G L L

GRAYER than your grandfather's cradle, the walls of Uruq will outlast your grandson's grave. Twelve times they wind around the city suburbs, five around the urbs itself, tendrils extending inward and outward, overlapping, undermining, overtopping. In the walls are relics of ancient worships, prayers submitted by the faithful — crammed into niches and cracks of the innermost layers accessible. The core of the wall, it is said, is composed purely of prayers: tablets and stones, papyrus and amulets, filling each other's gaps, topped with spinning prayerwheels that circulate a mantra a thousand times, a million times, forever.

There are castes who are charged with the upkeep of the walls, their repair, their defense, their dismantling and remantling. Generations can live and die without exiting the network of the walls. Among them are holy men who start pilgrimages: they walk barefoot, their right hand toward the city center, beginning the circuit of the walls. They must touch each great stone with their feet, they must not miss any fortification, they must stare fearlessly outward to the plains, fearlessly downward the hundred cubits to the pitiless dry ground, fearlessly upward to the Sun, and they must complete the circuit of the twelve great walls twelve times. None has completed the pilgrimage. Every day, a new pilgrimage begins.

Uruq, teeming, collapsing, thriving, fermenting, fomenting; its canyons and forums: its avenues and alleys: the City. It calls itself by many names in many languages, languages that circulate like disease among its classes and neighborhoods. It is named Ur, Urrak, Ouroboros, Nuruq, Ny'rk, Iruq, Arach. It is honored with a thousand titles, all inscribed on the city tablets deposited in the temple of Thuth:

Mother City of the Ten Thousand Mothers
Womb of kings
Omphalos Cosmou
Splendidous Amalgamation of Excellence
Hometown of the World Champions
Hub
Queen City of the Middle Power
Megalopolis of all Imagination
Great Spinning Axis of the Hurtling Wheel

and nine hundred and ninety-one more. But none of these titles expresses the city as much as the custom, ingrained in all its inhabitants of whatever ethnicity, of referring to the city economically by a single brief pronoun: in the absence of any other immediate reference, Uruq is always designated when one utters the word "it."

It rises to a mount most probably man-made; no one has explored all its sealed basements and crypts to confirm it. Columns, balconies, towers, and decorated battlements of limestone and turquoise spread their great shoulders over the heart of Uruq. A hundred and one approaches reach a hundred and one gates where sentries stand and deny or admit the petitioners, the messengers, the delivery boys, the palace dogs, oxcart, goats, elephants, idols. On a lofty level well-lit by great windows, the Map is laid out on the largest table to be found in it. The Map, ever updated, decorated, simplified, graphed, illuminated, copied, pictures every byway and hovel in it: its capillaries and arteries, its sewers, its temples, its marketplaces, its schools, its shacks, its brothels, its organs and hair and
nails and sweat. Individual bathers in the bathhouses are indicated with careful dots. A dog is pictured resting on a mud stoop. In one particularly fine work of illustration, a young girl, her orange and brown mantle around her shoulders on a cool morning, carries two loaves of bread on her way to the neighborhood bazaar; to see her you must wheel over the Lens that makes mites' mandibles visible; it is said that it took Eudyymus a year to complete the girl, working with the whiskers of a cicada, and that he died the day after the painting was completed. This one is preserved out of reverence for the artist. Others are painted over even before they're finished -- a house is torn down and its image must be effaced, a horse collapses and must be represented as a rotting corpse, a cool rain brings fresh water to the city cisterns and fresh mud puddles bring the children out to splash and frolic and befoul, so the mapmakers must refill the dry reservoirs on their creation and dab sacred mud on the symbolic spots reserved for that purpose. The Map is never the same from day to day, and it employs a well-groomed, well-fed caste who sweat from fear lest they make a mistake.

The Map is not highest, but is overtopped by offices and chambers without number. A pool fed by Archimean screws rising from a secret spring; the Office of Grain and Herbs; the royal podiatry clinic, the dental office, the mustache department; a theater reserved for minor nobility and their puppet shows; the shrine of the Unknown Deity; the stylus factory for the master scribes; the Birth Tax Department; the appetizer kitchen. From them all, rooted in them, drawing upon them, rises the tower, tallest in Uruq, encrusted with marble plundered from obliterated enemies -- the tower of the king.

What a man mighty Gil
giving justice joining worlds
utmost end of utmost life.
Lawful Gil shining lord
gives every man a modest share
allows the fair and finds the right,
the final truth is his to take
outranking all outdoing each
good and strong god of men
mighty Gil.

"Shut the fuck up," says Gil.
The bard's next word is strangled in his throat, and the guitar's chord dies in the rafters. Frozen, the poet stares at his lord, who reclines on a pelt. A finger trembles on the strings.
Gil lunges at the singer with his left eyebrow. In a panic, the man grabs his cymbals and harmonica, his lyre, his wrist drum, his nose flute, his tassels, and his jingle-bell moccasins, rushing out the door while managing not to make a single sound. He will live another day.
"The sound of terror is the best music," says Gil to the empty room.
"The silence of terror is the finest music," he says.
"The silence of terror is the finest symphony," he tries. He is about to cry for the court poet, who will record the sentence in the Book of Aphorisms of the King, and decides that he doesn't feel like bothering. He belches and walks to the balcony. Far below, some of the masses in the Plaza for Watching the Exalted Balcony of the King begin cheering and waving, screaming praises that the hot wind blows away, as Gil stares off beyond them.
From this ultimate apex of Uruq, he can watch the city boil and steam, turn and writhe, tremble with a constant minute activity. A crossbow affixed to the crenellation, a gift from the Sultan of Inferior Pomeranistan, allows him to mark any citizen for death. He soon grew bored with the amusement; a direct, killing punch to the skull is far more satisfying, and one wants to know one's victims a little better than one can from the heights. Now the crossbow rusts, its oxidation drooling down the side of the royal tower. A telescope gets more use. Invented by a Tuscan philosopher, it was carted to Uruq by elephant; it rests on a tripod adjusted to Gil's great height. He approaches the eyepiece, swings the instrument about, and sees a woman casting off her towel to enter her bath. Next door, her husband is pursuing some slave girl, smacking her head. Gil emits a smothering laugh, swings the telescope around, surveys boats on the river. They linger at the locks, approach the wharves, people climb in and out exchanging incense, timber, carpets, coconuts, sheep, hats, jewel boxes, cauliflowers, scrolls, slaves, oil. He swings the instrument and lets it rest on a dim alley. Nothing is there, no life stirs, the shadows seem eternal. There is a dim feeling of escape, as if, against all reason, some part of the city could fail to belong to it; as if it could fail to belong to Gil; as if Gil himself could fail to belong.

"Your Majesty." The voice is Echidnezar's: current chief counsel to the king, learned legal scholar, expert on the jus primae noctis. Gil stares into the quiet alley. Still no one enters it, as if it were immune to everydayness. Is it a section of the necropolis?

Some time later, Gil has almost forgotten about Echidnezar, but when he turns away from the eyepiece, there is the mm loyal jurist, in his blue robes, patiently waiting.

"What?"

"The delegation from Unitaria awaits Your Majesty in the opal room. After the reception, the afternoon feast will be served in the fourth afternoon dining room."

Gil strides back into his tower and down the staircase to the opal room, Echidnezar scurrying after. The Unitaris are small, craven men in cotton clothes who prostrate themselves upon the king's entry. A translator explains that they are offering a yearly tribute of five hundred golden ingots, a white horse with saffron mane, a full Corinthian vase of myrrh, and an illuminated copy of their sacred book. What is in the hands of the least-pitiful Unitari? It is the book itself. Gil grabs it. Before the delegates' eyes, he pulls it apart, ripping the thick leather binding.

"You say this is a magic book?" he roars. "What magic book yields so easily to a man's strength? Will it punish me if I do this?" And he rips out a great sheet, a gilt jewel of a page with the intricate curls of the Unitari script. Gil hoists his royal robes and wipes his ass with it. He crumples the stinking sheet and tosses it into the midst of the bowing men. They are staring, gasping, shaking with anger — all except one who remains perfectly still, unmoved, making sure to cause no offense.

Gil seizes this self-controlled man by the neck, yanks him up, and tosses him out the window of the opal room. A hopeless ululation wafts up through the window until it stops with a crunch.

"Your tribute is accepted!" shouts Gil. "Out!" No translation is needed; the delegation runs backward, bowing, stumbling over each other, and the room is empty except for Gil and his advisor.

After some time, Gil asks Echidnezar, "Why did I kill the one who showed no anger?"

"I do not know, Your Majesty."
"Because the enemy who can disguise his hatred is the most dangerous enemy of all."
"Thank you, Your Majesty."
"You can add that one to the Book of Aphorisms of the King."
"Yes, Your Majesty."
Then it's down to the dining room for the afternoon feast. Courtiers, concubines, ministers, butlers, the sommelier, the busboys, the sous-chef, the maître-des-hors-d'œuvres, the beer wench — all bow boringly as Gil comes in and straddles his chair, grabbing a leg of mutton.

THE MENU

Leg of mutton à la royale
Caramelized pheasant neck with pomegranate coulis
Tower of bear fat
Pear blossom soup
Bird's-nest soup with arugula
Licorice soufflé
Chickadee in a chicken in a turkey, triple-roasted
Essence of tangerine pudding
Caramelized pomegranate with pheasant reduction
Reduced wild boar with microscopic fennel
Mustard seed confit with Alaskan honey
Integral consummation of consommé à la hobokienne
Gelatin temple with sugarcane columns
Naan bread with elephant garlic and fennel
Semiliquid Javanese coffee
Mesoamerican chocolate with agave syrup
'47 Adagio Pomeriggio Neufchâtel Neuf
Grappa-vodka chaser
4 grapes
One leaf of mint

The monarch punctuates his final course with a rumbling belch that makes the glassware shake. The guests around the table immediately try their polite burps, falling short, as they must and ought, by many decibels, and Gil stretches and observes the position of the sun.

His chair clatters to the ground as he leaves for his usual stroll after the feast of the afternoon. The usual crowd of soldiers, officials, toadies double-steps after him, but none precedes. There is no bodyguard for Gil. "I am your bodyguard," he likes to say to the throng behind him, to his generals, to the police, to the torturers, to whoever has muscles. His eyes search the eyes of the hundreds who make way for him, the merchants who stop hawking their ponchos and berets and jodhpurs, the children who clutch their hoops and whips and balls, the wives who blush, the men who blush, the old men who shake. Everyone has a reaction; he sees it and they react to his seeing. Sometimes he amuses himself by holding someone's gaze until the gaze breaks — it takes less than a breath. Sometimes he meets a defiant look, very rarely, and even more rarely a hostile word or act. Then there are bloody limbs on the ground, and organs cast into the air, and Gil wipes himself off and spits, and the necessary clean-up is performed that night, and the keepers of the Map dutifully add a speck of human blood to an intersection, a portico, a byway; the speck is erased the next day, but not completely; the Map is bejeweled with occasional tiny colonies of blood cells, brown and dry, faint reminders of the king's presence.
Gil extends his walk this evening. Some of the soldiers are panting. Over a bridge of ancient boards, under an arch erected last year in honor of the conquest of the Bactrians (camel heads stand out like gargoyles, palm trees are incised, an inscription mentions Gil fifteen times), into the crowded marketplace where people squeeze into each other to avoid the king's footsteps. As he does when the whim strikes him, Gil makes a sudden turn and races up a staircase lined with stalls hawking oily dumplings and dried fish. Behind him, the entourage strains and stumbles, and all too easily, he has mounted the stairs and raced off into another street that he knows from his childhood days. The people hardly have time to fear the king who races through the roadway and turns into a quiet alley.

It strikes a chord. The shadows have deepened and the sky is orange with the evening dust. A donkey brays somewhere. Swallows dip and flit across the sky, eliminating mosquitoes. But there are no people in the alley, and Gil recognizes it as the place he spotted through the telescope. He takes a deep breath as if he could absorb the whole place into his body. A cool damp morning than of the aged day; old and compressed dung; a spice that isn't quite familiar; timber from a foreign land. No one sees the king.

Then there are soft footsteps, and a girl passes into the alley with a burden on her head, humming, lost in her thoughts. She almost walks into the king, then recoils and looks up, at the godlike figure. The bundle falls, she squeals, and her eyes are deep brown pools, her mouth tender. Her dress has been sewn by her grandmother and a simple pendant rests on her bosom -- an eye; the stylized evil eye that is meant to see enemies before they see her.

A noise of approval emerges from Gil, he reaches for her hair -- but she runs, surprisingly fast. Not fast enough for the king, who lopes after her through the network of back streets, seeing her fly into a recessed, modest temple dedicated to the goddess Bendis.

In the temple, no bigger than Gil's dressing room, a sacred fire burns in a copper vessel. An aged priestess, looking leprous, tends the fire and collects donations. The rough-hewn statue of the goddess, slightly taller than Gil, is made of wood and has lost most of its paint. The smoke rises past the blackened walls to seep out through a round vent in the roof. At the foot of the goddess, the girl is trembling.

Gil kicks the priestess out, bars the door, and has his pleasure. Cries and smoke rise into the sky. A girl's intimate blood stains the torn dress. The evil eye lies in a corner.

That evening, when families have gathered in their apartments, when a few boys sleep on the roofs despite the unusually chilly weather, when a lute and oboe around the corner are trying snatches of ballads, a ragged figure slinks from the temple and keeps to the shadows inside the shadows. After some time, the smoke from the temple dies and is replaced by a certain acrid steam. The king is urinating on the embers.

THE GODS do not live in some remote region of the sky, as mortals picture them, as if some flying machine could take us there, or as if some bird could reach the divine abode. The gods do not reside in statues and idols, in paintings and charms, as the makers of such things like to believe, and especially like to have others believe. The location of the gods is unlike ours; they can dwell inside and through our prosaic world; they can split
themselves up without splitting themselves, so that scintillas of the gods can multilocate and recombine, coexist and reconstitute, and you never know where gods may be, because they can be anywhere, anytime.

The gods are in the dust on a scroll, in the last ray of evening sun that hits the sign advertising sweet breads, under your mattress, in holy smoke, in urine steam, in the intestine of a dog, in the glance of an old man's half-blind eye, in a dim star, in an embarrassed silence between newlyweds, in the screech of a wounded crow, in the roots of a vegetable left behind when it is pulled up briskly. They speak in their god-language, which is always the same for them but always different for mortals: they send messages to each other and themselves, already knowing their import before they can arrive, sending them forward a thousand years and back by an hour, speaking through the scuffing sound of sandals, the gesture of a tanner, the temple bells, a sudden rustle of a flag, the burrowing of a squirrel, the empty spaces in the margins of a manuscript, the steps of plovers in mud, and every other word uttered by a seven-year-old boy who is inventing a song.

But the gods aren't everywhere. They don't always speak. You never know when they may be present, when they may choose to adopt mortal space and time and language, but often you can feel that they're absent. Then a certain flatness comes over the day, and sounds don't echo, and colors all have names. No one dares to say that the gods are gone, but if they stop to observe, they know it. Some people know this, without ever speaking of it, most days of their lives. Some feel chills when the absence prevails. Others feel warm, as if the missing dimension were icy cold and the flatness of life without gods made the world more like a home. A few sense the absence only in rare moments, events when a constant buzzing and shimmering around them has somehow disappeared -- and these are the times when these select few choose to make sacrifices, offer prayers, fast.

The gods had seen Gil's killings, his feasts, his rambles, by being in them: by enlivening the cobbles under his gilt sandals, by smelling his sweat while inhabiting his pores, by casting messages that intersected with the royal edicts and aphorisms and infested them. From a billion moments and points, the goddess called Bendis had petitioned for the king's destruction long before he entered her temple. With the last fizzle of her sacred fire, the petitions converged and demanded Gil's ruin. The possibility of drowning, seizure, aneurysm, assassination, poisoning, incineration, hovered around Gil in the night.

But the god called Theuth, who favors revelation, countered the possibilities and gathered others. Destruction cannot satisfy, he said through the hammering of a blacksmith. Pain alone is insufficient, he said through the taste of a spoiled tangerine. Recognition brings a more intrinsic punishment and a more internal pain, he said through the scratchiness of a yak-hair blanket that an eighty-year-old woman pulled over her on the next-to-last night of her life. The king will recognize himself.

How will he recognize himself? echoed messages flying between quarks and bosons.

In his other, answered a quasar and the mandibles of a mantis.
In his other.
EVERY element of Uruq has its undiscovered counterpart in the forest: for every house there is a tree, for every coin a leaf, for every baby who cries from hunger there is a bird that falls silent as it waits for its mate. From the footprints and spittle and belts and anger and shadows of Gil, something is assembling in the forest.

Flashrun.
Flashrun it here there eat.
Flashrun it here there eat drink run, run more, drink eat, this and this and this and this.
The leopard smells some great gamy thing, not prey, hustling.
The qitak birds are restless as they sense a bulk racing under tree limbs, fording streams, crushing the new shoots.
Run this, eat this, drink this, run it, this and this and this and this.
He rests on leaves of a shedding gingko tree as hares and vipers smell him from a distance, drowsing on a yellow bed of fan leaves, hairy and unclothed, his mouth hanging open, limbs and gut haphazard on the ground. He does not know how to dream.

Sometimes he wakes and things are harder to find, they withdraw into hiddenness, and overhead there are glimpses of little brights and a soft round bright. Sometimes he wakes and things crowd around, waiting to be touched or eaten, and overhead there is a harsh round bright. Taste and run and squat and splash. Sometimes he recognizes red round little good things to eat. Sometimes crawly things are good to eat. Sometimes not. Sometimes he wakes and there is pain and he moans and the wolves howl with him. Sometimes he wakes and there is light-footed leaping time, and the monkeys leap with him. The leopard has learned his scent and grants him territory. His foraging starts to delineate a circuit of favorite streams, bushes, hollows. Every moment elicits a touch from him, a noise, a twitch, so that his reactions impregnate the air and make the place his, as he belongs to it. His world is rich in sounds, cries, chills and rays of sun, crisp and soft textures, living flavors.

All is his own and he is all of it, participating in the feeding and small fights, consuming and giving himself to be consumed by flies, worms, fungus, exchanging nutrients in cycles. And he knows no more and cannot want more, but has only this and this and this.

MERCURY has coalesced on the road to a certain house in a loud, drunken quarter of the city where a woman stands on a balcony. Her memories grow dimmer the closer to her they are. She remembers every moment of the first time she sold herself. Some elements of the second time have faded. Last week is complete oblivion.

Now Retheta sells others more often than she sells herself. Ten rooms perfumed with cinnamon, cloves, and musk are kept busy, and a procession of basins comes to the sewers at all hours carting away the unperfumed and unwanted aftermath of the business. Minstrels wander through Retheta's house in the evenings, as entertainers for customers and as customers themselves. The voices in the house are too high, too low, too strained, too quiet, too loud, too frantic or angry or excited -- except hers, which is always measured and uninflected. Retheta no longer remembers new experiences, but only measures her collection of coins and jewels. Life has become a fluctuating number, a tally, a sum and not a stream, though the sum increases and decreases. She is so experienced that experiencing has become impossible.
Mercury enters the house, passing between bored, wheedling propositions from two of its inhabitants; he climbs the dark stairs and finds Retheta where she is. Her eyes start summing when he opens his bag. His instructions are added up and entered on her inner calendar. The day after tomorrow.

He leaves the entire bag of gold in Retheta's room and issues no threats, but salutes with what might be a smile as he leaves. For a while, Retheta counts and stares. Then she imagines a different life, a life that could begin tomorrow, or tonight: loading a few bags and carpets on an ass, making her way to the great avenue of this sector, traveling through the southwest gate, following the river past the forest, embarking on a ship, landing in a distant snowy land where she meets a prince wrapped in furs.

The next day, standing on her balcony, she imagines that she could do it that very night: loading her things, leaving the city, sailing to the frozen country.

The next day is the day after tomorrow. She loads her supplies on the ass, makes her way to the great avenue of this sector, travels out through the southwest gate, and follows the river to the forest. She stops at a pool that borders the woods. An ibis explores the water with the tip of its great beak, sifting. Here, six hours' travel from the city, there is no music and nothing to buy. This is the place. As the god has requested, she spreads a carpet by the pool, removes her garments, and lies down, opening her legs. Every moment teems with incalculable sensations of sun, water, leaves, breeze, and the moments flow into each other but do not go away; they mount.

In the forest he senses some troubling something -- some unknown food, not food, that withdraws and entices at once, that lures and alters him. Flashrun past the drink and past this and into this and through the glen, flashrun past screaming toucans and over the vines, into hurt, into sweat, following the lure. He is past his domain now, unhome, exploring, sensing the strange openness of thinning foliage, the patches of ungrowth, the speed that he can pick up as his breath sustains him.

And then there is openness, emptiness, brightness that he's never known. He catches his breath, reels, and senses the life before him on the strange rectangular domain. Inside his own strange life, a chafing throb, and a horn between his legs.

He runs for the first time, and she for a time without number that climbs back through her life to the first time and displaces it and overturns it. They make the beast with two backs until the sky is cooling and dimming. She bathes in the pool and leads him in to join her, to mingle with the water and learn how to hold his breath -- gliding through the darkening fluid like some new kind of forest, then exhaling and rising through the surface to wonder at the orange horizon.

Then there is a new wonder: she puts on shimmering, soft things that are not skin and not food. And she has a robe and tunic for him. She has to dress him like a great child. She combs his beard and his damp mane. She rest his fingers on his chest, looks him in the eyes, and selects syllables. They will be the first word that he hears, the first sound magically structured to transcend the moment of breathing, the cries, the snapping of twigs -- to reach out past the event to establish some permanence, some substrate, a door to another world of meanings and relations. She readies her tongue and teeth, takes a breath, and pushes the word into his chest with her fingertips, pushes into his mind with her eyes:

"Enkidu."
ENKIDU and Retheta silently walk ahead of the ass, tracing the road toward the city; sometimes he touches her softly, curiously, confirming that she is there; the stars are starting to appear, and she looks for the inn that she passed earlier that day, the inn mentioned by the man with the money. At last it appears, just as the road has become invisible: a torch ahead and an air from a flute.

Everything is new to Enkidu, who touches and tastes the doorjam the curtain, as she names them for him. He stares deeply into the faces of the innkeeper and his wife, who hurry to bring sustenance to this soft-and-hard man who has to stoop to enter. Furniture, a bronze medallion on the wall, a statue of a bull, and a plate of a grainy, bright stuff that tastes like his own sweat but richer, purer, a wondrous food: salt. He has licked it up already. This is called a ceiling, this is fire, this is you, this is me, this is night, this is man. This is music. Then they bring a basket of hot, complex, crunchy, soft miracles. This is bread. And mugs of living water, drinkfood, magic. This is beer. Crunchy, toasted loaf-ends snap between Enkidu's molars, the gaseous brew washes them down, steaming soft bites are dipped in a new plate of salt, the beer quenches the thirst and flows down his throat, he is thrilled and dizzy, everyone laughs and he learns to sing. Beer and stumbling and bread soaked in beer. Then a new wonder: olive oil. It is a night of yeast and hops and essences cultivated by his new fellows. He falls asleep on blankets and yet another new thing: faces, words, flashrunning across his inner forest, a strange return to his circuit, but now things have names and he wears clothes, and the pool and the woman and the bread and beer are all pressing around him, stifling and elusive, dark and bright at once. He has learned how to dream.

The next morning, Retheta guides Enkidu to a vast, unintelligible press of others — something he can hardly even see, that seems to press against him as the branches and leaves never did, that makes him sit and hold his head. The city. She strokes his head and gives him a name for the unmanageable: Uruq. "Uruq," he repeats. And now he's armed with two syllables that embrace the ungraspable. With those syllables on his tongue, he can go forward, gathering his spirit and striding through the great limestone gate — admiring oxen, seeing the startled faces of children who gape at him, the lined and toothless faces of monkeys — but she tells him they are old men — the polychromed statuettes and scarves and parrots, the women, the towers glimpsed in the distance. It is all fermenting under Enkidu's skin, combined under the two syllables, opening his eyes and mind ever wider, and when they are stretched open as far as he can stand, he can finally see himself.

Just as the visitor with the bug of gold predicted, there is a wedding festival underway at the meeting hall at the intersection of the Victory Road, the Buttomakers' Lane, and Penitence Street. But the commotion sounds uneasy, the bagpipes and bugles sound forced. Through a window, Retheta can see Gil sprawled insolently on the feast table, one sandal on a plate, draining the last of a bottle. The king evidently invited himself and has taken what he wanted. The guests don't know whether to look in feigned admiration or look away and feign celebration. There is the bride in her headdress and necklaces, looking pale. The groom is cowering among male relatives. The bridesmaids are nowhere to be found.

"To the happy couple!" bellows Gil.
"To the happy couple," recites everyone.
Sated and smirking, Gil swaggered out the door of the hall and bums against an unmoveable object: Enkidu. The king is stunned. This great steer, this rube, this freak as tall as the king himself, stands planted in the courtyard and stares back at him without breaking his gaze.

Gil pushes him savagely and Enkidu steps back, only to charge forward like a bull. The king, unused to resistance, slips as he tries to get a hold on the man. They crash against the wall of the nuptial hall and to the ground, where Gil locks Enkidu's leg between his rock-like arms and twists. Enkidu punches a punch that would snap another man's spine in two, bruising Gil's inner organs.

The wedding party has come to the windows and is starting to come out the door to watch the unheard-of wrestling match unfolding in the dust. They don't know whether to feel joy or dread, but can only stare in awe as the two massive men crush and flip and claw at each other, panting.

Like bees to a field of clover, citizens stream to the arena, word of mouth and the sounds of Gil's furious shouts drawing them. They peer over each other's shoulders and under each other's legs, not wagering as they would when they see most fights, but witnessing this event that is bound to change the whole city — how, they don't know. A little boy tries to get closer until his uncle yanks him back. The wrestlers have a perfect circle to themselves, a circle whose circumference shifts as they shift the center, pulling and shoving each other this way and that, bleeding each other's beards, making bones creak.

In the heat of the day, they gasp and sweat, extracting further energies from their aching bodies. The vendors of the city are hawking chilled guava nectar and fried cuttlefish, roasted pistachios, mead, buttered pretzels, syruped buns, horse jerky, and watered wine. Scribes are frantically recording the death match on their tablets, abbreviating words, stenographic cuneiform. A mother tells her daughter to start practicing now to tell this story to her grandchildren. Retheta watches with the rest of the people, weeps a little, understands, then turns to push her way out, deciding whether to return to her balcony or set out to the land where water crystallizes and lies as white, unflowing blankets on the ground. "Shishkabob!" shouts a vendor.

They struggle, hold, twist, hit, grapple until the sky is cooling and dimming.

With a last summation of his strength, Gil pins Enkidu to the dust and feels him cease his struggle.

Then Gil, too, falls to the ground and lies panting painfully next to the man from the forest.

People murmur, peer, and fear, slightly contracting the circumference of the circle.

Gradually the men sit up and focus on each other. Something unexpected goes through Gil's bruised brain. He finds himself clapping his hand on Enkidu's meaty shoulder. "Ha!" says Gil with a broad grin.

Enkidu reacts with a snort of acknowledgment and then grins back: he is unpracticed in any concealment and freely mirrors the emotions that meet him. He feels them, too: a respect, a satisfaction, a brotherhood.

The scribes write feverishly, the people talk incessantly, the children stare and shriek as the two giants trudge, arms around each other's shoulders, through the dusty evening in the direction of the towering fortress.
BRINGING Gil his breakfast is the job that's usually given to the most expendable kitchen underling. Morning is not the monarch's most philanthropic moment. How many boys just old enough to balance a tray have suffered defenestration, scalding, or battery by royal cutlery? Today it's Mino's turn. On his tray of hammered bronze he carries a samovar of dark, sweet tea smoothed with creamy mare's milk, berries from the fields, crisp wafers of bread baked before dawn, a silk napkin in a golden ring, and the king's usual favorite (except when it's not): a brace of soft-boiled duck eggs accompanied by a bowl of select spices and herbs.

The king is awake, unfortunately. When he's asleep, you can delicately set down the tray on his bedside table, trembling and holding your breath, then pick up the little bell ever so slowly—muffling it in your hands—tiptoe to the door, ring the bell, and duck out, hightailing it down the grand staircase as some snarling bellow chases you. You live another day. But when he knows that you're approaching, you're at the mercy of his humors. Mino swallows and proceeds, remembering highlights of his nine years on Earth.

But today the king's humor is odd. He's propped against his pillows and furs, his gaze focused somewhere much farther away, as if he were looking beyond Uruq itself (hardly an imaginable possibility for Mino), into the stars, biding his time, glacially revolving the thoughts cooking in his head. Mino notices in wonder that a bruise extends grayly over half of Gil's temple, and a fresh scab lies on his massive cheekbone.

Gil turns his head gradually toward the breakfast now lying beside him, seeming to look through it and through Mino, with a strangely uncruel indifference. Ming has not been dismissed, so he has to stand by and watch as the king's behavior gets stranger still: he swings out of bed, stretching himself with loud cracks, and picks up the tray—light as air for him. Then he carries the food, as if he were a servant, walking down the hall barefoot, in his bedclothes. Mino creeps after, wide-eyed, and sees Gil, easily holding the tray by its edge with his left hand, use his right to push open an oaken door. After a little time there are deep laughs, noises of approbation, and bursts of words coming from the guest room. Mino creeps to the door and peers in to see an impossibility: a man as great as the king, heavy and hairy, sitting with the king as they hunch over the tray, cracking one of the king's own duck eggs between his thumb and forefinger as the king smiles broadly and asserts: "Egg!"

The rest of the kitchen staff soon have occasion to confirm what Mino tells them, and they learn what the king's council and guard soon notice too: the king doesn't care about them. Now they realize that what seemed like indifference to their wishes and happiness was not true indifference, that the king cared about them—as one cares about a dog that gets in the way of one's chariot, or a mosquito that is buzzing in one's ear. Now it's as if they hardly exist. The valet brings newly embroidered robes to the king, only to see him give them to Enkidu. The chef's dinner options, which usually bring anger as Gil throws most or all of them to the tiled floor, now all seem to bring pleasure to the king, because he can share them with Enkidu. As for the chef, standing at attention by the table, he no longer gets
glares and shouts, but is out of the king's ken. Gil never stares him down anymore. He lays a hand on him once to move him out of the way, shifting the chef to the side so he can reach a roast and tell Enkidu about it; but it's not a shove, not an angry push, only a calm and efficient move like parting a curtain. For a moment the chef feels offended, but soon he feels relieved and can only wonder how long this holiday will last. The servant castes of the palace all feel this relief that spreads through their ranks, a lightness they've never experienced before. They do their tasks, if anything, even more carefully now, as if it were a magical effect of their skill that the king's distraction has granted them this freedom from abuse. The head butlers and maids are especially alert, happily so, straightening the tablecloths, brushing the carpets, polishing the tureens, currying the stallions, directing the thousands who keep the palace, and believing with determined superstition that they can keep the king distracted if only nothing goes wrong. It's a baseless superstition, since in the past, the king seemed even more irascible on days when the service was faultless; but this seems to be a new dispensation, a new order of the world.

Enkidu now gets as much attention as Gil himself from the servants, who know Enkidu is the king's favorite. They bring matching robes, matching meals to the two men. But they learn right away that Enkidu behaves no more like a master than their transformed king does. Enkidu never issues orders and never gives thanks — but something like gratitude lights up in his inky eyes with every new service, a kind of surprise and even puzzlement at the existence of a strawberry rather than nothing, at the presence of the manicurist instead of her absence, at the appearance of the evening sky rather than unlight. To Enkidu, every object as well as every ordinary human being seems extraordinary. But no person other than Gil can get him to speak. The king and the stranger take long walks around the parapets and through the gardens, holding animated conversations. They grapple and push each other across the lawn. They start a tug-of-war with a tanned oxtail until they tear it, rolling backwards with peals of laughter. Gil is teaching Enkidu to use the crossbow and how to do one-armed pushups. The other day they spent eight hours running, trotting steadily through quarters of the city glorious and inglorious, over stiles and across the gardens of the nobility, through the marketplace, watering themselves at fountains and pumps, chewing on dried beef, glowing and shining with their effort.

The king's advisors are not as pleased as the servants at this new reality. They try to flatter Enkidu, but he seems as bemused and entertained by one word as by another, regardless of their content, as if he had no sense of self. Some of the councilors whisper that Enkidu is an idiot, one of the countless misbirths given a body and no mind. Others reply that they have heard him reasoning, asking Gil questions without end, like a boy who has just started losing his baby teeth. In any case, it's impossible to curry favor with the manchild, and the king seems indifferent to their efforts to fawn on his friend; at most, he shows a little impatience and is eager to return to the project that he and Enkidu started this morning.

The minister of war, Malek-i-honza, approaches Gil with an odd object in his arms as Gil and Enkidu are inspecting a chessboard. It looks like he's carrying a quilt.
"Your Majesty."
"Hm?"

"We have acquired a tapestry from the Eastern Scythians." He lays it out on a carpet, but Gil isn't paying attention; he's busy showing Enkidu the nostrils on the horse's head of an ivory knight.

"Your Majesty will observe the pearls and silver threads that these barbarians use in the tapestry."

Gil glances, and with sudden enthusiasm he plucks Enkidu's sleeve and brings him over to the tapestry. They kneel down (Malek-i-honza briskly kneels too and makes sure his head remains lower than the king's) and Gil starts pointing at items in the embroidery.

"Elephant!"

"Elephant," repeats Enkidu. "Gil, why is the man on the elephant?"

"You can ride on an elephant, like on a horse or a burro."

"Where is he going?"

"Maybe here."

"Is that a garden?"

"Yes! And look at the bird in the center of the garden."

"Why does the bird have such a great tail?"

"It's a peacock!"

"Gil, why does the peacock have such a great tail?"

"Look, Enkidu, there are eyes on the tips of the peacock's tail!"

(They are squinting closely, and Malek-i-honza is forced to slap his shaved cheek onto the carpet.)

"Why?"

Gil pauses. He says with a touch of surprise, "I don't know."

A somewhat choked voice with carpet lint on its lips asks, "Your Majesty, have you observed the palace in the center of the tapestry?"

Gil sits up to get a clear view. (Malek-i-honza pushes himself up like a lizard.) Gil is formulating an observation for Enkidu, but the minister of war is so bold as to speak first.

"Your Majesty will already have noticed that the palace of the Eastern Scythians is mobile. It rolls on a thousand wheels like a great cart, each wheel almost as tall as Your Majesty Himself. They have developed an ingenious system of axles. The rest of the Scythians accompany it by horse and set up their tents every night around the palace — there they are."

"Look, Enkidu, a tent with golden banners!"

"Your Majesty will already have noted the great, curving tusks that surround the mobile palace, each one tipped with pure gold — a fortune in ivory and gold. And their horsemen and elephant troops have only the simplest of small quivers for their arrows. Our spies say they have not yet discovered liquid fire or the catapult."

"Gil, why are there so many fish in this stream? How did they get there?"

"Other fish made them."

"Why?"

"So Your Majesty" — there still seems to be some lint irritating Malek-i-honza's lips — "will already have concluded that one division of Your Majesty's army would suffice to rout the Eastern Scythian troops, smash the wheels of their palace, and plunder it. We estimate that it will yield six tons of gold, twenty of silver, and considerable quantities of slave girls, icons, purple dye, amethysts, and tigers."
Malek-i-honza awaits the go-ahead with some confidence. But Gil swings his head dreamily toward him and eventually asks, in an echo of Enkidu: "Why?"

"Your Majesty?"

"Why do we want this?"

"Your Majesty, there are six tons of gold, twenty of silver—"

"I said why!" A touch of the familiar anger shuts the minister up.

"Your Scythians have nothing Uruq does not have."

The humiliated minister casts down his eyes, reddens, and begins to gather up the tapestry, but Gil brushes him away so he can return to an examination of the aquatic and sylvan fauna with his friend. They hunch over the tapestry, and Malek-i-honza has to exit the room slinking backwards on all fours, keeping his head low in case the king should, against all appearances, bother to look up and care what Malek-i-honza is doing. In fact, he does not.

These days Gil has an indefinable sensation, as if he had never met another human being before now: as if the boys he had bullied and crowds he had rallied and the hundreds of thousands teeming about the palace, and the creatures he had spied through the telescope and shot with the crossbow, had all been puppets and empty masks, so that he had been alone from the start, one man surrounded by nothings and reflections. What Gil feels is a great retrospective loneliness. He looks at himself before Enkidu's arrival and pities the man. He feels this sensation is something like wondering at the fact that he didn't exist before he took form in his mother's womb -- a fact that had always seemed easy to understand before.

As for Enkidu, his life without dreams now seems like a dream itself. Even the first day with Retheta has the quality of a myth or a floating image without roots. He cannot remember being named, and when he thinks back to the forest he is thinking, so the forest is no longer the forest it was before it was forest. He names his former life but can't live it. There is some sadness in him every day, but mostly there is pleasure in having become Enkidu, in the world that grows every day, in Gil's company and their contests.

The citizens all feel by now that the air in the city is different, that the king's eyes are no longer upon them, and some find to their surprise that they almost miss that presence. Is a rich man's funeral as impressive now if the king does not turn up and demand a share of the inheritance? Is a young man as brave now if he doesn't risk his life by walking on the avenues of Uruq and risking an encounter with the king? But after some puzzlement on this score, the people turn with a new lightness and relish to their ballads, their workshops, and their squabbles.

It's not as if the king has disappeared. He strides out from the palace, if anything, more often than before, invariably with his friend. They speak to no one else and don't care if anyone watches them. So the people gather and observe; they cheer for Gil when he throws Enkidu to the ground in one of their wrestling matches, and some of the braver young men cheer for Enkidu when he throws the king. Everyone sees that Gil does not get angry, but even joins the applause. So the crowds grow, and the royal sports become a popular spectacle whenever they take place in some public plaza or park.
FIRST EVER URUQ KICKBOXING MATCH
Champion: Enkidu

ROYAL ARCHERY COMPETITION
Champion: Gil

THROW-THE-BALL-THROUGH-THE-BASKET GAME
Gil: 246
Enkidu: 258

KING'S RUGBY MATCH, WITH SPONTANEOUS PARTICIPATION BY COMMONERS
Gil and associated citizens: 23
Enkidu and associated citizens: 35

Volleyball Competition
Canceled due to loss of ball after Gil spikes it into the air and it disappears into a canal.

ALL-URUQ ENDURANCE GYMNASTICS
Champion: Gil
Runner-up: Enkidu
Second runner-up: Targuth of Cappadocia

FIELD HOCKEY
Gil's Mesopotamian Maniacs: 20
Enkidu's Assyrian Animals: 20
The tie was broken with a citywide drinking contest, but no one is quite sure who won.

YAK POLO
Champion: Enkidu
Yaks used in match: 7

REGIONAL JAI ALAI COMPETITION
Enkidu's Assyrian Animals: 487
Gil's Mesopotamian Maniacs: 513

In the mornings, the palace library is finally seeing its leather-upholstered armchairs and massive tables get some use. Gil had last visited some years ago, to inspect the collection of gilt copies of the aphorisms of the king, shred some inferior ones, and order that a master copy be kept perpetually updated. The librarian caste is now a-twitter with the king's presence, hovering around, while servants bring samovars of tea and biscuits of fine-milled quinoa with huckleberry compote. Gil is teaching Enkidu how to read.

The man is a fast learner. At first he thought he saw insects crawling across the tablets and the papyrus, and each word was an individual creature with no relation to the rest. Then he saw similarities. Then the connection to sounds and names dawned on him, and now he is hungry to learn more. He recites texts to Gil with occasional corrections and explanations from the king.
As he learns, Enkidu learns to wonder about things unseen, things only indicated through signs. He realizes that this room contains worlds, that every shelf can convey new possibilities. Shalmanizzim the Librarian proudly explains:

The royal library of Uruq contains books in 23 languages from 17 nations, in 13 scripts. Codices, clay tablets, scrolls, inscribed stones, lambaksins stripped and scraped and stretched so they can receive the dye and paint of a sacred text. Many were written locally and contain essential records of the kingdom's daily life: tallies of cattle, irrigation schemes, laws upon laws. Others were imported by conquerors, explorers, or traders who collected them. Others were gifts from foreigners currying favor or making peace. Some were collected from tribes who have not invented writing, by civilized scribes who improvised ways of representing the tribal noises with urban symbols. Some collect ancient stories, epics from lost millennia. Some, they say, collect stories from millennia to come -- prophecies of the future, written in scripts yet to be deciphered or invented.

"Which ones have you read?" asks Enkidu.

Surprised at this personal question, Shalmanizzim hastens to assemble a list in his mind, and pulls himself together to recite some titles:
The True Tale of the Behemoth of Sanguinaria
The Tailor's Recompense
Book, or Sacred Text of the Magnarites
The Astronomical Compendium of Mareboh of Er
Dialogues on the Magnificence of the Invisible
Wanderings of Askhalon of Euboia in the Frozen Regions
On Nature, by Herakleitos
On Nature, by Farmanides
On Nature, by Empedocles
Growth and Decay of Worms, by Epididymus
The Hagiography of Ortekh the Siberian
The Deluge and the Recompense of Utnapishtim
Planets and their Colors
Planets and their Songs
How to Care for Your New Ox
Hermes Trismegistus and his Concealed Instruction
The Legislation of the Emperors of Babylon
Ritual Instruction for the Cult of Fire
The Measurement of Land, by Amen-Ptah
The Lonely Planet Guide to the Afterlife
The Quest for Humbaba
Biographical Portraits of Great Shahs of Middle Mongolia
Chronicles of the Dzu Dynasty
Exquisite Presentation of the Deipnosophical Mantra
Correction of the Corrections
Devastation of the Devastations
The Cookbook of the Pasha of Ailoni
Hymn to Martush
The Ballad of Roswetha and Neganor
Songs of Shlomo
Herbs of the Steppes and their Ritual and Medicinal Employment
Enkidu listens to the unfamiliar names, tasting them, inchoate images flashrunning through his head as the sounds echo. The universe seems to multiply and its limits are unknown.

Gil listens too, irritable, imagining Shalmanizzim basted with hot oil in a dish for the Pasha of Aliuni, garnished with herbs of the steppes. But he tolerates the pompous old man for Enkidu's sake. How could Shalmanizzim have neglected to mention the aphorisms of Gil first on his list? Echidnezar the jurist must be reminded to speak to the caste of librarians on this point... but such concerns seem much more remote than they used to be, small game, fish not worth keeping. Gil forgets the point of honor and he, too, lets himself get lost in the names and stories, some of which he's heard before—some that stir memories of childhood fireside recitations, legends and archetypes—and others that are foreign and new, stirring ambitions and curiosity. Maybe he should construct a mobile palace à la Scythian. Perhaps it might be worth conquering those nomads simply in order to roll their palace to the gates of Uruq and send the engineer caste to inspect it. The rolling palace of Gil would exceed the Scythians' in magnificence and excellence, to be sure, with cages for beasts discovered along the way and provisions for floating across intervening rivers. From the high turret, the king and Enkidu will watch with the telescope as mountains approach and herds of wild antelope scatter before the army. Then Gil sours on his fantasy, sighing at the thought of being carried like a baby in this vast, creaky perambulator. He feels impatience at the ubiquity of his underlings.

"Let's go," he interrupts, as Shalmanizzim is starting to list the three hundred thirty-eight tribes of the Akkadian Empire, with sketches of the ethnic costume of each. "Time for weightlifting."

The librarian bows as far as his age will permit, and Enkidu follows dreamily to the weight room, where the friends will pump iron, bronze, and marble. But as they strain and sweat with the gigantic spheres and slabs, Enkidu's mind is elsewhere, floating amid the steppes and swamps; and Gil's mind is elsewhere too, longing for some new adventure.

That night the king wakes up with indigestion and rises to walk half-nude to the window. He climbs to the turret and makes the circuit by moonlight, listening to the occasional cry of a drunken priest or the creak of a cart bringing nocturnal supplies to bakeries. The city shimmers in the faint glow of the half-grown moon, and stars are briefly blocked by flights of black, unidentified creatures competing for prey. Gil has reached a decision.

"HUMBABA!" shouts Gil as he strides into Enkidu's chambers. His friend is awake, doing one-handed pushups on the cold floor.

"Humbaba!" answers Enkidu. "What does 'humbaba' mean, Gil?"

"Humbaba is a monster. Humbaba is the greatest monster in the world. It lives in the Far Jungle and no one has ever defeated it."

"Did you see it?"

"No, I've never seen it. But there are reports, from many sources over the years. Just a few months ago, a traveler bringing saffron said that he'd heard the thing crashing around the jungle, and the thing was definitely still alive."

"Is it very big and strong?"

"Yes, of course, the greatest monster in the world! Some call it
Yubaba, or Oom-pa-pah, or Hommapa — it's all the same. And you and me, Enkidu: we're going to kill Humbaba."

"Why?"

"I told you! It's the greatest monster in the world! And together we will defeat it. Which makes us..."

"What, Gil?"

"The greatest warriors in the world!"

"Oh."

Gil takes that as a "yes" and is off to collect supplies: he shouts at his underlings and overseers, paying more attention to them than he has in months. Something is afoot, soon everyone in the palace knows, but he doesn't share his plan — only his list of gear.

Nets
Knives
Arsenic
Axes
Javelins
Shields
Helmets
Yak jerky
Oranges
Kindling
Leather straps
Rucksacks
Bandannas
Amulets
Trident
Salted swordfish
A lens from the workshop of Adrianus Heliogabalus
Two full quivers of arrows
A block of salt
A block of sugar
Freshly woven socks

By noon, everything is heaped together, and Gil supervises its assembly into two great packs. Enkidu arrives, ready to follow Gil, and they hoist the packs onto their broad shoulders.

"The slaves will carry all the gear, Your Maj—" begins Hiuloch, First Sub-Slavedriver to the Royal Household.

"No!" roars Gil. "No slaves! And no one is allowed to follow us past the city gates! Where is Echidnezar?"

The Chief Counsel steps silently up.

"You, Echidnezar, are king in absentia until my return. Let everyone hear! You I trust with my riches and authority. Don't do anything I wouldn't do, and remember, good servant, if you betray me I will flay you and fill your skin with boiling elephant fat, and then tip you into your own skin upside down. Deal?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The renowned kickboxing and jai alai champions, the tyrant and his companion, step bouncily with their backpacks through the dusty streets as the people fall in beside them and the usual troop of assorted yes-men follows behind. No one knows where they are headed, but all recognize that it must be important. A young woman runs out and suddenly plants a kiss on Enkidu's forearm (she can't reach any higher). Enkidu looks back at her with a touch of something that might be confusion or regret as they approach the great gates.
Gil and Enkidu hike for forty parasangs, past villages and wadis and gatherings of crows and shifting sands. They camp and make a fire, singing the song of Nath Ummarathi and his Magic Bowl (Gil) and the song of water (Enkidu).

Gil has a dream: a floating palace is on fire. The flames are reflected, very beautifully, on the waters, and the smoke rises into the red sky. Faint cries of despair are emerging from the structure, but he can't see anyone through any window. The palace is not consumed by the fire, but seems to burn interminably, and the cries interminably echo.

"It's bad," says Enkidu when they discuss it over breakfast. "Your kingdom will be destroyed."

"It's not my kingdom," answers Gil. "I don't live in a floating palace! The floating palace is Humbaba, and we will triumph."

Gil and Enkidu travel for fifty parasangs, past a swamp and two cougars and a river that has to be swum. They camp in a place where no human hand seems to have come, and feast on a wild boar that crossed their path and had no fear.

Gil has a dream: clouds rush past a mountain, the sun rises and sets, and years seem to be passing like blinks of an eye. He can see snows come and go, the constellations spinning frantically overhead when it's dark, rain and wind doing their work. And the great mountain changes: it erodes, softens, wastes away, its substance washing off with muddy streams that go to the sea. The mountain melts down to a hill, then it is gone.

"Bad," says Enkidu. "Destruction."

"Good destruction!" retorts Gil. "The mountain is Humbaba. We're fated to win."

Gil and Enkidu, picking up speed now as they travel over a prairie with abundant water and game, march for sixty-four parasangs and camp in a windy spot where a few spindly trees provide a little shelter and competing bands of crickets surround them.

Gil has a dream: a beautiful weaving, rich in the patterns of some unknown clan, is lying on a rooftop. Birds of all kinds come to sit on the cloth, scratch at it, peck at it, and then start to pull it apart. They fly off with strands of multicolored yarn in their beaks. Sparrows and storks and ibises take their booty as the thing becomes threadbare. Now the roof is thick with birds, but they all fly off mad and nothing is left.

"I don't like it," says Enkidu.

"Don't you see? We are the birds! This is the third good-omened dream. No way we can fail now."

Gil and Enkidu trudge for fifty-five parasangs up a river valley that grows steeper and brings them into a new ecosystem with evergreens and unknown rodents. A hardy peasant with a mule meets them and sells them orange vegetables and nuts. He confirms that they're on the way to the jungle. They camp in a cave replete of fungus.

Gil has a dream: there's a sinkhole in Uruq, houses are starting to tip into it, and it only grows. It opens and yawns, the whole city is afraid and is fleeing the ever-growing maw. Gil comes running and runs down, straight into the sinkhole, and everything is black.

"Well?" says Enkidu.

"OK, this one's not so great. But wait! I see! We are the hole, and Humbaba is the king!"

"Humbaba is you?"

"Exactly! You just have to know how to read these things, Enkidu."
And so it goes. After a month of travel, the sunburned, sinewy wanderers come to an ocean of greenery: the Great Jungle. The insects are thick here, and compete for prime parasitism locations where arteries flow close to the surface of the skin. Gil wipes his forearm and leaves multiple streaks of blood. Enkidu, remembering his infancy hazily, shows Gil how to coat himself with thin mud to protect his body. The Great Jungle is much vaster, wilder, thicker than Enkidu's forest, but some of the same skills apply.

Straight into the jungle they march, cutting vines, reaching an area where vegetation decreases because the canopy far overhead absorbs all the precious light, leaving a dim green space where the friends can make good progress, passing over rotten logs and fern groves and snakes. Every once in a while Gil stops, fills his lungs, and shouts: "HUMBABA!"

Days have passed, deep in the jungle. At night, their campfire casts sinuous shadows into the blackness, and the firelit smoke column rises to the treetops. Their skins are unhealthy, filthy with jungle mold and dust, and Gil coughs. Enkidu falls asleep early, while Gil stays up recollecting battles: boys he bloodied in the streets, rivals he challenged and destroyed in duels, barbarian soldiers he skewered and dismembered, craftier enemies he discovered plotting against him who became examples. He is ready for this new, best enemy. But the enemy does not show himself. Even though it's the middle of the night, Gil stands up and screams into the nothingness: "HUMBABA!"

The next morning they rise, as usual, with the morning light and follow the lone ray that passes through the canopy, continuing eastward. No new prey appears, so they lunch on the haunch of a small herbivore they surprised two days ago. As they go on, a stillness and peace surrounds them.

"No animals," says Enkidu.

Gil confirms that no birds, no reptiles, not even a moth is to be seen, and no cries of beasts are present in this quarter of the jungle.

"We have to be getting closer. Humbaba has scared all the animals away."

They go on. There is nothing but a weak, humid breeze that insinuates something into their nostrils: something reminiscent of a termite mound or a neglected cache of spices.

"Humbaba!" Gil shouts yet again. There are no echoes in the jungle; the words vanish, absorbed by the moss and the silent spaces.

They climb a mound, furrowed and stained by lichen, and peer as far as they can into the trees.

The mound shifts under them.

They race, leap off as the hill rises. Gil already has his pack off and his weapons at hand. Enkidu holds an axe in one hand, a great club that he fashioned from a mountain elm in the other. The ground is trembling and the men are poised, their hearts racing.

Humbaba -- they have no doubt this thing is it -- is a wrinkled, shuddering thing larger than the largest elephant, pushing itself up out of the dead pit where it has been resting. It's all whiskers and joints and teeth, a fat belly, limbs that seem to bend in them wrong places, and in the semi-light of the jungle it's impossible to get a picture of its shape. But those are eyes, those great, dark, glistening things that point their way, and that maw is a mouth with lips that have stretched to show its rows of teeth. Lips that now writhe and come together in an unpracticed gesture. The monster is preparing to use its mouth to speak.
"What are you?" says the thing in a hoarse, gristly voice, its eyes slowly pulsing.
"Men!" says Gil. "Gil of Uruq and Enkidu."
"Why are you here?"
"To kill you!"
"Why?"
"Because you are the greatest monster in the world! Prepare to die."
Humbaba does not react, but simply breathes and focuses its eyes and runs its tongue around the recesses of its mouth, exhaling the humid termite scent. Finally it answers. "I have not forgotten men. Men came with fire once and swarmed around me, and they died. Men came one time with sticks that they sent into my hide, and they died. But I did not die."
"They were weaklings, and we are heroes. So prepare to battle!"
"Why do men want battle?"
"For greatness. For glory."
"I do not know these words."
"For fame!"
"I do not know fame."
"But you yourself are famous, Humbaba. Your name has reached around the world. People tell tales about you. They write books. Now they will write books about Enkidu and me."
"Humbaba, yes, that is what the men with sticks called me."
"That is your name, then, monster!"
"My name." A deep hum, a strange sort of purr, comes from inside the beast. "I do not need the name Humbaba or the name monster or any name. You do not need your names. Know what you are, and that is enough. Go away now and live. Live as men." It hums.

The hum and the subsonic vibration get into Gil's head, his bones. For a moment he has a delusion that his name is an empty sound, that his past is a dream, that he is only a man and not a king.
"Gil?" asks Enkidu, who has not lost his senses and is giving him an urgent look.

Gil pulls himself together. He picks up his javelin and hurls it at Humbaba with all his strength, screaming without language. Humbaba lifts a leg to deflect the weapon, and it tears into the limb and passes through. A great sound of anger and impatience climbs up out of the hum and turns into Humbaba's roar. The monster lashes out with an unharmed leg and slashes against the men. Enkidu embeds his axe in the thing but is knocked off his feet, and Gil comes to the rescue with sword in hand, thrusting and slicing.

Now Humbaba is on its feet, lunging and crashing its bulk against Gil, who takes advantage of the moment to push his sword into the monster's hide, before falling to the jungle floor. Humbaba swivels to bite him, but Enkidu leaps onto the monster and punches its eye, bursting the eyeball. Ichor sprays onto the men, a bloody jelly, and now the creature is desperate and furious. Its wounded paw rakes across Enkidu and leaves gashes. Gil has scrambled to his feet and grasps his trident, charging, catching the monster in the mouth, puncturing its vile tongue, while he is sprayed by an acid juice from the belly of Humbaba, a digestive sludge.

Blinded, Gil lashes out with the honed knife he has pulled out from his scabbard, slicing but not going deep. He and Humbaba grapple, wrestle, giant against giant, the vast, ancient limbs of the monster pulling Gil's rocklike muscles apart from his joints, threatening to snap his spine -- until Enkidu comes with his club. It whips through the jungle air, performs its arc, and smashes down through the skull of Humbaba. Gil, under the
now slack but twitching flesh of the creature, is struggling to breathe but also reviewing the sequence of the fight, which may have taken minutes or hours, to be sure he will be able to tell the story. Enkidu is groaning, pushing up the monster's body with the leverage of his club, and Gil pulls himself out.

Dusk is coming on in the jungle clearing. Only the inaudible motions of plants surround the noise of cutting and chopping. Gil and Enkidu are separating the head of Humbaba from its body.

THE YOUNG lookout sees a crowd approaching from the north, a confused cluster of pedestrians and some men on horses or donkeys. As they get closer he sees two large figures in the center, with great burdens on their back; the crowd swirls around them, shouting excitedly, as others join in. The lookout feels a sudden importance, and something like a panic, as if he is the watched, not the watcher. He shouts down to the lower levels and inner ramparts.

"The king is back!"

"The king is back!" runs the report through the neighborhoods of the city, filtering through tiny alleys and through metal bars, into cloisters and jails and sickrooms. Some feel as if they've been caught stealing by their father; others feel proud; others feel resentful, wishing that this uneventful intermission had been allowed to continue; everyone wants to see. The crowds press around the two heroes.

The men tramping steadily up the great avenue are reeking, filthy, coarsened by their adventure, but glowing with achievement. They say nothing, but press on to the Agora, where they swing their great bundles off their shoulders. Enkidu's clutters to the ground with a ringing of bronze; it is a cache of weapons. Gil's falls heavily and they feel the bony thump. He strips off the tarp.

Now silence spreads as the crusty, misshapen, bristly mass lolls on the flagstones. The sockets are rotting, the cavities dessicated, the skin tearing. The teeth protrude.

Then one shout, another, a hundred proclaim that Gil and Enkidu are heroes, saviors, champions, true kings. A frenzy of excitement breaks out, a manic revel. Screams, dancing, ouzo, banners, laying on of hands, scribbling, singing, slivovitz, cheers. It's late night before the heroes are back in the palace, soaking in near-scalding water perfumed with rose petals, scraping layers of scurf off their bodies, sinking into their soft beds -- too soft after so much time in the wilderness, so that each of them separately tosses and turns, throws off the blankets, and ends up sleeping on the floor as the dawn is breaking.

A week of citywide celebrations is declared, with contests, speeches, dancing, and feasting. For the first time, the people's fear of Gil has been mingled with admiration. Their affection for Enkidu has only grown.

Craftsmen are busy fashioning faces of Humbaba: a bronze head to be mounted above a primary gate of the palace; a likeness to be struck on a new batch of coins; Humbaba rugs are already available in the marketplaces; a fresco depicting the two heroes' struggle with the monster is taking shape on a wall in the artists' quarter.

Hanging black and blind over it all, the real head of Humbaba is impaled on a high tower, prey to birds and insects, wasting away daily on its way to becoming a bleached, cracked skull.
CERTAIN configurations of human achievement or misfortune seem to attract the gods. Human beings regularly misunderstand the cause and effect, attributing their success or failure to the divine. But the divine takes no interest in advance, plots no providence for the ephemeral animals that haunt the earth. The gods are alerted to come together, to focus their being on a limited time and space, when some extraordinary heights or depths of human life send their signals out to the countless scintillations of the divine.

And so it is that Ishtar, the goddess of that name, concentrates herself upon Gil in his newfound glory. Wrapped in an iridescent gown and multi-layered tiara, she strides through the city, coming out of a nondescript patch of shabby pavement without explanation. She is as tall as the king, the most awe-inspiring woman ever seen in Uruq. But only the king himself is allowed to feel the awe; only he can notice her; to everyone else, she is a blur hardly noticed on the periphery of their vision, a background stride of silken slippers on the dusty road. The people feel a brightness, a stimulation that frames their experience, without being able to catch sight of the goddess as an object.

Gil is training for a race against Enkidu, a race that will culminate the festivities of that evening -- a great party to be held under a bright banner decorated with the face of Humbaba. He is crouching, sprinting, racing back again, guzzling ice water.

The goddess is straight in front of him as he's about to take off on a new sprint.

"Gil!"

He looks up at her magnificence and knows her right away.

"Ishtar."

"You are a great king, Gil. A great hero. The greatest known."

"What do you want, goddess?"

She slips off her gown and reveals five rows of perfect breasts that shine in the sun. "I want you to become my lover."

"What for?"

"Proud fool, to love a goddess, to love Ishtar, is the greatest joy any man can imagine!" Her golden-red hair bursts free and swirls around her, longer than her body itself, and her eyes shine green.

"Joy? I know the stories. They're not stories of joy. Marton of Epidotis became your lover and he was burned up in your embrace. Just a film of greasy dust was left on your skin."

"But he knew the pleasure that no woman can ever give you, Gil. And look how I magnified Elator, the champion rower."

"Elator -- he's the one who became king in his city with your favor."

"Yes, and I made him more handsome than anyone else. But you, Gil, you are already far more beautiful than Elator."

"Handsome. And his corpse was handsome, was it, when he was ambushed by his entire cabinet and shot full of arrows?"

"I did not do that."

"Without you it would never have happened. And do you remember Nicolae who was shot, Saddam who was hanged, Moammar who was bayoneted in the ass? Weren't they all your favorites too?"

"Don't insult me, Gil. Be grateful!"

"Is a chestnut grateful when it falls out of the pan and into the fire, blackening, bursting, smoking? Is a drop of wine grateful when it falls into the river and is diluted and no one can drink it? Is a candle grateful when it's put into the desert at noon and no one can see its flame for the abundance of light?"
"No, Ishtar, you are too much. Your touch kills. Your love is lethal."
"But those men were small, Gil. You are great. You are supreme."
"I am a man! I haven't forgotten that! And you — you're not human. I've heard of what happened to Samazon the Scamandrian, the wrestler, your favorite for a week. You used him, sucked him dry, and he **fell** back among his people drained, withered, aged. He died within a week."
"But Gil..." and the goddess breathes upon him. Her breath is unparalleled, smoky sweet, laden with unknown essences, rich beyond compare. It touches every inch of his skin and sends shivering waves across every hair of his body.

He casts his gaze around him. A dirty butcher's stall has been trying to sell a side of beef, a graying carcass from some broken-down field animal. Gil runs over, hauls the corpse off while the butcher gapes, and starts dragging it, raising it up, spinning his body, swirling it about him like a shotgun champion. Then he releases it. It flies into Ishtar's golden body and knocks it into a thousand pieces. Sparks of goddess disaggregate, shimmer, zip away with flecks of beef blood feebly following them but soon collapsing to the ground, where the dusty, overripe mass of meat is shuddering. An aura of auburn and green flickers in the air over the marketplace, and disappears.

That night Gil beats Enkidu by two strides, and drinks an urnful of honey wine. There are dancing virgins and gamelan orchestras and fireworks from the Han kingdom. The shouts and songs buzz and pulse like cicada rhythms. Enkidu is tired and goes off to bed, but Gil feels stronger than ever. He has triumphed today over the only fit human opponent, his best friend. They have triumphed over the greatest monster in the world. And he has earned the lust of a goddess and triumphed over it too. When he lies back and gazes into the sky, he can see the stars revolving around him.

ENKIDU is sick. He doesn't feel like joining Gil in the morning, but wants to stay in bed. Gil has tea and herbs brought to him and spends the day patrolling the city, taking fresh interest in all its activities.

The next day Enkidu is worse, coughing and spitting up greenish slime. Gil brings the chief healer to his friend's room. The healer applies a poultice and a plaster. He attaches fresh leeches to Enkidu's chest, which soon become fat and glossy with blood. When they're pulled off, a watery trickle oozes from their sucking spots, welling up without rest, draining off the sickness from the hero.

The next day Enkidu is worse, and Gil is pacing back and forth in his room, listening to his relentless coughs, bringing him water that he doesn't want, holding the bowl under his strained body when he hacks up bloody phlegm. Gil gathers all the members of the palace medical caste and orders them to cure his friend. As Enkidu shivers, the physicians apply ice and boil water, smear hot mustard on his chest, peer into his ears, listen to his heart through his shaggy chest. They prescribe kuhuli juice, ground amber, tylen oil, concentrated sunlight therapy. Enkidu is hoisted by a team of nurses who bring him to a sickroom and administer the remedies. Throughout everything, Enkidu says nothing except "I feel bad." He says this a few times between racking coughs.

The next day Enkidu is worse. He looks very pale and keeps coughing violently, but nothing comes out, as if he's empty. His tongue is swelling and he's very hot.

Gil goes to the magi. Usually ignored or insulted by the king, they
inhabit a lesser wing and spend their days performing rituals for pay on request of the more traditional members of the household. They are old and ignorant of events in the kingdom. But they can gain knowledge through casting magic lots. This is what everyone says.

"Enkidu is sick!" shouts Gil. A white-bearded magus bows and makes a sign of blessing.

"What can you do?"

"We will perform the healing ceremony, Your Majesty." Five magi climb slowly to the sickroom, bringing their folded cloths, their books, and their censers. The room fills with stale, perfumed smoke as they begin their chant. It goes on for hours, with dead languages and incense and miniature gongs, with wrinkled fingertips laid on Enkidu's feverish and trembling skin. At the end of it, Enkidu is still convulsing with the feeble cough that is all he can muster.

The next day Enkidu is worse. He seems to have entered a delusional state, muttering and making twitching motions like a sleeping dog, shaking his head violently, letting water dribble from his mouth, not chewing or swallowing any food. His breath is rank.

While the medicine men and priests continue to attend on Enkidu, Gil lays his hand on the shoulder of the chief magus and asks him for a divination. Slowly, infuriatingly slowly, they return to the shabby wing where the old man keeps the necessary supplies. He brings out misshapen chunks of quartz that he arranges in front of him in a seemingly random order — but the care he takes with the position of each stone indicates that there is some method afoot. The old magus whispers some syllables, rocks back and forth, and finally stiffens and adopts the expression of a medium.

"What's wrong with Enkidu?"

"Enkidu is sick," the geezer croaks.

Gil wants to smack the old fool, but controls himself. "I know that. When is he going to get well?"

"He will not get well."

"What can you do for him?"

"Nothing."

"Is he going to die?"

"Yes."

Gil starts up, paces around the narrow room, not seeing the old arrases and icons on its walls, twitching with the need to act.

"He's going to die from his illness? From this illness?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Soon."

Gil is breathing heavily. "Why? Tell me something, you fraud. What happened? What did we do wrong?"

"He is sick."

"Is it Humbaba? Did Humbaba put a curse on him when it died? Was Humbaba the favorite monster of some god?"

"No."

"But it's the gods. Right? I know: Ishtar. Ishtar did it. She wants to punish me. Right?"

"No."

"Why won't she punish me instead?"

There is no answer.

"He's not going to die!" Gil runs out, leaving the old magus in trance, sprinting up to the sickroom. Enkidu, surrounded by servants and healers
with slack faces, is quivering in a disconnected way, his tongue black, stinking, his eyes open but glassy.

“Enkidu! Stop it!” Gil shouts at him. He pushes away the little people and pulls Enkidu up, shakes him, pinches him, shouts again. There is no sign of awareness of self-control.

Gil shoos everyone out and spends the day and night at Enkidu's side, talking to him, gripping his shoulder, feeling his brow, striding off only to turn back superstitiously to see if Enkidu is staring at him.

The next day Enkidu dies. His breaths get shallower and slower, there is more and more time between them, and then the next breath doesn't come. Gil is waiting for it, his ear directly over Enkidu's mouth, and he can't feel it, he can't hear it. He roars for the magi and healers.

The chief healer listens, feels, takes due time, and says, "Your Majesty, I regret to inform Your Majesty that Enkidu has died."

"Liar!" This is the old Gil, the fire in his eyes, the viciousness. Everyone gets out and leaves the king to rip apart a chair, push the wall, shed tears of anger, grab Enkidu's body and prop it up against the pillows, shout at it, give a speech, jump up and down, pull Enkidu's hair.

For three days no one dares to come in the room. Gil is half-mad, ranting, interrogating Enkidu, cursing Ishtar, reliving the fight against Humbaba, breaking apart the bed. Staring at Enkidu. Walking around the room again and again, and staring at him again.

On the fourth day, in the light of morning, a small squirming maggot pushes its way out of Enkidu's nose. It drops onto his chest and writhes there, twitching against the wiry hair on the waxy skin.

Enkidu's funeral is the greatest Uruq can remember. The body is draped in layer upon layer of rich silk, adorned with golden jewelry, perfumed, painted, accorded the royal treatment and more. His sandals are made of crystal. Thousands weep genuine tears, and gifts and riches follow the body onto its funeral pyre. It begins to burn amid droning bagpipes and cymbals. The fire grows fast and drowns out the music and the tears with its roar, scorching the crowd with its heat, sending an immense pillar of smoke into the sky.

Gil, facing the spectacle from his throne, stare past it as the firelight flickers on his cheeks. He is looking into the infinite distance, looking at the beating of his own heart and the breath that he inhales and exhales.

SOMETHING has finally landed a blow on Gil. The wind has been knocked out of him. There is a haunted look in his eyes, a sickly look. Even his enemies don't like to see him in this strange, unpredictable condition. He doesn't break anything or anyone, but seems not to care about them or about himself. He wanders at night and stays in bed in the day, but no one sees him sleep. Gil's mourning is swelling, pregnant with a further emotion: dread.

It's all too easy to see his warm, bronze skin transmuted into a waxy hide; to see his own eyes lose their luster, film over, and collapse into blind marbles; to see the liquids ooze out, fester, dry up, ferment.

It's impossible to see out from those dead eyes, though. This is what Gil never understood before. The fact that he once did not exist and that someday he would cease to exist always seemed obvious, trivial, and unworthy of the attention of a king. Now he understands that he was looking at his
own birth and death as if he, the observer, did not need to be born or die. Now he himself, Gil, has been plucked out of nonbeing and is hovering over a return to it.

There are many stories that sects and families tell about the afterlife:

1. Heroes go to Valhalla and spend eternity feasting and killing. Those killed by the immortal heroes go to ... some other Valhalla? It was never explained very clearly.

2. The zealots will be rewarded with wine, virgins, and all sorts of meats -- just the things they can't touch on earth.

3. Everyone will be reborn -- as a peasant, a dog, an emperor, a peacock, a goldfish, an inhabitant of the moon, a mosquito, a demigod...

4. After a thousand years of reward or punishment, you will get the chance to pick your next life from a barrel of lifetimes before you sip the waters of Oblivion.

5. Your life-force will be preserved in your objects of daily use, which should
   (a) be buried with you to accompany you on your journey to the afterlife
   (b) be kept in use so that you will continue to live here after death

6. You do not really die, but become very small, collapsing into a sub-visible realm of smaller and smaller worlds.

7. You are either tortured without the hope of mercy, or absorbed into perfection, or tortured for a period between a week and a trillion years before being absorbed into perfection.

8. You stop existing, but your body rots and becomes food for other beings.

9. Your soul travels to a distant planet where you meet the strange race that initially planted your soul in the degenerate flesh that it has suffered. This race gives you your true, indestructible housing.

Gil only finds #8 really plausible. But all the others, even if true, are inadequate to his dread. They are all ways of saying that he himself, with his own body and mind and desires, on the earth that he knows, cannot survive. The transformations are too great; if not complete destructions, they are the end of life as he knows it. When he thinks of them, they make him sick, as if they bring death closer instead of bringing consolation. They sound empty, mortal themselves, dreams of the condemned.

Seeking a story that he can believe in, a story that preserves life instead of giving up on it or changing it into some other creature's life, Gil sinks into his memories and sorts through his mental maps, letting himself wander over the earth, back in time. Then his heart quickens and he sits up.

The chief magus is throwing dice, memorizing the results, and throwing them again. By his side is a meager, ascetic dish of roots and beans. Gil crouches down to him, staring into his eyes, hungry.

"Magus. Tell me about Utanapishtim."
The old magus watches his dice. "Some call him Utnapishtim. Some call him Ishi. Some call him No'akh."
"And?"
"They say there was once a flood."
"Look, I know the story. I'm not here to be told a story! What I want you to tell me is, is he real?"

The magus looks at Gil with a look that could be pity or resignation. After a while he pronounces, "It happened."
"Then he's real. Then he's alive."
"It happened generations of generations ago, before Uruq."
"Where is he?"

Now surely that's a look of pity. But the magus answers. "They say that he lives on the other side of the earth. Where the sun goes after it sets."
"And if I go there I will meet him."
"If you get to where he is ... then you will meet him, King."

Gil sets out that very afternoon, too agitated to listen to any cautions or to respond to the goodbyes. The magus must have spread the word, because as he packs his few necessities and strides out of the palace, the name Utnapishtim is whispered behind his back. He is met by deep bows that seem to say, "We hope the next ruler of the city will be less mad than you," and "We wish you had left like this, and Enkidu had lived to be king," and "Ancient stories can't tell you how to live today." He can't wait to get these feeble vermin out of his sight. They seem to realize that; no one follows him beyond the city walls, no one calls out behind him.

Gil's goal is fixed: the evening land, the land of the setting sun. There are rivers to be forded, great dusty highways where he has to defend himself against kidnappers, mountains where he slips on ice, heavy-browed people living in shapeless huts, and then no sign of human habitation, only plains grazed by aurochs, skies cloven by the cries of great raptors, and then desert.

Carrying waterskins and traveling at dawn and dusk, Gil follows the path of the sun, which is swollen and raging, a great ball hurled his way by the gods. The land is desolate, devoid of plant or animal.

Finally he witnesses it: the sinking of the sun. Peering from behind a baked rock, Gil squints toward the vast furnace of light before him. The searing globe sinks steadily into a chasm that is lit brighter than anything the human eye can take in. The sun disappears into the pit. Steadily the light emerging from the great hole fades down. The sky cools. Gil ventures to the edge of the chasm and cannot see the sun, only its receding radiance as it continues its course through the gigantic tunnel that takes it to the other side of the earth.

This is it. He has one day to pass through that tunnel. Gil drops all his gear. He drains the last of the dusty, warm water from his skins. He bites off a hunk of dried meat from his depleted store and hurls the rest into the sky. "Enkidu," he affirms.

Then Gil runs straight on, down the sloping, glazed, lifeless track that takes him into the monstrous pit.
Chasing the sun, he hurtles downward, racing like a horse, pushing against the rock, as the light keeps dimming. The great tunnel echoes its dead presence around him, seemingly unchanging, as if he were getting nowhere. He sprints on, panting, heart pumping, finally realizing that he can see nothing at all, running on into the utter blackness, no echo reaching him anymore, only the steady slap of his sandals on the blasted stone.

Gil runs into the dark, the dark behind him, his lungs in pain, his knees pounding, pressing on.

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It has already been an eternity.

Gil runs into the dark, the dark behind him, his lungs in pain, his knees pounding, pressing on.

He imagines that he has turned around, that he's heading back to the desert. He imagines that he's running in circles. He stops imagining.

Gil runs into the dark, the dark behind him, his lungs in pain, his knees pounding, pressing on.

He has let go of his kingdom. He has let go of his possessions, his food, his drink. Now he lets go of everything he has left, thinking goodbye to his hair, his beard, his useless eyes, his ears, his fingers. He runs into the dark and away from the dark, panting and smashing his feet against rock.

His heart, his joints, his liver, his kidneys, his tongue.

He runs into the dark and away from the dark, panting and smashing his feet against rock.

His teeth, his genitals, his intestines, his marrow, his brain.

He runs into the dark and away from the dusk, panting and smashing his feet against rock.

There is grayness. There are hints of texture on the rock. His every organ is being pulled apart.

Gil runs from the sun. The growing warmth and yellow light surround him now. He can see the far wall of the tunnel. He cannot see any exit. Every bone singing in pain, he draws on some undiscovered reservoir of life and runs.

There is a roaring in his ears. Not just in his ears, in the great pit itself. It is the inchoate bellowing of the sun.

Flashrun hurry, flashrun go, man against star. Through his starved eyes Gil sees great brightness ahead and feels something like hope. The brightness grows toward him, searing, and then he sees his shadow shooting forward into it, as he casts a long, dying spike of dimness, the sun behind him now, racing toward him.

His hair is shriveling. His back is blistering. Again he's blind, ready to be consumed in the brightness.

But Gil's deadened legs sense a change in the terrain. He is climbing a slope that opens out —- into the morning sky.

Shelter: a boulder. Gil scrambles behind it and the raving sun dawns without killing him.

He can't rest here, though — his thirst commands his pain to get up, to search. Gil trudges out of the pit into the fresh, brisk air. He makes out a green swath just a mile away. Two white figures are standing on the grass.
As he stumbles toward them, they walk in his direction. They carry something in their arms. The grass is lush in this place, the sky is smokeless, there is no scent of dung. Just one white house stands here, out beyond the two people, and after that a great expanse of glittering sea.

The people approach, no sound except a gentle sea breeze in the grass. They approach as he approaches them. It is a man and a woman. They are here.

Gil stands uncertainly in this soft and verdant place, wondering if this is a dream. Maybe he has fallen in the tunnel and is hallucinating. The man and woman are short, dressed in clean linen, their long white hair carefully braided. Their skin is a fine mesh of almost invisible wrinkles, which looks soft and clean. In their arms are a loaf of bread and a jug of water.

"I am Gil of Uruq," he tries to say, but his throat is completely dry.

The man hands him the water, and Gil nods in gratitude and drinks it down.

"I am Utanapishtim," says the man. "This is my wife." She makes a small bow and gives him the bread.

They escort him toward the house, one on either side of him, saying no more. Gil has absorbed all the cool water and is chewing the bread. His starved, exhausted body secretes grateful pleasure. The place begins to feel warm. Utanapishtim is real. Gil begins to reclaim his limbs, his organs, his mind. The house is a simple, whitewashed cottage, a humble garden next to it. You can hear the surf now, just over the hill, and the once-fearsome sun is now just a bright globe bringing gentle warmth to the morning.

Gil stops. He has to ask his question.

"Utanapishtim. I want to be immortal like you. How?"

Utanapishtim and his wife look gently, evenly at him, unsurprised.

"Come with me," says Utanapishtim, and takes him by the hand like a boy. He leads Gil to the seaward side of the house, where a lightly salted mist reaches his nostrils and faint cries of birds can be heard. There is a great tree here with gnarled roots.

"Wait at the foot of this tree. When I come back you will have your answer."

Gil sits down.

"Stay awake," adds Utanapishtim.

"Of course!" replies Gil, anticipating his triumph.

The sea just over the grassy hill sends its rhythmic surf onto the land. Clouds scud slowly across the sky. A profound calm seeps into Gil's exhausted muscles. The grass is soft and swaying. Fine breezes, some cool, some warm, caress Gil's skin. Suddenly he pulls his head up. The scene is still there, still the inextinguishable rhythm, the gentle air. Sweet relief and a cradling comfort, a mother's touch, his childhood room is still and mysterious, children's voices coming through the window, he can look out and see them at play with a gourd that they toss back and forth, back and forth —

"Gil." He's back under the old tree. Utanapishtim is watching him with the same gentle, unsurprised expression.

"What — do you have my answer?"

"Yes. You want to overcome death. But you cannot even overcome sleep."
"Very funny."
Utnapishtim looks soberly, steadily at Gil, saying nothing more.
"What, you want me to stay awake?" Gil jumps to his feet. "I can stay awake as long as you like! What does this have to do with immortality anyway?" A creeping despair is on Gil's neck — he ran through the earth itself and found the legendary immortal; is he to be denied his desire because of a nap?
Again leading him by the hand like a child, Utnapishtim takes Gil into the whitewashed cottage, where his wife is stirring a pot over a small hearth. The fresh air and sunlight pour into the modest, clean room where an unpainted table and three chairs await.
"Please, Utnapishtim. Make me live forever. I'll tell everyone about you, I'll make your story come back to life."
"Have a seat," says Utnapishtim. He sits across from Gil as his wife removes some food from the boiling pot. "I cannot make you live forever. I cannot make myself live forever. Only the gods can do such a thing. It was the gods that made me and my wife immortal. The greatest and wisest and strongest mortals are still the slaves of their own bodies. When the body is exhausted, they lose their mind and sleep. When the body is destroyed, they lose their life."
His wife serves three plates of soft, white, mealy balls, flavored with a touch of sea brine. Gil's heart is breaking, but his belly is empty, so he eats. The man and woman eat too, in no hurry, as the waves crash on the beach.
After the meal, Utnapishtim begins to tell his story. What else can he do? His wife looks on patiently, unsurprised, unsurprisable. And what can Gil do but listen as well?

WE LIVED, says Utnapishtim, in the town of Mah延迟-i-mekridh, in the foothills of the Mother Range, and I was a carpenter. We had four grown children and I was successful. One year there was bad weather. Drought in the summer, whirlwinds, and then monsoon rains. The land without crops turned to mud and started to wash away.

One night, after a week of rain, I had a dream. A dream of everything filling with water, everyone drowning, not alive but the fish. The next morning I gathered all my three sons and my daughter and my wife, and put them to work helping me build a ship.

They were too respectful to question me, but I could see in their eyes that they thought I was mad. And all the neighbors and people of the town of Mahr延迟 thought I was mad when the news got around. Soon the ship was too big to keep in my workshop, and we rolled it out under a tent, rolling it on logs. People gathered around and asked what it was for, again and again.

"For the flood," I said.
They all laughed. And all the time, it rained and kept raining. But people believe that everything they are used to will return like the sun returns every day.
The ship was finished in seventeen days of constant work. It was bigger than our house. I asked my children and their spouses to gather up only their essentials. Two of my sons had infant children they brought. Then we gathered a male and female of every species we could find. Everyone else in town laughed and mocked. Then we closed the doors and the rain really began.

Rain like this will drown you for lack of enough air between the raindrops. It comes down in sheets, in tubs, in waterfalls. Houses were undermined — we peered out through holes in the side of the ship — and people started to pound on the planks of my vessel. But there was no room.
Our ship was knocked off its props by great waves that took us into a great river that had never passed through Mahrat before. Now it was passing through — and it was taking all of Mahrat with it. The river was soon so big that we could not see its banks. Then we were at sea. The sea was usually ten days’ journey from Mahrat, but it had come up to meet us. We watched the land, even the Mother Range itself, sink into the sea, and then there was nothing except the waves. The rain had stopped and had turned into the world.

I do not need to tell you about the cries of the animals and infants, the desperate and hungry birds circling the ship, or our emotions as every new dawn brought only the shimmer of sunlight on water. But one morning there was land on the horizon. The ship’s one great sail brought us to the shore.

We disembarked onto this island — later I discovered it was a peak of the Mother Range — and I could feel the gods buzzing over us like fl ies, waiting for a sacrifice. Somehow I had not planned for this. It had not been in my dreams or thoughts. But I knew it was necessary.

Our cow had given birth to a calf on board the ship. It was this young calf that we took from its mother and slaughtered. We separated it into all its ritual parts, collected the blood, and sacrificed everything, not taking a single bite ourselves, while its mother bellowed and kicked. A rich smoke rose into the heavens.

Then a god appeared from out of the smoke. He gathered himself from the smoke. My wife believes it was the god we called Marsh-t-e-khd. I have never been sure. “Utnapishtim,” he said. “You have saved humanity for us. You have saved all the future generations of men and women who will be born and die. For this, you and your wife will be exempted from death. Your bodies will not be corrupted and will not grow old. And we will take you to live forever in a land of your own.”

That was the last we saw of our four children and two little grandchildren. A whirlwind picked us up and deposited us here. And what the god said is true. Our bodies are not corrupted and do not grow old.

THE STORY is done. Gil cannot see deep enough into Utnapishtim’s soft eyes or the eyes of the woman. He does not know what to call the feeling that he may or may not detect in their eyes. It is the same story he heard as a boy, the same story represented on a few old coins or paintings, but it seems more puzzling and incomplete than he expected.

"Why did the flood come?"
"We don’t know."
"Were people bad?"
"Yes."
"Then that’s why."
"People are always bad. People are always good."
"Did the gods make the flood?"
"We don’t know."
"Did anyone else make a ship?"
"We didn’t see anyone else."
"Did the gods send you your dream?"
"We believe all dreams are sent by the gods."
"Do you want to return to your children?"
"One cannot return to the dead."
"Do you ever get other visitors here?"
"We have had a few others. They always want what you wanted."

There is a pause when they all listen to a seagull and the sun passes briefly behind a cloud.
"Do you ever wish you hadn't made the sacrifice?"
"There was a time when we wished it."

Gil stands at the window and feels as if he is mourning. He doesn't know whether he's mourning the drowned, or Utanapishtim's children, or the life of Utanapishtim and his wife, or Enkidu, or himself.

"Come," says Utanapishtim. "I have a gift for you before you go."

Like a child, Gil snaps out of his dark feelings and gets excited about the present. Utanapishtim walks with him across the field to the bank of a dark river that is running toward the coast. At this point in the river, there are strange eddies as the water pauses to swirl in a deep pool before it gets taken to the sea.

"On the riverbed here there grows a plant that some call moly. It will not make you live forever. But it can cure any disease in the world. Just a pinch of the dried leaf, dissolved in water, will bring health to anyone, will destroy all infection."

There is another chance for magic, another opportunity for this journey to mean at least something.

"Dive down as far as you can and pull up as many leaves as you can from the bottom of the river."

Gil strips, peers into the dark water, empties and fills his lungs, and dives. His whole body is slapped alert by the cold, dark water, and he sinks deep into the moly fluid, pulling down with his arms, kicking down like a frog, his ears hurting from the pressure. Tendrils and sleek forms brush against him. He pulls downwards. Finally some resistance: a slimy, slippery, multiform mass. He grabs in the darkness. Again and again, the stuff slips away from him as he begins to burn for lack of air. Finally he grabs with both hands, using his nails, putting all the force of his arm muscles and finger muscles into the act, and he uproots something. Then he kicks and wriggles his way back up, nearly bursting, finally coming out to gasp and pant onto the shore.

"That is the plant," says Utanapishtim with a soft smile.

In Gil's clenched fists, a flabby, purplish seaweed is dripping.

THE NEXT MORNING Utanapishtim takes Gil to the inlet where a sailboat awaits -- a foreign-looking little craft with a single sail of coarse cloth. "It is a little replica of my ship," says Utanapishtim. "My wife and I build a new one after we have a visitor. This one has been waiting for a hundred and twenty years, but I have kept it in good condition. Returning to your land is easy; the prevailing winds will take you there in four days."

Gil thanks the couple repeatedly and wants to apologize for having nothing to give them in return; but he reflects that they seem to want nothing. They give him water jars, pickled food -- those white, soft balls that grow underground -- and loaves of bread. He pushes the boat out into the surf, pulls himself aboard, and soon a breeze has taken him out of sight of the cottage and the island of the immortals.

Out on the sea, there is the illusion he has noticed before: moving with the wind and waves, the boat seems to be standing still. But the sail remains full and he believes Utanapishtim's promise that he is heading home. Gil travels all day until the sun sets -- is it rising over Uruq now? -- and countless stars sparkle overhead. There is only the quiet lap and rush of water, the hint of wind, the simple flavors of the food and the fresh water. Gil doesn't think, but just lets himself be carried.
On the second day, Gil imagines himself growing old. He can already see new lines in his hands, new coarseness from his journey and his close encounter with the sun. He envisions his beard growing white, his limbs weakening, his joints stiffening. But he will not die of a fever like Enkidu. He will not die of plague, pox, agues, cancer, scarlet fever, malaria, all the pestilence that seems to sweep over people in waves. The moly will save him. Just a little pinch dissolved in water.

Gil carefully unwraps the weed that is stashed in a jar. It's shriveled and looks much smaller. But it's supposed to dry out. He quickly covers it again in the linen.

He will die, but not of disease. He will achieve what only a few achieve: death of old age. Or by violence? Gil seems to see faces of enemies in the waves. The rest of the day is full of imagined scenarios, ways in which the aging ruler might cultivate the good will of the people and turn enemies into friends.

On the third day, Gil dreams of a city transformed. A few clouds scud overhead, the sail continues to swell, and he thinks that the magi and physicians will be able to study the moly and determine the source of its healing power. Then Uruq will grow in strength as it grows in health. No tiny coffins brought to the children's pyre, no young men dying in convulsions before they've had a chance to marry or soldier. Every man and woman will carry a flask of diluted moly to keep them thriving, productive, alive.

With the new potion, the kingdom grows and becomes a great empire, the greatest known. It spreads its superior medicine to its conquered peoples and embarks on collaborative projects that will turn nature itself into man's property and slave. Old Gil will live to see some of these projects: Great new aqueducts and canals that irrigate the desert.

Paved roads that bring Uruq's army to new frontiers.

Vehicles that roll along without horses, powered by fire.

Devices that write official records at the touch of a lever.

Towers higher than his own palace, served by machines that pull the inhabitants up by ropes.

More machines that can be boarded at the top of a tower and that then fly like birds, gliding and flapping their way to distant destinations.

An Uruq expanded beyond its great walls, expanded to the horizon, a vast beehive of activity, singing its industrious symphony to the sky, day and night.

His inner eye pullulating with these possibilities, Gil lies on his back on the deck of the little craft.

On the fourth day, after eating a lightly salted loaf, Gil sees a dark line on the horizon that turns into a coastline. The ever-reliable wind brings him to the shore, where he leaps out, clutching the moly, and heads inland. He knows these lands, a semi-arid scrub just 2 days' travel from his home. There are some small villages where Gil might stop, but he pushes onward, eager to return, until night overtakes him in some woods that cannot be far from Uruq. He sleeps a peaceful sleep.

It's dawn. Gil stretches and turns at the sound of scuffling. A rock badger is hustling off with something in its mouth. A blackish clump of dry seaweed.

With a roar, Gil lights out after the animal, which disappears into a burrow. Gil jams his arm in after it but can't go further. With a branch, he rips at the burrow, digs it up, uncovering tunnel after tunnel, sweating and cursing. At the end of the day, there is no badger and no moly.
A PACK of street dogs race around a neighborhood and knock down a laundry basket sitting on a stoop. The shrieks of the washerwoman mingle with the music of an oud and a tambourine. There is hammering in a workshop where they build cabinets for merchants. A soldier, drunk on beer, is urinating in an alley. An empty-handed, oversized man passes through the South Gate, along with a small flock of goats and a young goatherd. A chant begins in a temple dedicated to the Moon.

The large man makes his way up the main avenue, his eyes on the ground. He reminds some pedestrians of someone, and they pause to look after him for a few moments. He reaches the royal palace and the guards look closely before they spring aside.

Up spiral staircases and through colonnades he wanders, reviewing the banquet halls and throne rooms that now seem so strange. Finally he takes a seat in the royal library, resting in a leather chair at a great oak table with a view of the city. There is papyrus on the table, a stylus, and a bottle of ink. Gil sits and views the city, and sees the writing implements, and stare at them for a very long time until he can't wait longer. He begins to write:

GRAYER than your grandfather's cradle, the walls of Uruq will outlast your grandson's grave. Twelve times they wind around the city suburbs, five around the urba itself, tendrils extending inward and outward, overlapping, undermining, overtopping. In the walls are relics of ancient worships, prayers submitted by the faithful -- crammed into niches and cracks of the innermost layers accessible. The core of the wall, it is said, is composed purely of prayers: tablets and stones, papyrus and amulets, filling each other's gaps, topped with spinning prayerwheels that circulate a mantra a thousand times, a million times, forever.

THE END.