

TABLET THIRTEEN

[Badly damaged]

[An open space suggesting buried ruins on a truncated hill. **Widow 2** (as a ragged crone) kneels with a fire-drill and a piece of socketed soapstone before an open fireplace and cooking pot, upstage left, near the inchoate statue of Engidu made by Gilgamesh in Tablet 10, now chipped and discolored beyond casual recognition. Engidu's bannerstone is set before it. Nearby stands the stone gnomon of a primitive sundial. **Berosus** in his usual position.]

Berosus: This high dune has been piled up and flattened by winds of sand swirling in contention. There is no evidence of the forlorn hamlet below it. The old woman formerly served as a priestess in the temple of Inanna (now known as Ishtar). She performs as a sacristine, preparing for a special liturgy of intercession as she addresses the effigy.

Widow 2:
[As if meditating aloud.]
Nimrod, you were once our mighty hunter. If this day we are spared the bolts of heaven save us from slow starvation,. We have served Inanna with the utmost means of our destitution. Humble offerings cannot measure our devotion. Listen to the frail voices of our faltering dance. Do not scorn the sacrificial tithes of our withered sustenance. Not a sheep or goat is left to offer. Instead the Optimates will bring seed cakes made with the sweepings of our barley. Dust is the only flour for bread we eat. The sun has sucked dry our well. A wineskin of river water is our libation.
—Let Inanna lay her hands upon your head as savior of her people. Plead that our sins have been thrust upon us. We always disavowed the sacrilege attributed to your name in error, but have too long suffered for. Only she can petition the Lord Enlil to absolve our submission to alien power and rescind impending doom.
—Pity the infirmity of our priest and the confusion of ancient Optimates; forgive the decline of women and the ignorance of men born too late to know how far we have fallen.
—I myself have barely strength enough to make this tinder hot. My husband used to say that I could inflame a rock.

Gilgamesh, nearly unrecognizable in desert dress, carrying his axe, **enters** from downstage right.
[Until he speaks the Widow is unaware of his presence.]

Gilgamesh: Madam, do not be afraid. Can you tell me where I am? I am out of place in this naked landscape, and in time as well!

Widow 2: Well, you did startle me; it's been a long time since we've seen a stranger. But I can no longer fear any whispering man or daylight wraith. Speak up! I can still hear with one ear.

Gilgamesh: Why do you live in arid desolation?
[Louder.]

- Widow 2:** I stay on this sand hill to haunt it. You can't call it living, under the pitiless sky of a second widowhood, surviving much too long both daughters born to a soldier of fortune. They put a stop to happy memory.
- Gilgamesh:** Who, your own children?
- Widow 2:** The Elamites who raped them to death..
- Gilgamesh:** Why did they attack a godforsaken place like this? They are known to sack for riches.
- Widow 2:** For revenge. Once before they had seized this place but were driven out by others.
- Gilgamesh:** So, wreaking vengeance on your gods?
- Widow 2:** On us, for calling Kassites to displace them as our masters.
- Gilgamesh:** All for a knoll of sand half a mile from the river!
- Widow 2:** Euphrates was so angry about our canals and watergates that he changed his course.
- Gilgamesh:** I see no trace of irrigation works.
- Widow 2:** When fields are parched the floods level dikes and fill canals.
- Gilgamesh:** So famine was the bane?
- Widow 2:** The gods don't like artificial plenty. The farmers had to dig according to a dictator's plans. After he was gone our crops grew feeble, but it wasn't because they had failed to maintain the works. They discovered that the gods had sterilized their irrigated fields with salt.
- Gilgamesh:** Why do you stay up here without shade or shelter? Haven't you a village?
- Widow 2:** "Village" is a term too noble! Our hovels are down below. This windy summit is the sunken crown of a citadel that once gathered clouds. Sandstorms spun this tumulus over rubble. You now stand where stood a nuptial bed lifted to the Lord God who has long since cursed us.
[Grunts a bitter laugh and points stage left.]
- Gilgamesh:** I grieve for every one of mankind's losses. Some day, if I can in this dream of mine, I'll help you recover—if I find my own city translated to the New World. But my memory of landscape is confused by too much travel. What do you call this place?
- Widow 2:** It's known as Warka to the caravans that now avoid it.
- Gilgamesh:** A name I never heard.

- Widow 2:** Naturally; since you're a stranger, like almost every other man on earth.
- Gilgamesh:** I thought I could get a better view by beaching my boat and climbing this hill, but the horizon doesn't seem any different from up here. Have you ever heard of Erech? If it's in this dream at all it must be further downstream than I estimated.
- Widow 2:** Oh, the nomads used to call this Erech! ...The real name was Uruk, as women named it when the earth was young.
[Looking at him narrowly and hesitating.]
- Gilgamesh:** Your folks must have copied that lore. It's not surprising as a common kind of ekistic echo. Uruk is a famous city, emulated everywhere. A place to be celebrated with namesakes!
[Laughs.]
- Widow 2:** I doubt that, mister. A name reviled everywhere between the great two rivers! Disowned by our own Inanna and blighted by the highest god! We don't boast of names that label discord. You are a remarkably hapless traveler to find yourself here on the day of judgment. I am making ready for the liturgy by kindling pure new fire, as my husband was taught in his religion. I'll never be too inured by the fate of women to tremble at what anyone's gods still have in store.
[Snorting. She labors with fire drill on soapstone socket.]
- Gilgamesh:** What distinguishes today for fear?
- Widow 2:** Our priest's oracle has warned that the moon will come like cancer to eat our sun at noon today, in retribution for the night this month when the sun stole upon the moon to suppress our brightest light. When gods dispute each other the catastrophe is always human.
- Gilgamesh:** Everywhere, even in ages of famine and sorrow, both such prodigies have always been idle threats, followed by neither gain nor loss. But your priest is a very good astrologer if he can predict of the omens themselves. They at least can have nothing to do with the sins of a single spot in the wilderness!
- Widow 2:** I remember that kind of unbelief when we were ruled by a godless khan. I tell you, this is no ordinary pile of crumbled clay!
- Gilgamesh:** You are remembering other people's dreams of another place. I know very well how that can be. I too find myself old. In fact I may be dreaming what you say! But I hope I can provide for you after I find my way back to the real Uruk. Didn't I hear you say that river is Euphrates? —But I can't understand why it would be so hard to see a tile-clad tower stepping halfway up to heaven even from as far away as Tigris is.
- Widow 2:** You now stand upon that landmark, old dreamer! On this dilapidated platform the priestess of Inanna was dedicated queen by the Lord of heaven. The blows of gods and follies of men have reduced it to the dust of clay that once elevated it to the bottom of heaven. From fields that once fed a wealth of trade you have climbed a skirt of windblown dirt!
[Squinting up from her work.]

Gilgamesh: Can it be? And a whole city in this ruins too? You can't bewitched me, woman!
[Peering in all directions.]

Widow 2: The walls were first to fail, undermined by floods no longer controlled to our advantage. Temple and palace crumbled. Then all our houses dissolved in mud. Our false prosperity left us desiccated ruins after the waters withdrew. When I was a little girl, before the khan and his northmen forced us to build those great monuments and gates, we were content with powerless rounds of toil and custom. By delivering us from enemies and raising us to glory he brought upon us grief and shambles!

Gilgamesh: This cannot be a lifetime's dream!

Widow 2: I was once a happy mother, but one affliction after another has humbled me to the state you see. Yet my widowhood and child-bereavement was no worse than the loss of our queen to the raiders who carried her off for a ransom that only Babylon might afford.

Gilgamesh: Had she no protection? Where were the Kassites then!

Widow 2:
[Leaves her work to look more closely at his face, just as he takes sudden interest in the statue and bannerstone, walking across diagonally and dropping his axe to examine them on his knees. But with face averted he stops to listen closely.]
They were loyal palatines, but when we all began to believe that the tyrant who bound them to Uruk would never return they lost confidence in their waning power. He was no longer here to inspire general respect for foreign mercenaries. Off duty they were tormented by the people. Most of them were past their prime. By then their captain Norkid had become the queen's beloved consort, her source of secular power—her brave and just advisor, always guided by what he thought Gilgamesh would have wished; but his sword was no match for a hundred pitchforks in an alley of assassins while his few warriors were defending us at the walls. My husband was one of those devoted martyrs.

Gilgamesh: So Norkid's loyalty had as many edges as my axe! He occupied in full the place of his khan!

Widow 2:
[Gets up to pace about the stage behind him with increasing interest.]
Why do you try to conceal your knowledge of our former times.

Gilgamesh: I remember you. Your man was Norkid's bravest.
—This numinous stone is Engidu! By the hand of Gilgamesh. Uncorrupted by worms or suppuration, free of posthumous filth! No carrion to mourn!

- Widow 2:** Engidu is a name forgotten. This is Nimrod the hunter, protector of my people, resurrected from his grave. —But I grieve no more for this dead Nimrod than for that vanished Nimrod who buried this one. It was he who led my husband to me and all my sorrows. So tell me no more! I want to guess nothing about you! But I warn you to go back to your boat before it's too late. You are imperilled by people who abominate all strangers, fixed in the hatred of fatal heresies implanted by foreigners who flouted their sacred law. The remaining citizens are old, but they are fierce, with too many stones and pitchforks even for a demigod. Save yourself from ignominious death. Then at least you may keep alive for humankind the memory of—whatever causes your quest.
- Enter Shepherd 1,**
downstage right from below, out of breath, standing still to listen unseen, armed with slingshot and javelin.
- Gilgamesh:** Is reason a false shadow of the world we really live in?
[Looking up at her.]
- Widow 2:** The people here may now have forgotten that I left the service of Inanna to marry a Kassite, but when there were no Troopers left they would have murdered my children if the Elamites hadn't speared them first. In folk memory the name Nimrod has come to mean either Gilgamesh or Engidu. But our implacable Rector isn't confused. He doesn't forget the details of humiliation under the regime that usurped his authority. What's left of my barren life, which I cherish only to remember its few truncated years of fruit, depends more upon his spark of charity for me than upon my sacerdotal craft. —Unlike our former king you appear to have no army to implement your offers of protection.
- Gilgamesh:** My latest army seems to have immolated himself to Inanna in Babylon.
- Widow 2:** I dare not speak well of Gilgamesh within local earshot, but I will say to you it was not his fault that my people refused to see the common good in which he left them. He broke the Tablets of Fate for the sake of liberating those who now remember nothing of him but their hatred. I am so used to the cumulating weight of terror and sorrow that I could not bear even an ounce of illusive hope, but if you should find that Gilgamesh is still alive somewhere in a world that I cannot imagine, tell him that at least two of Uruk's women, one high, the other low, did appreciate his reign.
- Gilgamesh:** You and the queen?
- Widow 2:** Lil-Amin and I. —Go to your boat, I say, before someone steals it! —I do not recognize you, but the priest's eyesight is not quite gone, and his enmity is enriched by four decades of vitriolic brooding. —So hurry down the way you came, stranger! He will soon be up here with the congregation. Even in this shrunken parish he can rile a plethora of fanatic men and ignorant sons to overpower an unprotected interloper, not to mention his gang of pious women with a bottomless supply of ceramic shards. If you haven't entirely lost your senses, sir, don't stand here and reminisce. Turn back while the day is still young. Get to your boat before someone steals it. —I can say no more! I cannot listen to you! I have no more wish to share the curse upon a man's head than I had to bring it down upon him!
- Gilgamesh:** I am very sorry that you've suffered so much for what seemed a heartless regime. —Perhaps it really was.

- Widow 2:** There's the first kite crossing the sun! Hurry, or you're lost indeed!
[Points upward.]
- Shepherd 1:** No, an eagle! Good omen.
[Showing himself.]
- Gilgamesh:** Dumuzi! You restore my faith in Eber's tribe! Has the princess of Babylon already had enough of your innocence?
- Shepherd 1:** No. Enheduanna sent me to learn the story for her poem. I was only a day behind your wake and spoor. This morning I found your empty boat and saw you in the distance clambering up this hill like a goat-hunter.
- Gilgamesh:** How long have you been standing there?
- Shepherd 1:** Long enough to hear what my mistress thought might be concealed by a mysterious trader. Apparently I'm as good at choosing a hero as I am at making love. Those are the two reasons she wants me back.
- Widow 2:** Quiet, boy! I hear the procession coming up from the village! I won't give you away if you lie down and listen behind that pile of rubble. No matter what happens, don't look up at the sky! Perhaps you at least will be spared as witness of our doom. The story will be all that's left of us, and should be told in Babylon.
[She indicates stage right.]
- Gilgamesh:** Not the end of us, but another beginning! Engidu has been restored to me because I have breasted the arrow of time. In former life I broke up the council of gods and altered fate, but I have never despised them—only their submission to fate. I can face mutiny without your help. Yet if in my pursuit I've been mistaking death for time, you must save yourself to save my life as legend. Take my Isorectotetrahedron as proof to Enheduanna that you were here to verify the transfiguration of Uruk!
[Shepherd 1 crouches in hiding. Gilgamesh passes him the IRTH to wear on his neck.]
- Berosus:** The priest shows himself, rising head first from the hillside, followed by
Rector enters stage left, solemnly but nearsightedly,
with Optimates leading a number of men and women.
His clothes are shabby but he is still a powerful figure, wearing some shabby remains of ecclesiastical vestments.
He carries the royal Rod and Ring.
[They do not notice Gilgamesh but form behind the Rector in a semicircle as he stands and genuflects to the Nimrod idol. Music by Berosus.]
- Rector:** Ahh! A sinful omen to portend this hour's judgment of our fate? My eyes are half-burnt by study of the sun but I can see what I feel in my hand! What was Engidu's bannerstone is now the hateful axe that I know as well as my daily prayer even after forty years! —Woman—defrocked Widow—is this the deed of a god? Or some nefarious trick of yours? I've never trusted the renewal of your vows!
[He drops the Rod and Ring to take up the axe. Quickly peers about but sees neither the bannerstone nor Gilgamesh.]

Widow 2: Your Grace! The axe was here when I arrived this morning. I thought you had done magic during the night. I dared not touch that strange axe.

Rector: That axe is no stranger to me than Nimrod himself! I can smell his aura better than you can see the sky. There's been a change of air up here! Is this abomination a sign he's out of my reach in death? Or can it be that I'm to have my life's revenge before it ends?

[Turns to point immediately at Gilgamesh before the others follow his gaze.]

—Look around, all you fools! This axe wasn't dropped from heaven!

—There he is, usurper of my glebe! Defiler of the temple and enemy of the gods! Murderer of godgiven Engidu!

—But look, now he has no Traders or Troopers for schemers and bodyguards! No Eber to dispense invented law, no Norkid to execute decrees by force! Can't you see he's helpless? There are no longer any Eberews or Kassites to corrupt our language and defy the customs handed down by Inanna!

Several men hurry off, after some hesitation. [He draws a knife and hands it to Widow 2. Gilgamesh is surrounded by the remaining people.]

—Quick, some of you, fetch the hunting net! We may be spared at the last moment! Hurry! The unavenged gods themselves have led their enemy to us for immolation. In this last hour of doomsday we have in our hands the offering to expiate the pollution that has brought our city to the verge of extinction.

—Here, this is work for a female priest. It's long since we've had flesh of any kind to sacrifice! The gods could not ask for better!

Widow 2: But that is human blood! And if it's Gilgamesh's, said to be mingled with the blood of gods! The oldest laws forbid sacrifice of any victim that can plead in language!

Rector: Don't argue, woman! It's nearly noontime! The Lord Enlil grants sacerdotal discretion to carry out his will. Demigod or antigod, Gilgamesh has attacked the gods we serve. But our atonement will fail if we don't work swiftly!
—Strike once and collect his blood. I'll do the rest. Meanwhile stoke the fire to illuminate our Nimrod in the dark of the sun. Remember that this is the tyrant who violated our queen Lil-Amin, my lost sister. —At last he faces me without the powers of force!

Gilgamesh:
[Suddenly steps forward
and seizes the Rod and
Ring.]

Yes, my implacable adversary, I am alone, no longer tireless or confident in my body's strength, but I do not plead. You are unfit for government, even in its service to your gods. Against your will I built up Uruk, made it a ladder halfway up to heaven, taught it record-keeping and how to plan. I left the city famous for its prosperous peace. You have let it fall to ruin amidst fields of poisoned soil that once fed flocks and herds as well as populations through good years and bad. Always in the name of a religion made hateful you mouthed abhorrence of reason and harbored conspiracy against the sovereignty I earned by driving out those who had actually enslaved your people. For Lil-Amin's sake I was too forgiving of your vengeful sedition, ignoring Eber's advice to scotch you at the roots. —I did not set out to retrieve the Rod and Ring of a polity that's been poisoned by your pious hatred of changes made for the common good, but now that I find the beginning of my journey at its end I must do exactly that. I resume kingship over the ruins of my works wiser in the mystery of time. I have been at fault for pursuing my private thoughts and absenting myself from the constructive government of a discontented and selfish public that prefers the servitude of rote religion. I will begin again by sharing the wretched poverty to which you have reduced your congregation, but with less confidence in time the carrier of hope.

Rector:
[Indicating the sundial.]

Time! There's no time now to hear more of your conceited folly! When that shadow passes zenith the Tablets of Fate you smashed in ostentation will be at last fulfilled! You will be dead before the sky grows dark.

Gilgamesh:
[Addressing all the
people.]

Without me, if heaven spares you the desert will not. There's only lingering death in your feeble efforts to survive. I'll make a softened calendar to strengthen and protect you—

Rector:

No doubt with softened plans to pacify the gods! With the imposition of barbarous new tongues! With softened kilns of stinking naphtha from the devil's jakes to fire godsent clay! With softened rules and regulations, softened tolerance in specifications, and softened work-orders for the human machine! All under a haughty despot's softened lash!

Gilgamesh:

Despot, perhaps—but no longer haughty, if I ever was.

Rector:

You've trapped yourself on the apex of your orgulous architecture!

Gilgamesh:

Time's circle ends where it begins—if this is really Uruk that I stand upon, if reason is disproved by fact, if the cosmos is irrational, or if logic's altered in duration! I now reset my mind. But I do not find the queen to whom I delegated power, only you her dissenting brother. That royal priestess was of more worth than all the power and glory of a shining tower, impregnable walls, elite archers, productive treasury, regulated canals, public granaries, and every art but those she made her own. You still claim leadership of the people and the sanction of heaven, so you I blame for the greatest loss of all.

Rector:
[Incensed.]

You abandoned her! Your guards failed to protect her! I had no men-at-arms. Do not claim her love!

Gilgamesh:
Men return with a gathered net. [With the help of others, directed by the Rector's gestures, they close in on Gilgamesh.]

I left this kingship to the queen, not to a narrow-minded clergyman. I need claim nothing more. This woman, here, who served in her temple may remember that Lil-Amin and I were of one mind. Even Engidu could not share that!

Rector:

Now I'd like to see your nostrils flare! The late Captain Norkid said the air around you used to glow in battle warp. Show us the red corona of your reputed fury!

Widow 2:

[Gilgamesh exchanges the Rod and Ring for the knife.]

Here, take this knife! It's not for me to kill a hero. Cut the net and run!

Optimates and People:

[The eclipse begins, gradually darkening the scene. Shepherd 1 slings a bit of shard at a sector of the circle furthest from the Rector (who stands upstage right) and **kills Optimate 1**, thus diverting all attention from himself as he comes out of hiding to strike the Rector with his hurled javelin.

[Hostile commotion of voice and gesture as they manage to throw the net over Gilgamesh.]

[Bewildered uproar. Cries of consternation and confusion at what may have seemed an unseen bolt from the sky.]

Optimate 2 seizes the axe.]

Rector:

Kill Gilgamesh!

Rector dies.

Shepherd 1:

Master, cut the net!

Gilgamesh:

[Shouts, gasping, as he futilely attempts to cut his way out of the net. The Optimates and people surround him in a spiral dance as the men tighten the net around Gilgamesh and the women batter him with shards, bricks, or staves.]

Run, Dumuzi! ...I'm all right! —My life began with thunder in mountains far away. ...These are not my gods... the people do not love me...but I have made this my place! . —Go make yours in Babylon! —If you disobey me, my head and heart will feed the kites and suffer common worms in vain! —My sempiternal public works have failed to last the lifetime of a man, but don't let my efforts vanish in the dust!... —I tell you, go! ...Correct the memory of my love for Engidu! —Escape this mob.... —I don't claim fame for madcap feats... or for the love of Lil-Amin...but there will be space enough in time between my extinction and the world's... for arts not handed down from heaven!... —Don't let thoughts be lost to time.... You must be my voice until Enheduanna writes her poem.. Give the poet your words of mouth.... .
 —If you perish, I fail.... but if you live, so shall I...

[**Optimate 2 chops at Gilgamesh with the axe.**]

Shepherd 1 hesitates until the eclipse is total; then,
as Gilgamesh is hopelessly silenced, **runs off downstage** into the audience.

Gilgamesh dies. [Illumination slowly returns. As Optimates gather around
the Rector's body the people, jeering, heap dirt and shards upon Gilgamesh's body.]

Widow 2:
[Plants the Rod, Ring,
bannerstone, and axe
(head upright) in or
upon the burial mound.]

He did not die in exile. Some day they will mourn their king. Unless our dance is
broken I am only the first to decorate his tomb. Here the rainbow ends. Not all
things change: this hill will last forever.

Berosus:
[As full light returns, to
end the play.]

Three millennia have inherited an illiterate boy's witness. Let the world's
remaining centuries preserve this version of the legend.