

THE DEATH OF ENKIDU

from Gilgamesh



Edwin Morgan

Enkidu lay then later in great pain.
His stomach and his heart were churning, turning.
He threshed and sweated in uneasy sleep,
and when he woke he called to Gilgamesh:

“My friend, what was I dreaming—oh—
the sky was blaring and the earth was drumming—
between them I was standing alone but facing—
oh—a dark-faced man, a lion-face,
his hands not hands but paws, his nails
not nails but claws, his wings eagle-wide—
he caught me by the hair and overthrew me—
I hit him but he skipped aside—he felled me,
fell on me, stamped on me like a bull,
clamped me in the vice of his wings
till I cried out for you to save me—
where were you, Gilgamesh?—I called, I did—
but if you heard me, you were nowhere near.
He shifted my shape then, feathered my arms
to the wings of a bird, seized me and took me
down to the House of Darkness, the Netherworld,
the house where those who go in never come out,
the house where those who live there do without light,
where they drink mud and feed on dirt and grit,
where they are clothed with feathers, winged like birds,
where they see no light, living in darkness,
where doors and bolts are dumb, basted with dust.
Once I was in the House of Dust
I saw crowns rolling in the filth,
I saw greatest kings of the past
serving gods with their roast meats.

Once I was in the House of Dust
I saw the priests and the priests’ men,
purifiers and diviners,

high preachers and death-ferriers,
and with them sat Ereshkigal
Queen of the Netherworld, and I saw
kneeling at her feet, Beletseri
Scribe of the Netherworld, I saw
how she held a tablet, reading
aloud from it to Ereshkigal,
and the queen saw me, her head
was raised and her lips spoke:
‘Who has brought this one down here?’
I saw, I heard, I dreamed these things
once, down in the House of Dust.”

Enkidu lay flat in his sickness,
he had no more dreaming.
The first day and the second
he lay flat on his bed.
The third, fourth, fifth
days passed where he lay.
He lay there as the sixth,
seventh, eighth days
passed over his bed.
A ninth, a terrible tenth
came where he lay.
Worse was the eleventh,
worst of all the twelfth.
He called to Gilgamesh:
“Who is it hates me?
What god is doing this?
What a way to die—
in a bed, on my back,
not in battle where
honour’s to be won!”

Gilgamesh heard the death-rattle; closed the eyes.
Day was beginning to break. He addressed his friend:

“Enkidu, your mother the gazelle, your father
the wild ass, raised you in the wilderness.
Herds, horns, savannahs were your playground.
The tracks that took you to the Cedar Forest
must mourn you now by day and by night.
The elders of the city too will mourn you,

and the hill-folk, and the hills themselves.
Pastures and woods, panther and bear and deer
lift their lament, and the rivers we strolled by.
Farmer and herdsman, doctor, brewer, harlot—
yes, she who rubbed and roused you with sweet oil—
all these will sob, all will cry a little.
Priests will shave their heads for you, Enkidu.
I will praise you in the wilderness.”

He touched his friend's heart—there was no beat.
He covered his friend's face like a bride's.
He hovered over him like an eagle.
He paced like a lioness whose cubs are lost.
He mussed and roughed the coils of his hair.
He threw off his rich robes like rags.

Then Gilgamesh called loudly in Uruk:

“Goldsmith! Sculptor! Blacksmith! Jeweller!
Make me a statue of my friend, life-size,
chest of lapis-lazuli, limbs and skin of gold!”

And Gilgamesh brought out a table of polished wood,
filled a lapis-lazuli bowl with butter,
offered the gold the blue the brown to Shamash.

It is time for the wilderness, the pilgrimage!
Gilgamesh has smelt death, it is a fever
that struck his friend down and will find him too.
He does not want to die! To be immortal,
is it possible? What would he not give,
kingship, comfort, palace, servants, safety?
He knows the rumour of an immortal man,
Ziusura the Faraway, he must reach him!
He has clothed himself in animal skins,
taken stave, knife, knapsack, left Uruk
for whatever lands and seas he needs
to purge his horror of the crawling grave.

THREE POEMS



Charles Tomlinson

LISTENING TO LEAVES

The timbre of the leaves is changing tone—
No more caressive, its metallic hiss,
But scaled and serpentine, setting aside
The bland assurance as of petals swelling
Into massed, harmonious shape and sound.
Behind the hill of leaves, a crag of cloud
Heaves outward into blue, the chartless heights
Borne down above the field's restriction,
Their colour and their cold one single breath
Preluding the autumn and its sequel.
We balance on a blade between the two
Seasons and their sounds that sense must travel through,
Catching from the current of the leaves
Its cross-ply meshing in the weave of time.

VOYAGE

I move beneath the grandeur of these days
When cloud-capes steer before an autumn wind,
Confronting blues the passing year dyes deeper.
Foliage as yet has felt no frost,
Solid and nocturnal in its depths, a lair
The winter light will soon reveal laid waste.
Farewells hang in the October air,
Ave and *vale* there so intertwined,
What single greeting might accord such counterpoint
Where a hovering past flickers with future fire
And piled cumulae are crossing the sunset pyre?

NOCTURNAL

Feeding the horse its hay
he looked up to see
the flat oval of a moon
through a frost-stripped tree:

and he gazed on there
with awakened eyes
at the shining round
with its criss-cross of traceries

so rough, sharp, real,
to follow limb on limb,
and feel the stalks of hay
bristling against him.