

The New Criterion

Poems

May 1997

The legend

by [John Haines](#)

I.

I understand the story of Gilgamesh,
of Enkidu, who called the wind by name,
who drank at the pool of silence,
kneeling in the sunburnt shallows
with all four-footed creatures.

I know the name of that exile,
the form that it takes within us:
the parting and breaking of things,
the distance and anguish.

I know too, in its utter strangeness,
that whoever asks of the sun its rising,
of the night its moonstruck depths,
stirs the envy of God in his lofty cabin.

And when Enkidu awoke, called
from his changed, companionless sleep
—singly, in glittering pairs,
the beasts vanished from the spring.

II.

The forest bond is broken,
and the tongued leaves no longer
speak for the dumb soul lost
in the wilderness of his own flesh.

All that had life for him:
the moon with her wandering children,
the storm-horse and the shepherd-bird,
become as salt to his outspread hand.

Let him go forth, to try the roads,
become that wasted pilgrim, familiar
with dust, dry chirps and whispers;
to die many times—die as a man dies,
seeing death in the life of things.

And then descend, deep into rootland
—not as temple-gardener, planting
with laurel the graves of gods and heroes,
but as one grieving and lost ...

To ask of the dead, of their fallen
web-faces, the spider's truth,
the rove-beetle's code of conduct.

By such knowledge is he cured,
and lives to face the sun at evening,
marked by the redness of clay,
the whiteness of ash on his body.

III.

By stealth, by the mastery of names,
and one resounding axe-blow
rung on the cedar-post at dawn,
the great, stomping bull of the forest
was slain. Rain only speaks
there now on the pelted leaves.
Overheard through the downpour,
in the stillness of my own
late-learned solace, I understand
through what repeated error
we were driven from Paradise.
The nailed gate and the fiery angel
are true.

 Could we ask them,
speaking their wind-language
of cries, of indecipherable song,
it may be that the swallows
who thread the water at evening

could tell us; or that the sparrows
who flock after rain, would write
in the coarse yellow meal
we have strewn at the threshold,
why God gave death to men,
keeping life for himself.

For the strong man driven to question,
and for him who, equally strong,
believes without asking,
sleep follows like a lasting shadow.

1981–96

John Haines is co-author, with Harvery Klehr, of *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (Yale University Press).

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 15 May 1997, on page 38

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/The-legend-3333>