilgamesh and Enkidu
like bulls
Destroyed the door to the wedding chamber
In the main square

Gilgamesh fell
his foot on the ground
His rage passed
He turned away
broke off

Enkidu said:
— Your mother bore you
unique
The Wild Cow of the Sheepfold
Ninsun
Raised you
over warriors
Enlil decreed your kingship
over the people of the land —

They kissed one another
in friendship

Gilgamesh spoke to his mother
of Enkidu's strength
— like a stone from Anu
as sturdy as the walls of the city —

Ninsun spoke:
— My son …
bitterly…

Gilgamesh spoke to his mother
— Enkidu without father or mother
his hair hanging loose
born in the wild
without a brother —

Enkidu stood
listened
Thought
sat down
Tears in his eyes
His arms limp
lacking strength

Gilgamesh and Enkidu grasped one another
joined hands

Gilgamesh spoke to Enkidu:
— Why are your eyes filled with tears?
Your arms limp
lacking strength —

Enkidu spoke to Gilgamesh:
— Terror has entered my heart —

FURTHER READING

My own work on *Gilgamesh* would not have been possible without the scholarship of Andrew George, Benjamin Foster, Stephanie Dalley, and Jeffrey Tigay, to name only these few leading Assyriologists. Andrew George's monumental, two-volume critical edition, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (Oxford, 2003), is the bedrock upon which all future work on *Gilgamesh* will stand. Though they have in many ways been surpassed by more recent historical & philological work, I benefited greatly from classic works in the field by Henri Frankfort, Samuel Noah Kramer, Thorkild Jacobsen, and others. Finally, my understanding of cultural history in general and of *Gilgamesh* in particular has been formed by the radical tradition in social thought, what poet Gary Snyder has called "the Great Subculture," including most fundamentally, works of psychoanalytical cultural history and cultural poetics.

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About the Author

Stuart Kendall is a writer, editor, and translator working at the intersections of poetics, philosophy, and visual culture. His books include *The Ends of Art and Design*, *Georges Bataille*, and many edited and translated volumes. Contra Mundum published his translation of Jean-Luc Godard's *Phrases: Six Films* in 2016.

COLOPHON

GILGAMESH
was handset in InDesign CC in 2020 CE.

The text font is MT *Dante*.
The display font is STF *Justice*.

Book design & typesetting: Alessandro Segalini.
Cover design: Alessandro Segalini & CMP.
Opening spread image: Tablet VI.

GILGAMESH
is published by Contra Mundum Press.

Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

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9 780983 697206
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