



A necessary encounter.

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From the Great Above, she opened her ear to the Great Below

From the Great Above, the goddess opened her ear to the Great Below

From the Great Above, Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.

Iraq, late March-April 2003

It's dark. I am lying outside our temporary shelter under the vast vault of the Southern Iraqi sky, gazing at the gaudy stars that cluster against the black silk of night, jewels on a Gulf State princess.

I have been here since the evening star, Venus, rose clear and bold, as she has for millions of years, as she did when the Ancients of this land, Sumerians and Babylonians, first named her. Inanna. Ishtar. I whisper her name. Now, despite the competing brilliance and pattern of hundreds of constellations, she commands my attention, removing my mind from the days behind me, the days ahead, the false security of the desert night. In the silence and darkness, I see flashes of light and hear distant gunfire. The Americans and British armies are charging through the country, the Americans racing their Abraham tanks ahead towards the oilfields and Baghdad while the British seize the South. What I am seeing and hearing is the battle for Basra.

I have been in Iraq three days, and tomorrow, I shall lead my team into our first prisoners-of-war camp, to register the detainees and check that the 3rd Geneva Convention¹ is applied. Inanna, Ishtar², Queen of Heaven and Earth, goddess of love and sex - she who carries the blessings of life and civilisation, whose vitality ensures that the bull mounts the cow, that man and woman make love, that grain grows abundant, and the date palm is weighed down with fruit - has taken on yet another of her myriad roles, in her homeland: the destroyer, the tempestuous mistress of storms and of war. She has brought the two at once, blasting sandstorms, tanks and troops up the length of the two rivers.

Is she again descending into the Underworld, leading her ancestral people into the deathly realm of her sister, Ereshkigal? Am I going there myself, during this journey into Iraq at war, drawn irresistibly down by some inner compulsion, as Inanna was? Did the Americans and British, when

¹ The Third Geneva Convention is part of the Law of Armed Conflict, and covers the treatment, condition and registration of Prisoners of War. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), of which I was a delegate, is mandated to control how it is being applied by the armies in conflict.

² Throughout this article, I use Inanna and Ishtar interchangeably: the one is the Sumerian name of the goddess, the other her Akkadian name, used by the Babylonians. The story of her descent to the Underworld to see her sister Ereshkigal and what befell her there was told in several known versions in Sumerian and Akkadian.

they drove their tanks across the border, cross the threshold into the realm of Ereshkigal, unleashing war, terror, death on a large scale, freeing the demons that had been frozen in Saddam's unhappy country? If so, they don't know it yet. Like Nergal, god of war, blasting his way into Ereshkigal's dominion to seduce its mistress in a lusty Babylonian tale, they only think of conquering the lady and making her beg for more, fuelled by rock-and-roll and testosterone, Fox News and the scent of early success and minimal casualties. The embedded journalists have all caught war fever and speak only of approaching victory and rebirth for Iraq. They don't realise that rebirth always comes at a price.

First encounter

Long before I came to Iraq and became interested in Ancient Mesopotamia, I met Inanna in the story of her descent to the underworld and her meeting with her sister Ereshkigal. I first read the myth in *Descent of the Goddess*, written by a Jungian analyst, Silvia Brinton Perera. Its premise is that Inanna's descent traces the natural descent of women into their own shadow-self, often through depression, and the ultimate rebirth of the self by integrating the shadow and light side of the personality. At the time I read it, I was going through a painful depression: Brinton Perera's analysis gave my personal story a meaning I hadn't found elsewhere, guilt-ridden as I was by wasted time and lost opportunities. I found the original story in an anthology of myths and hymns of Inanna published by Samuel Kramer, an American Sumerologist and Diane Wolkstein, a mythographer and storyteller³. I clung to Inanna's story of descent and return, and the opposite

³ *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth, Her Stories and Myths from Sumer*. Diane Wolkstein, Samuel Noah Kramer, Harper & Row, 1983.

tale of Ereshkigal receiving her, removing Inanna's signs of power, then killing her. In my imagination, I saw myself as Inanna visiting Ereshkigal, and I replayed the story many times in my mind. As I pulled myself out of the dust heap of depression, the reason for my being there was less important than the acknowledgement that this was a common part of the cycle of life and that travelling through the underworld of depression could be empowering. I didn't question the tale, or its use in Jungian psychology: it became my story.

The Descent of Inanna

My lady abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld

Inanna abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld

She abandoned her office of holy priestess to descent to the underworld.

Although I first encountered these words as a drowning woman might see her life spiralling round her as she sinks, it wasn't long before my poet's eyes took an interest in them. The repetition of the line and the rhythmic scansion trick the logical mind into rest and awaken the mythical, imaginative mind. Very soon, we are following Inanna on her great journey. We don't know what will happen, we only know we must go too.

Before she left, Inanna adorned herself with the sacred *me*, an untranslatable word, which conveys variously "attributes of power and civilisation", "laws of nature and civilisation", "protective emblems of a deity and city". The *me* take the form of tangible precious objects - a short lapis-lazuli necklace, two long row of beads, a robe, a diadem, a breastplate, eye-shadow and the measuring rod and line that all the gods carried. There is a back-story to how Inanna

acquired the *me*, which is worth retelling as it illuminates her character and her relationship with the god of wisdom, who plays a crucial role in the Descent story. Enki, god of wisdom and sweet waters, originally held the *me*. One day Inanna, at the height of her confident youth and beauty, decided to visit Enki in his sacred place in the city of Eridu. Enki, in avuncular fashion, received her and laid out a feast for her. They drank and exchanged stories late into the night. Softened by good cheer and beer, Enki gives the *me* to Inanna, one by one, toasting her as he does.

To each gift, Inanna replied: "I take them!" and toasted her uncle in return.

Once she bore the seven *me*, she enumerated all that they contained - that is, everything, good and bad, that was part of life in a Sumerian city. Having received the art of making decisions, Inanna rose swiftly with her treasures, left Enki and boarded her boat to bring the *me* back to her city of Uruk. The next morning, hungover and grumpy, Enki realised what he had handed away and sent envoys to fight Inanna, raise the water-level to capsize Inanna's boat and reclaim the *me*. Inanna in turn deployed her minister Ninshubur to fight off the envoys, and steered the boat coolly through the flood. Eventually, Inanna and Ninshubur reach Uruk, offloaded the *me* - only to find out there were many more than Enki had passed on: Inanna's courage and decisiveness had raised more power. Enki declared that she won them fairly and proclaimed an alliance between their two cities.

These, therefore, were the *me* that Inanna wore as she prepared for her great journey to underground. Because she won them from the god of wisdom and with her own courage and intrepidity, they contained both wisdom and audacity, age and youth. Once she had armed herself with the *me*, Inanna turned again to her assistant, Ninshubur. She explained her she was going to visit Ereshkigal and instructed her where to find help if she didn't return after three days. Inanna

then abandoned all her cities and temples, her Heaven and Earth, and travelled to the Great Below.

Why did she go?

This has remained a mystery, which various psychologists, mythographers, feminist scholars, Pagan practitioners and Mesopotamia specialists have tried to explain. Neither the Sumerian version of the myth, nor the later Babylonian version, are explicit about her reasons. Thorkild Jacobsen, following the opinion of the elder gods Enlil and Nanna, sees it as the whim of a reckless girl⁴; Johanna Stuckey as the remnants of a matriarchal religion where Inanna and Ereshkigal, sisters in the myth, were formerly a single goddess that oversaw heavens, earth and underworld - Inanna's descent is explained as an attempt to reclaim that feminine unity of power⁵ that had been severed by male gods. Psychotherapists, on the other hand, explain Inanna's reasons in modern psychological terms, as the desire of the personality to encounter and integrate its shadow. All seem to reveal more about the preoccupations of the commentators than the key to what drew Inanna to Ereshkigal. But the beginning of the story itself suggests a possible answer:

From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below

Kramer and Wolkstein write that the Sumerian word for "ear" is the same as the word for "wisdom". The line above, therefore, can equally be translated as: "From the Great Above, she set her wisdom towards the Great Below". Ear, listening and wisdom are united in a single word. Are we to infer that the path to wisdom necessarily passes through the underworld? That any deity or

⁴ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness, A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, Yale UP 1976.

⁵ Johanna Stuckey, *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*, in *Matrifocus* 2005, vol 4-5.

human who wishes to attain wisdom must experience such a descent and confront her adversary, the ruler of the underworld? We can't be certain from the language alone, but another clue lies in the first story I related, the visit of Inanna to Enki, who gave her the sacred *me*. Among the list of *me* we find: *Descent to the Underworld; Ascent from the Underworld*. In other words, the god of wisdom gives Inanna the force that urges her to abandon her life and go to meet Ereshkigal. As we will see below, he also wields the force that will bring her back to life.

The occasion Inanna chose for her journey was the funeral of Ereshkigal's first husband, Gugulanna, the Bull of Heaven. Though it is not mentioned in the text, we know from the famous Gilgamesh epic that Ishtar sent the Bull of Heaven against Gilgamesh when the hero turned down her love, and that Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Gilgamesh's friend, kill Gugulanna. Unless these two myths are unrelated, it's reasonable to assume that Inanna would know Ereshkigal would not welcome her. Yet she went.

As Inanna approached the outer gate, Ereshkigal's gatekeeper, Neti, asked what led her "on the road from which no traveller returns". Inanna explained that she came to attend Gugulanna's funeral. Neti had her wait while he informed his mistress of this surprise visitor. He described Inanna as 'tall as heaven, wide as the earth, strong as the foundations of the city wall.' She had come with the *me*, he said, she had come prepared. Ereshkigal's reacted fiercely. "She slapped her thigh and bit her lip." She gave her orders: stop Inanna at each of the seven gates of the Underworld, and remove one item from her at a time. "Let the holy priestess of heaven enter bowed low."

And so Inanna descended and at every gate, she was asked to surrender a piece of her power.

When she objected, she was told not to question the ways of the underworld. She arrived before Ereshkigal naked and powerless.

The encounter between the two sisters was brief.

Ereshkigal rose from her throne

Inanna started towards the throne.

The Annuna, the judges of the underworld surrounded her.

They passed judgement against her.

Then Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.

She spoke against her the word of wrath.

She uttered against her the word of guilt.

She struck her.

Inanna was turned into a corpse,

A piece of rotting meat,

And was hung from a hook on the wall.

In contrast with the dialogues that enliven the rest of the myth, this passage tolls inexorably. The sisters didn't exchange a word. The judges pronounced their verdict and Ershkigal executed Inanna with the sword of her look and word. The bright queen of Heaven and Earth, the life-force

of the land, the goddess of love and war died an ignominious death and was casually hung on a meat hook to rot.

The Babylonian version of the myth gives us a glimpse of the effect of this death in the upper world:

After Lady Ishtar had descended to the nether world,

The bull springs not upon the cow, the ass impregnates not the jenny,

In the street the man impregnates not the maiden.

The man lies in his own chamber, the maiden lies on her side⁶.

It also expands on Ereshkigal's reasons for disposing of Ishtar:

Lo, should I drink water with the Anunnaki?

Should I eat clay for bread, drink muddied water for beer?

Should I bemoan the men who left their wives behind?

Should I bemoan the maidens who were wretched from the laps of their lovers?

Or should I bemoan the tender little one who was sent off before his time?

Iraq, April to August 2003.

We are driving along a dusty road the Southern Iraqi desert in a convoy of three cars, clearly marked as humanitarian cars - though who cares about the protective emblem these days? In

⁶ *The Descent of Ishtar*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, trans. E.A. Speiser.

Baghdad, one of our colleagues, driving a similar vehicle to deliver surgical equipment to a hospital, was gunned down by an Abraham tank just three days ago. Not long after the fall of Saddam, the nascent Iraqi resistance was to shoot one of our electronics engineers at close range as he stood outside his car near Babel, the ancient Babylon. Humanitarians have become targets. The border between Ishtar's and Ereshkigal's dominions has all but disappeared in the ubiquitous dust. When we crossed the border from Kuwait, we entered a liminal zone between the outer and underworld, and I never know exactly when I am in one or the other. War in Iraq is treacherous, uncertain - a green grove might hide mines, a smiling face might distract from the hand that sets off the bomb, while a fierce-looking scarred warrior might offer you a basket of ripe apricots.

It's 6 am, we are on our way to a prison camp. By 1 pm it will be too hot to continue working under the implacable sun, so we leave early. Along the road, we see the long debris of the First Gulf War, twelve years earlier - rusted remains of tanks and armoured cars belonging to the Iraqi army that was retreating - or rather fleeing - from Kuwait. The Coalition bombed them intensively from the air during their rout. 40,000 died, for the most part young conscripts. Then Saddam sent his helicopter gunships and warplanes to bomb his Shiite people, who were rising up against him throughout the South. It's estimated that 100,000 civilians died in that campaign, in full view of the Coalition forces that stood by on the opposite bank of the river, refusing to intervene or enforce a no-fly zone they had only just proclaimed.

"I saw it happenin'", a sergeant in the Marines told me once, "back in '91. I was ashamed of what we were doin', letting all those folks down, letting them get butchered by Saddam. That's why I'm glad we're back again. We got a job to finish we should've done twelve years ago. We owe it to them."

I have no doubt he believed that sincerely, but his notion of history was sketchy. The twelve years he mentions were a mere blink in the timeframe of this country, and at the same time, one of the hardest and most painful periods this land has known. In Iraq, history is everywhere. Recent history, modern history, ancient history. It whispers through the date palms by the two rivers, it rises from the dust of the desert, it peeps out of the faces of children, it shows in the pockmarked buildings of every city, it comes out in torrents from the Iraqis when they speak of the invasion: “who do they think they are, these Americans? We have a history of 8000 years, we are the cradle of civilisation, we have given birth to heroes like Gilgamesh and Salaheddin - and they come here with their tanks, their wild music, their ignorance, their obsession with oil and their terrible manners...They don't know us, they don't understand us, they don't know our past, our culture, our losses. They don't understand what we have been through. We are glad to be rid of Saddam, but we don't want the Americans here.”

Sometimes, I answer that they might be doing what Ishtar did, travelling to the underworld; and they nod, but add that they're not sure whether they will return to America wiser and more respectful than they came. I don't remind them of the mass rape of their historical artefacts from the National Museum by their own fellow-citizens during the three days of mayhem and looting that followed the fall of Saddam on the 9th April. Most Iraqis are too tired and too poor to care. The looting was just the culmination of years of Saddam's hyperbolic dictatorial rule, and of the cruel sanctions imposed after the First Gulf War. In true United Nations style, after the army it authorised did nothing to prevent the massacres in the South, the world imposed a blockade on Saddam that hurt his people and barely touched him. His only answer was to turn the screw a little tighter and lay waste the marshes and date palm groves of the South. Basra's own poet Shakir Al-Sayyab said it best, about another time of loss and rebirth:

*And in the village, Ishtar is dying of thirst,
There are no flowers on her forehead
And in her hands there is a basket, its fruits are stones
Which she casts at every woman. And in the palm trees
On the city's shore, there is a wailing.⁷*

On every road, check-points have been set up, manned by young soldiers who stand in the sun all day in their heavy anti-bullet gear and helmets, stopping every vehicle. The backlog of cars is long. Heat and the fear of bombs is making us all edgy. At that time, most suicide bombers operate at check-points. We surrender our papers and authorisations at every road block. Sometimes, the message to let the Red Cross through hasn't come down the chain of command, so we are detained pending verification. At one gate, a young black woman in full combat gear approaches our landcruiser. Fear stretches her skin and suffuses her velvet eyes as she holds her gun up to the window, the trigger finger quivering. It wouldn't take much for an accident to happen. I speak to her, show her my papers and the gun lowers a fraction, enough to reassure. "Just doin' my job, ma'am. We gotta check *everyone*. Some bad folks get dressed up and paint their cars with a red cross and then blow themselves up and kill people." She's right. On the internal news yesterday, there was a report of a car bearing a red crescent emblem spewing out armed men who opened fire. I experience again the shifting threshold between Ishtar and Ereshkigal. In this land, I am as suspicious in the eyes of strangers as they are in mine, as likely to bring death as relief.

We arrive at the camp, which has become our own underworld. Thousands of Iraqis were detained as the coalition troops advanced towards the North. The occupation force has been

⁷ From *City of Sindbad*, by Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (Basrah, 1926-1964). This poem was published in 1960 and excoriates the failures of the 1958 revolution of Gen. Qasim.

arresting many more since the fall of Saddam. Some are clearly soldiers, prisoners of war. Some are just as clearly gangsters, generally held separate from the others - for in the dying days of his regime, Saddam let them all out of prison, intending to make the country ungovernable. Some are foreigners, young men who flocked to Iraq to fight for the Arab cause. The rest are civilians, a mix of common law and security detainees. When Saddam fell, the Iraqi prison service was disbanded: the whole of the detention work now falls on the coalition's military police, British and American. For reasons best known to themselves, the coalition has built its main prison camp in a desert devastated by sandstorms and old wars. Everyone inside it - prisoners, guards, humanitarians - eats dust and bakes in the sun. The military sleeping quarters, at the entrance of the camp, is barely better than the prisoners': same overheated tents, same scorching heat, same dirt that penetrates everywhere. I wonder if the Ancients got their idea of hell from this dour area. *Where dust is their fare and clay their food.*

The Ascent of Inanna from the Underworld.

Inanna had made preparations with her assistant Ninshubur in case she did not return after three days. That deadline past, Ninshubur followed her mistress's instructions to the letter. She dressed herself in mourning rags and ashes, and went to beg the god Enlil for help. Enlil reminded her that the laws of the underworld were inflexible and he could do nothing for the foolhardy Inanna. Inanna's father, Nanna, gave her the same answer as Enlil. Finally, Ninshubur went to Enki, Inanna's uncle, god of wisdom and sweet waters. In Sumerian, "sweet waters" - is also the word for semen: Enki is the great inseminator.

Enki didn't hesitate. Inanna was a daughter after his own heart, and, like his water, her vitality was necessary for life on earth. He fashioned two creatures from the dirt under his fingernails, neither male nor female. Shamanic shape-shifters and threshold-crossers, they slipped past the gates of the underworld as flies. When they reached Ereshkigal, they found her moaning as though in labour. As she cries, they cry with her, showing her a compassion she couldn't find in the sterile creatures of the underworld.

We are not told why Ereshkigal is experiencing labour pains, but it is inferred in the text that her pain follows on from Inanna's death. It is impossible, the tale seems to suggest, to take someone's life, to torture them (as happens in the Babylonian version), without feeling pain, without one's own life-force revolting against the choking out of life. Ereshkigal was alive with the pain of birth - as well she might, as she was about to give birth to Inanna's revival. The kindness of Enki's creatures won her over and she promised them whatever they wanted, offering them the water-gift or the grain-gift. We learn that the lady of death owns two vigorous signs of life - water, grain, both of which hide below ground before emerging. But Enki's creatures were after the bigger prize - she who embodies the principle of life itself, Inanna. They asked for her corpse and despite Ershkigal's reluctance, she gave it to them. They revived Inanna and and alive, she set out for home, stopping at every gate to retrieve her powers.

As she leaves, the judges of the underworld once again surrounded her:

No one ascends from the underworld unmarked

If Inanna wishes to return from the underworld,

She must provide someone in her place.

To ensure this sacrifice was carried out, Ereshkigal dispatched her demons with Inanna. After refusing to give up her faithful Ninshubur or her two sons, who were all deep in mourning for her, Inanna came upon her husband Dumuzi, who sat on his throne, dressed in splendid clothes, indifferent to his wife's disappearance. Enraged, she decided against him. Her words are a repetition of her own execution in the underworld:

Inanna fastened on Dumuzi the eye of death

She spoke against him the word of wrath.

She uttered against him the cry of guilt.

Inanna had changed during her time in the underworld: through humiliation and death, she had absorbed some of Ereshkigal, just as Ereshkigal had assimilated some of Inanna in facing and killing her. Now, Inanna is the one condemning another to death. The two, Inanna, Ereshkigal, became one continuum in life and death.

In a subsequent story, Dumuzi's sister Geshtinanna, goddess of the vine, pleads for his life, and Inanna agrees that she should spend half the year in the underworld, while Dumuzi will spend the other half. This arrangement portrays neatly both the Sumerian night sky, where constellations representing Dumuzi and Geshtinanna appeared and disappeared at different times of the year; and the agricultural year, which was divided between the grape and the grain (Dumuzi, as well as being the shepherd, was a grain god). Thus Inanna's wisdom, acquired during her hard journey, is complete and she and Ereshkigal have become a united force of balance: they regulate heavens, earth and underworld in harmony, half the year given to one life force, half the year to the other: while the god or goddess who has finished their task "dies" and remains in the underworld for six months.

After Iraq.

I spent less than six months in Iraq. I was due to return after a break, but the bomb at the UN headquarters in August, and a subsequent bomb outside the International Red Cross headquarters in Baghdad, caused all departures to Iraq to be frozen. Our headquarters were moved to Amman in neighbouring Jordan, and all humanitarian operations towards Iraqi prisoners and civilians set off from there in small ultra-mobile teams. Only delegates who spoke Arabic joined them, which excluded me, to my mingled sadness and relief. I holidayed up in the Swiss Alps, went walking every day, picked blueberries, played with my nephew and niece. I didn't send a loved one to Iraq in my place, but hundreds of humanitarians remained risking their lives and freedom to bring help and comfort to ordinary Iraqis. The insurrection against the Americans grew and was severely repressed, then gradually morphed into a civil war, as ever-more violent militants and terror organisations opposed each other in a dirty territorial and ideological war. Both insurrection and civil war killed thousands of soldiers and civilians. What was already dangerous work for humanitarians became at times almost suicidal, yet still, Iraqi and foreign humanitarians kept going, bringing to their work their life-force and their desire to see the country grow out of its misery and its fratricidal conflict.

The underworld that was Iraq in 2003 has never left me. Just as years before, in the midst of private pain, I had found solace with Inanna as she journeyed below and was reborn, this time, I consciously experienced Ereshkigal's realm - the tangible underworld of Iraq at war, the emotional underworld in which most of its people were living, and my own grief for so much lost life, for a ravaged countryside, for a battered people - Ishtar's proud people, lamenting the death of

Dumuzi, as became the yearly tradition in Babylon. Yet it was only after I had left the physical reality of Iraq that I was able to grieve for it, and to feel and express my anger at what I had witnessed, my guilt at being alive and safe. I mourned a long time. Like waters mingling together, my grief intermixed with other, earlier and later griefs, both personal and linked to my work. In 2006, impelled by memories of Iraq and by a more recent heartbreak, I took part in a shamanic experience that retraced over several days, in a series of four long journeys, the descent of Inanna to the underworld, her encounter with Ereshkigal and the experience of death, rebirth and return. Through this work at the centre of my own underworld, through my own meeting with the mysterious Ereshkigal, who underneath her stern exterior lives and resonates as intensely as Inanna, through my own shamanic death and rebirth in her domain, I was able to make sense of much of what I had experienced in my life. More importantly, I learnt to balance the forces of light and dark, to assimilate them in my life as part of a single cycle: rather than lurching from one to the other, uncontrollably and at a great cost to myself.

Switzerland, August 2003

I am lying outdoors under a pristine Alpine night sky. Meteor showers are falling around me, stardust exploding in death and life. I draw to myself the encrusted robe of night, wrap it close around me, pluck down the crown of heaven, slip the necklace of stars over my head and a ring of saturn around my wrist, draw darkness onto my eyelids, protect myself with a shining breastplate of light. I'm sleeping out here tonight, enclosed between the interwoven darkness of the sky, the earth and the mountainous underworld. I am home.

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