5 Inanna’s Descent

The Sumerian story of ‘Inanna’s Descent’ was pieced together from more than thirty tablets and fragments found in the ruins of Nippur in central Mesopotamia. Most of the tablets, discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, date from around 1750 BCE. The myth highlights the dual aspect of Inanna, as goddess of love and war. By this stage in her story, Inanna has already become the queen of the shepherd Dumuzi, inciting him to love and thereby bringing fertility to the land. Her descent to the underworld is her initiation into the transformative mysteries of life and death. When she returns to earth to find her king proceeding with life much as usual, she elects that he should be sent to the underworld goddess Ereshkigal in her place. The Babylonian ‘Descent of Ishtar’ (Inanna’s counterpart) is a much shorter version of the same story. The myth bears comparison with the Egyptian tale of ‘Isis and Osiris’ (pp. 112–16) and the Phrygian story of ‘Cybele and Attis’ (pp. 312–14).

From the great heaven, the goddess set her mind on the great below. My mistress Inanna abandoned heaven, abandoned earth and descended to the underworld.

She abandoned her priestly duties, and descended to the underworld. She abandoned her temples in Unug, Badtibira, Zabalam and Adab, and descended to the underworld. She abandoned her temples in Nibiru, Kish and Agade, and descended to the underworld.

She gathered together the me, the seven divine powers, and proceeded with these in her care. She donned a head-dress suitable for the open country and arranged her hair across her brow. Around her neck she hung small lapis lazuli beads and on her breast she placed two egg-shaped stones. She gathered her royal robes about her, painted ‘come hither’ mascara on her eyes and bound a ‘come hither’ sash across her breast. Slipping a golden bangle round her wrist and holding her lapis lazuli measuring rod and line, she set out for the underworld. Her servant Ninshubur travelled behind her. ‘Come, my faithful servant of the house of An, my fair and trustworthy servant,’ she said. ‘This is the day on which I will descend to the underworld. When I arrive you must raise a lament for me, you must beat a drum in the sanctuary and visit the temples of the gods for me. Tear at your eyes, your face, your thighs for me. Dress yourself like a pauper and go alone to the temple
of Enlil in Nippur. When you have entered, cry out to him: “O Father Enlil, do not let your daughter be put to death in the underworld. Do not let your precious silver be tarnished with the dirt of the underworld. Do not let your precious lapis lazuli be shattered there by the mason’s stone. Do not let your fragrant boxwood be chopped up for the carpenter. Do not let the mistress Inanna be put to death in the underworld.”

“If Enlil will not help you, go to the city of Ur, to the temple of the moon-god Nanna, and cry out: “O Father Nanna, do not let your daughter be put to death in the underworld. Do not let your precious silver be tarnished with the dirt of the underworld. Do not let your precious lapis lazuli be shattered there by the mason’s stone. Do not let your fragrant boxwood be chopped up for the carpenter. Do not let the mistress Inanna be put to death in the underworld.”

“If Nanna will not help you, go to the city of Eridu, to the temple of Enki, and cry out: “O Father Enki, do not let your daughter be put to death in the underworld. Do not let your precious silver be tarnished with the dirt of the underworld. Do not let your precious lapis lazuli be shattered there by the mason’s stone. Do not let your fragrant boxwood be chopped up for the carpenter. Do not let the mistress Inanna be put to death in the underworld.” Father Enki, lord of great wisdom, knows about the food of life and the water of life. It is he who will return me to the land of the living.’

Inanna continued her journey towards the underworld, her servant Ninshubur following behind her, until at last she said: ‘Leave me now, my Ninshubur, but pay heed to what I have said.’

When Inanna arrived at Ganzar, the outer gate of the underworld, she pushed fiercely against the door and shouted: ‘Open up, gatekeeper! Open up, Neti! Let me come in!’

‘Who are you?’ asked Neti, chief gatekeeper of the underworld.

‘I am Inanna and I am travelling east.’

‘If indeed you are Inanna, and travelling east, why have you come to the land of no return?’

‘I am here because Lord Gugulanna, the Bull of Heaven, the husband of my older sister Ereshkigal, has died,’ Inanna replied. ‘I have come to witness his magnificent funeral rites.’

Neti approached Ereshkigal, goddess of the underworld, and said: ‘My lady, your sister Inanna waits outside. She pushed fiercely against the door and shouted. Before descending, she abandoned her temples, she gathered together the me, the seven divine powers, and proceeded
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with these in her care. She donned a head-dress suitable for the open
country and arranged her hair across her brow. Around her neck she
hung small lapis lazuli beads and on her breast she placed two egg-
shaped stones. She gathered her royal robes about her, painted “come
father” mascara on her eyes and bound a “come hither” sash across her
breast. She slipped a golden bangle round her wrist and grasped hold of
her lapis lazuli measuring rod and line.

When Ereshkigal heard this, she struck her thigh, bit her lip and
mused on the words. Then she said: ‘Come, Neti, chief gatekeeper of
the underworld, pay attention to my instructions. Bolt the seven gates of
the underworld and then open each of them one at a time. She must
stoop low to enter and her garments must be removed.’

Neti did as bidden and bolted the seven gates of the underworld.
Then he opened the outer gate and said: ‘Come, Inanna. Enter.’

When Inanna entered, her head-dress was removed from her head.
‘What are you doing?’ she asked and was told: ‘Ask no questions,
Inanna. A divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled. You must
not challenge the rites of the underworld.’

When Inanna entered the second gate, the small lapis lazuli beads
were removed from her neck.
‘What are you doing?’ she asked and was told: ‘Ask no questions,
Inanna. A divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled. You must
not challenge the rites of the underworld.’

When she entered the third gate, the egg-shaped stones were re-
moved from her breast.
‘What are you doing?’ she asked and was told: ‘Ask no questions,
Inanna. A divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled. You must
not challenge the rites of the underworld.’

When she entered the fourth gate the ‘come hither’ sash was re-
moved from her breast.
‘What are you doing?’ she asked and was told: ‘Ask no questions,
Inanna. A divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled. You must
not challenge the rites of the underworld.’

When she entered the fifth gate, the golden bangle was removed
from her wrist.
‘What are you doing?’ she asked and was told: ‘Ask no questions,
Inanna. A divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled. You must
not challenge the rites of the underworld.’

When she entered the sixth gate, the lapis lazuli measuring rod and
line were removed from her hand.
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‘What are you doing?’ she asked and was told: ‘Ask no questions, Inanna. A divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled. You must not challenge the rites of the underworld.’

When she entered the seventh gate, the royal robes were removed from her body.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked and was told: ‘Ask no questions, Inanna. A divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled. You must not challenge the rites of the underworld.’

Then Ereshkigal rose from her throne and Inanna sat there in her stead. The Anunnak, the seven judges of the underworld, passed sentence on her. They looked at her – it was the look of death. They spoke to her – it was the speech of anger. They shouted at her – it was a cry against one found guilty. Inanna was turned into a roving corpse and hung from a hook on the wall.

After three days and three nights, Ninshubur carried out her mistress Inanna’s instructions. She raised a lament for Inanna, she beat a drum for her in the sanctuary and visited the temples of the gods for her. She tore at her eyes, her face, her thighs. She dressed herself like a pauper and went alone to the temple of Enlil in Nippur. When she had entered, she cried out: ‘O Father Enlil, do not let your daughter be put to death in the underworld. Do not let your precious silver be tarnished with the dirt of the underworld. Do not let your precious lapis lazuli be shattered there by the mason’s stone. Do not let your fragrant boxwood be chopped up for the carpenter. Do not let the mistress Inanna be put to death in the underworld.’

Father Enlil answered angrily: ‘My daughter desired the great heaven and she desired the great below as well. No one should desire the divine powers of the underworld, for whoever receives them must remain there for ever. Who, having once entered that place, could expect to leave it?’

When Father Enlil refused to help, Ninshubur went to the city of Ur. On her arrival, she entered the temple of Nanna and cried out: ‘O Father Nanna, do not let your daughter be put to death in the underworld. Do not let your precious silver be tarnished with the dirt of the underworld. Do not let your precious lapis lazuli be shattered there by the mason’s stone. Do not let your fragrant boxwood be chopped up for the carpenter. Do not let the mistress Inanna be put to death in the underworld.’

Father Nanna answered angrily: ‘My daughter desired the great heaven and she desired the great below as well. No one should desire
the divine powers of the underworld, for whoever receives them must remain there for ever. Who, having once entered that place, could expect to leave it?"

When Father Nanna refused to help, Ninshubur went to the city of Eridu. On her arrival, she entered the temple of Enki and cried out: ‘O Father Enki, do not let your daughter be put to death in the underworld. Do not let your precious silver be tarnished with the dirt of the underworld. Do not let your precious lapis lazuli be shattered there by the mason’s stone. Do not let your fragrant boxwood be chopped up for the carpenter. Do not let the mistress Inanna be put to death in the underworld.’

Father Enki answered: ‘What has my daughter done? I am deeply troubled. What has Inanna done? What has An’s sacred prostitute done? I am deeply troubled.’ Then he removed some dirt from under a fingernail and with it he fashioned the kur-jara, a magical creature. Next, he removed some dirt from a different fingernail and with it he created the gala-tura, another magical creature. To the kur-jara he gave the food of life and to the gala-tura he gave the water of life.

Then Father Enki spoke to the gala-tura and the kur-jara saying: ‘Go to the underworld. Flit through the door like flies, slip through the cracks like ghosts. Ereshkigal, the mother who gave birth, is lying there. Her holy shoulders are not covered by a linen cloth, her breasts are empty, her nails are long and sharp, her hair is bunched up like leeks. When she groans, “Oh, my heart” you must say: “Oh, your heart, it is troubled.” When she says, “Oh, my liver” you must say: “Oh, your liver, it is troubled.” She will ask who you are and will beg to talk to you, offering you a river of water, a field of grain in reward. You must say: “Give us the corpse that hangs on the hook.” She will say: “That is the corpse of your queen.” You must reply: “Whether it is the corpse of our king or our queen, give it to us.”’ Then she will give you the corpse and you must sprinkle it with the food of life and the water of life. Thus Inanna will arise.’

The gala-tura and the kur-jara listened intently to Enki’s instructions. They flitted through the door like flies, slipped through the cracks like ghosts and found Ereshkigal, the mother who gave birth, lying there. Her holy shoulders were not covered by a linen cloth, her breasts were empty, her nails were long and sharp, her hair was bunched up like leeks. When she groaned, ‘Oh, my heart’ they replied: ‘Oh, your heart, it is troubled.’ When she groaned, ‘Oh, my liver’ they replied: ‘Oh, your liver, it is troubled.’ Then Ereshkigal asked who they
were and begged to talk to them, offering them a river of water, a field of grain in reward. They refused her offer, saying instead: ‘Give us the corpse that hangs on the hook.’ Holy Ereshkigal answered: ‘That is the corpse of your queen.’

‘Whether it is the corpse of our king or our queen, give it to us,’ they replied. So they were given the corpse and while one sprinkled it with the food of life, the other sprinkled it with the water of life. Thus Inanna arose.

Just as Inanna was about to ascend from the underworld, the Anunnas, the judges of the underworld, seized her: ‘Who has ever risen from the underworld?’ they demanded. ‘If we are to release Inanna, then she must provide a substitute for herself.’

At last, Inanna ascended from the underworld, restrained on all sides by demons intent on finding someone to take her place there. These demons neither eat nor drink, they make no offerings or libations and they accept no sweet gifts. They never enjoy the pleasures of love-making, neither do they have sweet children to kiss. They tear the wife from her husband's embrace, they snatch the son from his father's knee, they steal the bride from her marriage home.

At Ganzar, the outer gate of the underworld, Ninshubur waited, dressed in a filthy garment and covered in dust. As soon as she saw Inanna, she threw herself down at her feet. At once, the demons set up a clamour, saying: ‘Inanna, go home to your city. We will take Ninshubur back to the underworld with us.’

‘This is my trustworthy servant,’ said Inanna. ‘She did not forget my instructions nor neglect to carry them out. How could I possibly hand over the goddess who brought me back to life? Let us proceed. Let us go to the temple in Umma.’

When they arrived at the temple in Umma, the god Cara, dressed in a filthy garment and covered in dust, threw himself down at her feet. At once, the demons set up a clamour, saying: ‘Inanna, go home to your city. We will take this god back to the underworld with us.’

‘Cara is my singer, my manicurist, my hairdresser,’ said Inanna. ‘How could I possibly hand him over to you? Let us proceed. Let us go to the temple in Badtibira.’

At the temple in Badtibira, the god Lulal, dressed in a filthy garment and covered in dust, threw himself down at Inanna's feet. At once, the demons set up a clamour, saying: ‘Inanna, go home to your city. We will take this god back to the underworld with us.’

‘The great Lulal is my constant companion,’ said Inanna. ‘How could
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I possibly hand him over to you? Let us proceed. Let us go to the great apple tree in the plain of Kulaba.’

The demons followed Inanna to the great apple tree in the plain of Kulaba. There they found Inanna’s husband, Dumuzi, wearing a magnificent robe and seated in great majesty on a throne. The demons seized the shepherd by his thighs, poured the milk from his churns and made him cease playing his flute and pipe. Inanna looked at Dumuzi — it was the look of death. Inanna spoke to him — it was the speech of anger. Inanna shouted at him — it was a cry against one found guilty.

‘Take him away!’ she commanded. Thus holy Inanna handed Dumuzi the shepherd over to the demons.

Those who accompanied Inanna, those who had come for Dumuzi, neither eat nor drink. They make neither offerings nor libations and they accept no sweet gifts. They never enjoy the pleasures of lovemaking nor do they have sweet children to kiss. They tear the wife from her husband’s embrace, they snatch the son from his father’s knee, they steal the bride from her marriage home.

Dumuzi uttered a wail of despair, turned very pale and raised his hands to heaven, to the sun-god Utu. ‘Utu, you are my brother-in-law. I am related to you by marriage. I brought butter to your mother’s house, I brought milk to your sister Ningal. Turn me into a snake so that I may escape the demons!’

Utu the sun-god took pity on Dumuzi and he escaped. Then the demons set off in pursuit of Inanna once more. They entered Uruk, her holy city, and seized her. ‘Come, Inanna, let us go to the underworld!’ they cried. ‘Remove your royal garments and your holy crown.’ Once again, Inanna told them where they might find the shepherd Dumuzi. The demons said: ‘As for the youth Dumuzi, we will put his feet in the stocks. We will put his hands in the stocks too, we will put his neck in the stocks.’ They threatened him with copper pins, nails and pokers. They sharpened their axes, they stood him up, they sat him down, they removed his clothes, they bound his arms. The youth raised his arms to the sun-god Utu and cried: ‘O Utu, I am a youth, your friend. Do you recognise me? Your sister Inanna whom I married descended to the underworld and then decided to hand me over to the underworld in her place. O Utu, you are a fair judge, don’t let me down! Disguise me so that I may escape the clutches of the demons! Don’t let them catch me! Let me escape to the home of my sister Geshtinanna.’

Utu responded to Dumuzi’s plea and disguised him so that, like a snake or a falcon, he escaped to the home of his sister Geshtinanna.
There, Geshtinanna gazed upon her brother with great concern and raised a lament for the unfortunate youth: 'O my brother! O youth of tender years. O my brother without wife or child, without friend or companion. O my brother who grieves his mother!' The demons searched hither and thither for Dumuzi. The small demons said to the big demons: 'Demons have no mother or father, no sister or brother, no wife or children. Demons know no pity, they do not distinguish between good and evil. We cannot let a man, all alone, with no family, escape with his life. Rather than going to the home of his friends or in-laws, we will go to Geshtinanna's dwelling.' Then they clapped their hands and went in search of him.

Geshtinanna had scarcely finished her lament when the demons arrived at her door and demanded: 'Show us your brother!' She refused to speak to them. They afflicted her skin with a terrible rash, but still she would not speak to them. They scratched her face, but still she would not speak to them. They scratched her buttocks, but still she would not speak to them. They poured tar in her lap, but still she would not speak to them. And so the demons were unable to find Dumuzi.

The small demons said to the big demons: 'Come, let us go to the holy sheepfold!' There at the holy sheepfold they caught Dumuzi. There they wielded their axe against the youth. There they sharpened their daggers, there they smashed his hut. All the while, Dumuzi's sister Geshtinanna wandered about the city like a great bird calling: 'My brother, let me take this great misfortune from you!' So, while Geshtinanna wept for her brother, it was decreed that Dumuzi should spend half the year in the underworld and his sister the other half. Thus it was that Dumuzi went to the underworld in place of the holy Inanna. Sweet is your praise, holy Ereshkigal.

6 Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave

The Sumerian Lugalbanda tales were found on tablets dating back to Ur III (the end of the third millennium BCE) buried at Nippur, Kish, Uruk and Nineveh. According to a number of ancient sources, Lugalbanda was the third king of the first dynasty of Uruk (modern-day Warka), the son of Enmerkar, and the father of the semi-divine hero Gilgame...