

There was a city called Shurruapak  
On the bank of the Euphrates.  
It was very old and so many were the gods  
Within it. They converged in their complex hearts  
On the idea of creating a great flood.  
There was Anu, their aging and weak-minded father,  
The military Enlil, his adviser,  
Ishtar, the sensation craving one,  
And all the rest. Ea, who was present  
At their council, came to my house  
And, frightened by the violent winds that filled the  
air,  
Echoed all that they were planning and had said.  
Man of Shurruapak, he said, tear down your house

And build a ship. Abandon your possessions  
And the works that you find beautiful and crave  
And save your life instead. Into the ship  
Bring the seed of all the living creatures.

I was overawed, perplexed,  
And finally downcast. I agreed to do  
As Ea said but I protested: What shall I say  
To the city, the people, the leaders?

Tell them, Ea said, you have learned that Enlil  
The war god despises you and will not  
Give you access to the city anymore.  
Tell them for this Ea will bring the rains.

That is the way gods think, he laughed. His tone  
Of savage irony frightened Gilgamesh  
Yet gave him pleasure, being his friend.  
They only know how to compete or echo.

But who am I to talk? He sighed as if  
Disgusted with himself; I did as he  
Commanded me to do. I spoke to them  
And some came out to help me build the ship  
Of seven stories each with nine chambers.  
The boat was cube in shape, and sound; it held  
The food and wine and precious minerals  
And seed of living animals we put  
In it. My family then moved inside  
And all who wanted to be with us there:  
The game of the field, the goats of the Steppe,  
The craftsmen of the city came, a navigator

Came. And then Ea ordered me to close  
The door. The time of the great rains had come.  
O there was ample warning, yes, my friend,  
But it was terrifying still. Buildings  
Blown by the winds for miles like desert brush.  
People clung to branches of trees until  
Roots gave way. New possessions, now debris,  
Floated on the water with their special  
Sterile vacancy. The riverbanks failed  
To hold the water back. Even the gods  
Cowered like dogs at what they had done.  
Ishtar cried out like a woman at the height  
Of labor: O how could I have wanted  
To do this to my people! They were *hers*,  
Notice. Even her sorrow was possessive.  
Her spawn that she had killed too soon.  
Old gods are terrible to look at when  
They weep, all bloated like spoiled fish.  
One wonders if they ever understand  
That they have caused their grief. When the seventh  
day

Came, the flood subsided from its slaughter  
Like hair drawn slowly back  
From a tormented face.  
I looked at the earth and all was silence.  
Bodies lay like alewives dead  
And in the clay. I fell down  
On the ship's deck and wept. Why? Why did they  
Have to die! I couldn't understand. I asked  
Unanswerable questions a child asks  
When a parent dies — for nothing. Only slowly  
Did I make myself believe — or hope — they  
Might all be swept up in their fragments  
Together  
And made whole again  
By some compassionate hand.

But my hand was too small  
To do the gathering.  
I have only known this feeling since  
When I look out across the sea of death,  
This pull inside against a littleness — myself —  
Waiting for an upward gesture.

O the dove, the swallow and the raven  
Found their land. The people left the ship.  
But I for a long time could only stay inside.  
I could not face the deaths I knew were there.  
Then I received Enlil, for Ea had *chosen* me;  
The war god touched my forehead; he blessed  
My family and said:  
Before this you were just a man, but now  
You and your wife shall be like gods. You  
Shall live in the distance at the rivers' mouth,  
At the source. I allowed myself to be  
Taken far away from all that I had seen.  
Sometimes even in love we yearn to leave mankind.  
Only the loneliness of the Only One  
Who never acts like gods  
Is bearable.  
I am downcast because of what I've seen,  
Not what I still have hope to yearn for.  
Lost youths restored to life,  
Lost children to their crying mothers,  
Lost wives, lost friends, lost hopes, lost homes,  
I want to bring these back to them.  
But now there is you.  
We must find something for you.  
How will you find eternal life  
To bring back to your friend?

He pondered busily, as if  
It were just a matter of getting down to work  
Or making plans for an excursion.  
Then he relaxed, as if there were no use  
In this reflection. I would grieve  
At all that may befall you still  
If I did not know you must return  
And bury your own loss and build  
Your world anew with your own hands.  
I envy you your freedom.

As he listened, Gilgamesh felt tiredness again  
Come over him, the words now so discouraging,  
The promise so remote, so unlike what he sought.  
He looked into the old man's face, and it seemed  
changed,  
As if this one had fought within himself a battle  
He would never know, that still went on.