

The Descent of Inanna

Part I: Below

Down.

Her foot is pointed like a dancer's, laces inward,
indicating darkness. The bend in her knee is not quite classical--
the bone protrudes, white-blind, and her calf is mapped:
scar, welt, sun. It hesitates, ostrich-elongate,
and the ribbon knotted at the perfumed hollow of her ankle
flutters.

The wind out of the deep smells of myrrh and cardamom,
and meat just shy of spoil.

Does she hear the sea far off from her? Does she hear the working
of worms in the ceiling of loam?

There is no door--moss and roots like swinging nooses
cover a hole, hardly wide enough for her amphora-waist.
On her hands and knees
in the squelching mud she crawls,
infant with tectonic skull
wriggling into the earth, her breaststroke white of arm
mushrooms suckle at her palms, her belly, her collarbone.
Centipedes whisper her progress
to clicking beetles, green of carapace.

Her face is clay, nostrils packed with dust.
She can taste the ground mulch-meal
of palm and olive, acacia and carob,
thick as meat on her tongue. The crown
of her head is clotted with leaves,
peels of fruit,
crickets dirge-clucking.

She has come so far,
Inanna of the pounded millet.
Inanna of the barreled cider.

In Uruk where the walls are frozen dust and high,
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spackled air.

In Badtibira, where the water-sellers curse in six languages,
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spackled air.

In Zabalam, where the municipal quays glitter like sun-baked oil,
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spackled air.

In Adab, where the ox-drivers speak in rhyming couplets,
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spackled air.

In Nippur, which straddles the Shatt-en-Nil like a woman squatting in birth,
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spangled air.

In Kish, where frankincense traders guard their pots with bared teeth,
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spangled air.

In Akkad, where rose-grafter's sons are kings,
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spangled air.

From these seven places
thick with woodsmoke
and the gymnast-tongues of the prayerful,
she gathered her belongings –
Waif-Queen of Runaways,
and went to the brambled hole of the deep,
the sludge-canal of the seed-shot earth.

She drew the shugurra, the crown of her crown,
from a reliquary of drywall and daub.
She blew the dust from the twisted gold.
She arranged the net of jewels over her hair – black, oh,
blacker than shadow that lies with shadow –
and the weight left a mark on her brow.

She drew the lapis necklace, wide as her whittled shoulders,
from a reliquary of many-colored splinters.
She wiped the clinging wood from the stones.
She arranged the doubled and tripled strings of beads – blue, oh,
blue as the painted horns of lowing bulls –
around her oinochoe-neck,
and the weight left a mark on her breastbone.

She drew the robe of milkweed and spun sapphire
from a mouse's grain-thatched hutch.
She combed the pepper and seeds from the stitches.
She arranged the breathing cloth around her frame – pale, oh,
pale as the dust of excavations –
and the weight left a mark on her spine.

She drew her pots of malachite and soot
from the cracks of a sunken well.
She drained the bracken-water from the ointment.
She arranged the lines of her eyes – green, oh,
green as flooding banks –
and the weight left a mark on her lids.

She drew the breastplate of beaten bronze
from behind her own statue.
She polished the dull from the sheen.
She arranged the armor of her torso – bright, oh,
bright as pickaxes flashing through a gridline –
she hissed and she crowed:
Come into me, come.

And the weight left a mark on her stomach.

She drew the ring of gold and jacinth
from the wheel-packed storehouse.
She brushed the sawdust from the circle.
She arranged the shining hyphen on her wrist— cold, oh,
cold as a pillow left beneath the window—
and the weight left a mark on her hand.

She drew the measuring rod and line
from between tablets bellowing graffiti-cuneiform.
She smoothed the words from the thread.
She took up the sextant-stick in her hand— tight, oh,
tight as a closed jaw—
and the weight left a mark on her palm.

All dressed up,
Inanna stood at the roadhead,
still as a hieroglyph,
and sniffed the air, jackal-cagey.

Beneath her, she felt her sister roll over sleeping,
under her blankets of moon-leeched limbs. The wind
out of Adab plucked sweat from her brow.

There is no dark
like a catacomb.

—

Inanna, whose bones were flutes and pipes,
went for tea-and-tallow to her friend Nishubur,
whose bones made no sound,
but whose hair was oiled with dates,
whose arms were cuffed in silver and carnelian,
whose lashes floated on her cheeks like smoke.

Her necklace and breastplate clanged awkward and severe:
Inanna lay beside Nishubur on a red chaise.

“Your hands are so small,”
whispered Inanna of the oil-jar brimming.
“so small, and so cold.”

Nishubur took off the rings of her fingers,
the garnet and the iron,
and held the green-lidded face of her friend.

“Where are you going, dearest of all women to me?
You are already gone, I see it,
and a husk lies here beside me,
like a mantis-skin.”

"I am going to my sister;
I am going into the dark,
into the other,
and I am afraid."

"The dark
is always dark
even if you are the light of all lanterns,
beacon-bodied,
boiling over into my hands—
my small hands, and cold."

Inanna laughed, and her laughter
was like figs falling from the branch.

"Nishubur, if I should not return—"

"Don't say that, of course you'll return.
There is wool to be combed."

"Nishubur, if I should not return—"

"Don't say that, of course you'll return.
There are walnuts to be hulled."

"Nishubur, if I should not return—"

"Don't say that, of course you'll return.
There is grass-beer to be brewed."

"Nishubur, if I should not return—"

And Nishubur lowered her head,
her hair brushing her arms.

"Don't say that.
I could not bear it."

Inanna sighed, and her sigh
was a wind worrying the seawall.

"If I should mire there in the black mud,
you must fashion a lament with both hands—
yes, with your small hands—
out of goatsblood and oxhair.
Lean it up against the broken pillars,
tear its breast and hollow its throat
with a threshing knife.
Dig out the meat of its eyes,
lay furrows of blood into its thighs,
rip its scalp from its skull.
Do not clothe it, but let it howl naked
in the alleys, mad and black-bellowed.

Use its fists to batter drums into deafening.

Use its feet to wander among the holy places.

Use the span of its arms to circle the holy places.

Use the wedge of its jaw to chew the doors of the holy places.

Let it walk from the canopied spice-market into Nippur,
to the diamond-dome of Enlil.

Wretched, let it smear the celestial steps
with blood and waste,
let it shriek against the stone,
and break its teeth on the stair.

Let your Lament do its sodden work,
let it trumpet from a dripping mouth:

*O Enlil, Pickaxe-King,
Inanna suffers in the black!
Dust clumps in her eye-sockets,
she is broken into pieces for the stoneworkers,
the goldsmiths and the woodworkers,
the thatchers and the iron-smelters!
Haul her up with your left hand!*

Enlil, whose breath is the vapors
of decomposing clouds,
will surely refuse.

Let your Lament hobble on mourning ankles
to Ur, to the silver-doored temple of Nanna and Ningal.
Let it weep until the irises ooze from its eyes,
and with its nose running, wail:

*O Father Fullmoon, do not leave her lightless!
Haul her up with your right hand!*

Nanna, who turns his pockmarked back to the sun,
will surely refuse, as is
a stern father's habit
where sisters are concerned.

Let your Lament then stumble on sore-riddled knees
to glad-banked Eridu, to the moist and greening halls of Enki.

He keeps a kettle; he keeps a platter.
old brother ocean, who rocked me once
in a cradle of starfish.
Surely he will come for me, surely he
will not leave me alone in the dark."

Nishubur whose hair smelled of dateskin
pulled her knees to her chest,
buried her face in her limbs.

With a clatter of clothing,
the rice-gathering Inanna
closed arms around her.

“Don’t worry, dearest of all women to me,
it is not so terrible to descend
along the wending way.”

When her friend had slipped from her door,
Nishubur began to hang
mourning cloths in her windows,
unwinding slowly
black from black.

Flour-pounding Inanna
followed the hole in herself to find
the hole in the world,
punched through the hill like a hive-hexagram.
She followed the hole in herself into
the hole in the world,
and, jeweled worm, ate earth into down,
frogkicking through the slime of secret roots,
sand-striations above her,
clay and charcoal packed below:
little white wax-woman between,
contracting through the *kur*-canal,
inching on her belly
towards the sounds of her sister sleeping.

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Look:

A door,
a door in the dark.

She feels it with her hands
like reading Braille,
its edges, its hinges, its latch.
Her fingers leave wet streaks of grime
worm-mash and ant-paste
on the implacable gate.
There is no design on its face,
but bolts and buckles and knotted ropes
cross it and cross again,
as though it were a body,
only just bound in its clothes.

Lemon-planting Inanna unbuckled one,
and then another clasp:
silver, and jet, and the third dull copper.

She pulled open the knots:
flax, and hemp, and twisted silk.

She unbolted the locks,
iron, and heartwood, and gold.

But behind these were still more buckles,
still more knots,
still more bolts.

She clawed at them,
and her fingernails tore to the quick.
First blood mingled with bracken,
and pestle-grinding Inanna
ground her fists into the door,
gouging her thumbs on the bolts,
scouring her knuckles on the knots,
wrenching her wrists on the buckles.

“Open the door!
Let me in!
Sister, my sister,
do not keep me out here
with the wreckage of snails
and the skeletons of voles!
Send you man Neti—
unlock this ghastly hangman’s plank!”

Behind the door,
a voice like pages turning.

“Who are you?”

“I am Inanna, Queen of Heaven;
my hands fold the stars into seeds.
She knows me—I daresay my sister knows me.
Open the door.”

The voice snorted, and
its snort was like spectacles breaking.
It said:

“If you are Inanna whose-legs-lie-open,
why would you come here
through the muck and mire,
past the dung-beetles’ sentry?
There are no flush-skinned lovers here,
or fields sown with carrots.
Here is only swamp-winds wending,

apples browned to sopping,
and Ereshkigal on her pitch-soaked throne.

Go home.
This is no place for tourists.”

“Is it so hard to believe
that sister calls to sister,
blood to blood,
that my heart misses
the sight of her fell and braid-framed face?”

Again, the voice snorted,
and the buckle-bolts moved
not at all.

“Is it so hard to believe, then,
that grief calls to grief,
wife to wife?
Her husband, Gugalanna,
the Bull of Heaven
whose haunches bunched
and smoothed in their strength, has died.
Let the grass-beer be poured out into troughs –
I am here to pay my respects.”

The voice laughed, and his laughter
was like verses tearing themselves from their scrolls.

“It is my right to breach the soil –
this too is part of my work,
whether carrots arrow through your fields,
or legs tangle in your beds.
An apple fermented is no less fruit.
It is not the place of gatesmen
to keep the landlord out.”

The voice was silent, and the silence
was like a fly-laden web.

Inanna put both hands to the door.

“Family needs no reason. Call down to her,
rouse her from grieving, or celebration, or sleep
– whichever bends her arms above her head.
Let me in; open the door.
Your mistress will dock your wages
for such vile guest-etiquette.”

The voice rumbled, a ram grinding
his horns on the cliff – but the buckles
silver, then jet, and the third dull copper,
released.

The knots,
flax, hemp, and twisted silk,
loosened.

The bolts,
iron, heartwood, and gold,
unfastened.

Neti, hunched and small,
scholar's pate round as a mushroom,
pursed his cleric-lips at her.

"Stay here. I will ask her,
and I will leave out
how rude you were to me –
that is my guest-gift to the Queen of Heaven."

And so Neti shuffled in his loafers
down the wending stair,
fiddling with his cuffs as he went.

Through the streets of Kur he shambled,
through suburbs with wide avenues
rimmed in blasted elms,
twig-torches planted in the soil fine as fallout,
guttering blue and orange,
sick and bright.

Through trade roads heavy with stock-still haywains,
teetering with grain-loads gone to maggot,
with leather sour and chewed,
with wine-defeated vinegar in bounded barrels.

Through the urban sprawl of the Underworld,
stud-frames standing like mastodon skulls,
temples with ceilings constellation-cracked,
alleys paved with black stone,
pitted as moons stretched thin. Library-doors
flap open in a myrrh-sop wind,
pages mold over, the colors oceanic,
salt-sallow.

Up through the central square Neti ambled
towards his mistress. The balustrades
forked and glittered around his shadow-errand,
statues broken into abstraction – well, he thought,
statues lose a head or arm –
nothing anyone can do. The noses, particularly,
are vulnerable as infants.
There is Nanna with a caved brainpan,
Utu, hands subtracted,
Ninhursag, her belly broken.

A familiar anatomy-parade for the old man,
straight and well-measured, the road to the palace,
all those pale ancestral arms pointing
up and in, to the inner gates of Ereshkigal,
whose haggard eyes
follow the tracks of fish in a sunless sea.

Eyes dark-customed as a mole's,
Neti filed in through the welded entrance,
the air factory-stale and dizzy with smoke.
Stairs and more stairs, always stairs,
ascent and descent much the same.
But at the step-nexus,
where the dust collects itself,
there the chambers of Ereshkigal gape,
and she within, the stony pit of Irkalla-fig,
steeped in all the beauty
dark things possess:
here Neti begins his night-shift.

"Queen, whose breath is weighed against all sin,
there is a blockage
at the loam-hole.

A woman long as cat-tracks in the snow,
wide of hip as a butcher's wife,
strong as a poor man's lust,
lies corked up against the buckled door,
beating her claim against the plank.

She has gathered together her gifts-to-men,
and wears them hanging tawdry on her body,
all spangles and paint.

She wears the shugurra, the crown of her crown.
She wears the lapis necklace, wide as her whittled shoulders.
She wears the robe of milkweed and spun sapphire.
She wears the ointment of malachite and soot.
She wears the breastplate of beaten bronze, and cries:
Come into me, come.
She wears the ring of gold and jacinth.
She holds the measuring rod and the line."

Ereshkigal heard this and rose
naked from her wing-postered bed,
her hair, black as ice over deep water,
covered her from the crown of her crown
to her nacre-toes. She listened
to the hum of the roof of the world,
listened for the sound of cicadas dream-rustling,
for the sound of eyeless worms chewing filth,
for the sound of flies tapping out telegraphs
faster than fingers.

Then life-leeching Ereshkigal said:

“Open the door. Let her come.
Sister calls to sister,
blood to blood.
But bolt the seven doors of Irkalla ahead of her,
and take her pretty things from her as she passes through,
like a tongue-moistened thread
through a needle of bone.
Let her be as naked as I am,
and as alone.

If she is not cold and shivering,
a bedraggled orphan without a name,
I will not see her, sister or no –
else she will unbolt my chest and slither into me
like the rose that strangles the wheat.”

Neti, valet loyal, walked back
through the cities of Kur,
and behind him,
he shut up the seven walls
with mortar and milk,
and buckled the spackle with iron.

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“Come in, the lamps are lit.”

And Inanna, caked up in dried mud like a fossil,
crouched through the loam-hole and the door,
her muscles thick with stillness.

But Neti, his collar starched and pinned,
stopped her. “Where there is a gate,
there is a toll. The crown of your crown
will clatter in my box
before you see the back of this door.”

In that moment Inanna saw the seven gates
clapping before her like an audience,
saw herself naked and shivering at their end,
shaved to a soap-slip.

“But my head will be bare.
I will feel the cold wind on my scalp.
Without the crown of my crown,
who will know me?”

“Quiet your mouth, Inanna.
We have our customs in this country,

and you are a stranger here.”

She did not bite her lip —
but she wanted to. She lifted
the crown of her crown
with both hands, and rubbed
the red place where it marked her.

The crown was so heavy, really,
she stood straighter without it.

Like a thief at festival, Neti
hooked the crown on his finger,
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the second gate, where the shantytowns of Kur
start to spring up, fungus-bright, on the grey ground,
Neti, his pleats straight and neat,
stopped her. “Where there is a gate,
there is a toll. The lapis necklace,
wide as your whittled shoulders
will clatter in my box
before you see the back of this door.”

She touched the double strand at her throat,
and her vulpine lids drooped,
uncertain and tired.

“But my neck will be bare.
I will feel the chill Irkalla-clime on my skin.
Without my lapis,
who will know me?”

“Quiet your mouth, Inanna.
We have our customs in this country,
and you are a stranger here.”

She did not quail from his dusty hands —
but she wanted to. She lifted
the such-blue beads from her throat,
and rubbed the red place
where it marked her.

The necklace itched so;
she breathed easier, without it.

Like a thief at festival, Neti
hooked the necklace on his finger,
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the third gate, where the aqueducts of Kur
bubble and spit,
Neti, his hair parted on the right,

stopped her. "Where there is a gate,
there is a toll. The robe of milkweed and spun sapphire
will cloud the shoals of my box
before you see the back of this door."

Rain-brewing Inanna
touched the hem of her dress--
her hands allowed the smallest shiver.

"But I will be naked.
I will feel the hands of the dead on my flesh.
Without my robe of milkweed
who will know me?"

"Quiet your mouth, Inanna.
We have our customs in this country,
and you are a stranger here."

She did not cover herself before his rheumy eyes —
but she wanted to. She lifted
the fire-pale robe from her shoulders,
and rubbed the red place
where it marked her.

The dress bound her so;
she walked easier without it.

But it was cold on the outskirts,
and her breath fogged in the air.

Like a thief at festival, Neti
hooked the robe on his finger,
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the fourth gate, where the trash-mounds of Kur
steamed in their sweet-rot stench,
Neti, his mustache trimmed and oiled,
stopped her. "Where there is a gate,
there is a toll. The ointment of malachite and soot
will pool in my box
before you see the back of this door."

Lamb-slaughtering Inanna
touched her painted eye,
the white showing like a moon eclipsed.

"But my lids will be bare.
I will feel the damp of the moldering breeze
rifle my lashes.
Without my beautiful eyes,
who will know me?"

"Quiet your mouth, Inanna.

We have our customs in this country,
and you are a stranger here."

She did not weep when the colors ran —
but she wanted to. She smeared
the green and the black from her eyes,
and rubbed the red place
where they marked her.

The ointment burned so;
she saw more clearly without it.

Like a thief at festival, Neti
hooked the paint on his finger,
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the fifth gate,
where the river Hubur carries out the bile and lurch of Kur,
Neti, his pocket-handkerchief crisp-angled,
stopped her. "Where there is a gate,
there is a toll. The breastplate of beaten bronze,
in which you are brazen enough to cry:
Come into me, come
will clatter in my box
before you see the back of this door."

Fleece-carding Inanna
touched her shining armor,
and her palm allowed
the lightest veil of sweat.

"But my breast will be bare.
I will feel the hard bricks of Kur
hurled against me.
Without my beaten breastplate
who will know me?"

"Quiet your mouth, Inanna.
We have our customs in this country,
and you are a stranger here."

She did not shudder when the straps were unfastened —
but she wanted to.
She lifted the bronze plate from her breast,
and rubbed the red place
where it marked her.

The metal chafed so;
she reached further without it.

Like a thief at festival, Neti
hooked the shirt on his finger,
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the sixth gate, where fallow fields
bristle with shadow-grain,
Neti, his watch-fob mirroring
the drawn and weary face of Heaven,
stopped her. "Where there is a gate,
there is a toll. The ring of gold and jacinth
will clatter in my box
before you see the back of this door."

Grape-crushing Inanna
touched her thick-banded bracelet,
and her breath became ragged
as an unshorn goat.

"But my wrist will be bare.
I will feel the hand of darkness
close on my arm.
Without my blazing ring
who will know me?"

"Quiet your mouth, Inanna.
We have our customs in this country,
and you are a stranger here."

She did not grimace when he reached for the cuff—
but she wanted to.
She lifted the studded band from her wrist
and rubbed the red place
where it marked her.

The bracer was so tight;
her blood beat more swiftly without it.

Like a thief at festival, Neti
hooked the ring on his finger,
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the seventh gate,
where limb-roots of palm and acacia
corkscrew into city walls,
into palisades, into stockades slick with oil,
Neti, his hat folded under his arm,
stopped her. "Where there is a gate,
there is a toll. The measuring rod and line
will clatter in my box
before you see the back of this door."

Calf-birthing Inanna
gripped the lapis baton
and the scabs on her palms split—
blood soaked the rod. Her voice rasped
like a wounded thing

dragging itself through a field of glass:

*But I will be bare.
I will be nothing.
I will be no one.
I will feel the fingers of my sister
break off my breath.
Without my tools
who will know me?
I will not know myself.*

“Quiet your mouth, Inanna. *Quiet.*
Your voice is shameful
and ugly.”

She did not scream when he took them from her —
but she wanted to.
The scream ate itself within her.

Like a well-fed jailor, Neti
seized the rod and line,
and shut them away in his buckled box.

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Naked, there is a woman in the great hall.
her face is salted with tears,
ravaged by mud and the bites of fleas —
she bows her head, nose running like a whipped daughter,
trying to cover her breasts
with her squalid hair.

She shivers. Oily water drips from the ceiling
to spatter her goosepimpled arms. A pillar of gloam
holds up the dark,
watching.

“Who are you?” asked the pillar.

The woman shuddered,
held her elbows,
began, very softly,
to sob into her chest.

The pillar removed itself from the murk,
and drew close, dragging long black hair
like a puddle of naphtha
behind it.

“Are you not my sister Inanna?”
crooned the Ereshkigal-pillar,
“Are you not the lime-tree’s mother?”

The woman's toes clenched
and opened.

"I.

I.

I.

I remember lime trees,
and the fat udders of ewes.
I have been unwound from myself,
a bandage torn,
and so much flesh came with it.
If you say I am Inanna, I will believe it,
but the name, dropped into me,
sounds no splash of water."

"Why would you come here? This is my city,
you have your own.
Do you want to take my capitol
like a dress borrowed without permission?
You are the dark sister, and I am the light –
I did not miss you
when you were gone from me."

The woman bent over, nun-humble.
"I do not know,
but if I could guess
I would say that I sought out the night
because of the hole in myself
that pointed compass-north
to the hole in the world."

The two women stood facing
like an optical illusion,
sunless and still.
Their raveled hair pooled and mingled
between them,
a stain spreading from some unnamable
spilt thing.

"I took all these things from you,
the shugurra, the crown of you crown.
the lapis necklace, wide as your whittled shoulders.
the robe of milkweed and spun sapphire.
the ointment of malachite and soot.
Also the breastplate of beaten bronze, in which you cry:
Come into me, come.
I took the ring of gold and jacinth.
I took the measuring rod and the line."

Ereshkigal who knows the gritty pluperfect
of the mumbling worms, peered close
across her sister's lidded gaze.

Yet I am not Inanna.
I could not lay by the Tigris
and catch the red sun in my skin;
I could not swell up with daughter
and squeeze the moon's grandchildren
from under a skirt of serpent's molt.

If you took these things from me –
nevermind if I wanted them –
if you took the bloodless diadem,
the hematite necklace long as my jointed arms,
the robe of aloe and asphodel,
the ointment of hartsblood and galena.
Also the breastplate of beaten silver, in which I cry:
Stay off from me, stay.
If you took the ring of iron and opal.
If you took the cubit measure.

If you took these things from me,
would you be Ereshkigal?
Could you straddle the dark cities of Kur,
and learn the snail-cuneiform, the beetle-morse?
Could you wane to a sickle
and cut law into clay
with the edge of your waist?

You cannot answer me this.
I have not been answered."

The waste-woman looked up then,
and caught the dead eye of the judge-priestess,
and the whites showed around four irises:

"You have not been answered."

The Annuna came then like egg whites boiling
over the banisters and stairs,
squeak-sliding down tall windows.
The fifty great gods,
and Ereshkigal chief justice.

They shored up the mud-woman,
and through some canals were dredged,
and around some long, unshucked grains were noosed
and some were veiled as widows
and some were gored by cattle
and some had mouths frothing with black beer.

In their ring, the soap-slip woman did not shy,
but the Annuna jeered sibilant; they accused
with tablet-tongues:

Inanna, Inanna.

Inanna, Inanna.

*Naked we know you.
Naked we see your name
tangled in your entrails,
a fat, lying clam
cuffed in salt-kelp.*

Inanna, Inanna.

*You had no right.
You have no passport here.
The hole was not yours to breach.*

*Guilty as a gavel,
guilty as a gavel.*

When they had bound her with their bodies,
Ereshkigal came to her sister,
and the bloodless diadem was baleful on her skull.
She cupped tenderly that midden-cheek and smiled:
a playmate's smile.

"I always thought, you know,
out of the two of us,
you were prettiest,"
said the deathshad, pale as sturgeon.

She drew back her hand,
and struck Inanna full-knuckled.

The yolk-breaking goddess spat,
and three teeth flew at the ground,
instantly wriggling into the grainy soil,
to send up white shoots in three days time.

Then Ereshkigal drew back her hair like curtains,
and fixed her headstone-eye on her sister.
Her mouth hinged, and she dragged up from her bones
a sloughing wail of guilt and sorrow

and triumph.

Ereshkigal who blights the grain
heaved the sister-self onto her broad shoulder,
and carried her deep into the palace,
carried her,
gentle as an elegy.
Inanna's head rocked sinew-sideways;
her limp fingers brushed their footprints from the dust.

Already, worms nosed at the pits of her knees.

Like a cow prepared for quartering,
Inanna was hung up on a hook,
frozen stiff— to keep the meat fresh—
and her hair hung down,
black as ice over deep water,
it covered her from the crown of her crown
to nacre-toes which pointed down,
slack as a lynching.

::

The first day Inanna went beneath the crust,
Nishubur cut her date-oiled hair with a dull knife,
to the length of her waist.

The second day Inanna went sky-unseen,
Nishubur cut her date-scented hair with a dull knife
to the length of her shoulders.

The third day Inanna lay prostrate as grave-goods,
Nishubur sheared her date-balmed hair from her skull,
and the blunt knife left gouges in her scalp
like red kisses.

On the third day she went into her garden,
knelt in the onion-patch.
Out of stems and compost she fashioned her Lament
with her small hands,
small and cold.
She did not clothe it,
and she lay furrows of blood
into its clayey thighs.
Instead of eyes,
she stabbed its doughy face with her fingers,
instead of a mouth she chewed a jaw
into its green skull.

With her Lament toddling beside,
she walked from the canopied spice-market into Nippur,
to the diamond-dome of Enlil.
Mother lion, she nudged Lament forward,
to wretched smear the celestial steps
with blood and shit and tears,
to shriek against the stone,
and break its teeth on the stair,
to do its sodden work,
and trumpet from its dripping mouth:

*O Enlil, Pickaxe-King,
Inanna suffers in the black!
Dust clumps in her eye-sockets,*

*she is broken into pieces for the stoneworkers,
the goldsmiths and the woodworkers,
the thatchers and the iron-smelters!
Haul her up with your left hand!*

But Enlil, whose breath is rarified
as white gloves and cufflinks,
refused, saying:

*The trollop-shanked thing
chose the road down.
The underworld does not tolerate dilettantes:
No one who goes into the black city
returns to coax pea-pods out of their land.*

With her Lament striding long-legged,
she walked to Ur,
to the silver-doored temple of Nanna and Ningal.
Sister Bear, she stood behind it
while it wept until the irises oozed from its eyes,
and with its nose running, wailed:

*O Father Fullmoon, do not leave her lightless!
Haul her up with your right hand!*

Nanna, who takes no more father-pride
than the first flush of seed,
refused, saying:

*The hoop-skirted belle
chose the road down.
Hell does not encourage dabblers.
No one who goes into the black city
returns to scale bluefish on a cedar stump.*

With her Lament stooped,
stumbling on sore-riddled knees,
she walked to glad-banked Eridu,
to the moist and greening halls of Enki.

Grandmother Crocodile, she crimped closed
the garden-mouth of Lament,
and growled, teeth sharp:

*Enki, O Enki!
You keep a kettle; you keep a platter.
Old brother, you rocked her once
in a cradle of starfish.
Surely you will go to her, surely you
will not leave her down there,
alone in the dark.*

Enki in his oasis-bower stirred.

His bellow was like the wind off of the Gulf—
all the lighthouse-lanterns
guttered and spent in its gust:

*What is this?
What has she done?
What has my sister committed
upon my sister?
Inanna, Inanna!
Weaver of the melon-vine!
The earth is an alchemist of innocence:
what are you now?*

Nishubur dropped to her knees,
her ruined head a flagellant's tonsure,
wringing the dead Lament
in her small hands.

Fresh-manicured, Enki dug into the
wet flesh and grime beneath his fingernails,
the smell oddly sweet. He clumped together
the soggy finger-cap with the dirt,
and spun two golem on his potter's wheel,
kilnless, deformed,
heads flat as the world,
mouths a geometric line
neither male nor female,
their bodies blank as if a hand
had scooped them clean.

He took up his kettle to boil and whistle;
he took up his platter to pile high,
and said to the pupilless golem:

*This is the Water of Life.
Fill up her throat.
This is the Bread of Life.
Fill up her belly.
On her abattoir-slab,
she will rise
and tunnel back up
to the light-drenched stones.*

When the golem trundled out
of the green and moist temple of Enki,
Nishubur stopped them,
and with her slender finger,
dug the name of *Inanna*
into the crust of the Bread of Life.
She patted their heads like babes
off to school,

and Nishubur,

whose hair once smelled of warm dates,
walked long and long
back to her own small house,
lay down in her bed,
and wept.

::

Oh! My within!

Being mud and whiteflesh,
the twins needed no gate.
They sieved into the mountain,
and down,
oozing through seven gates,
surrendering nothing.

What has a golem to give?

When they came through the city square
and passed like workers under the clanging gate,
even Neti, deep in books and scribbling,
blinked their passing away.

Oh! My without!

In the throneroom, papers
and waddling clothes littered the parquet floor –
in the corner – swollen bee, jelly-bloat! –
Ereshkigal lay prostrate,
her waterbag-womb stretched,
snail-round under her miasma-hair
that spread around her like limp leeks.
Her breasts black-nippled were uncovered,
chafed as if from the use of many mouths,
and Ereshkigal
who knew the hundred dialects of the centipede,
keened:

Oh! My within!

Little parrots, eager to please,
the golem chirped:

Oh! Your within!

Tearing at her stomach with necrotic fingers,
nails breaking on the skin,
Ereshkigal keened:

Oh! My without!

Little magpies, happy to echo,

the golem twittered:

Oh! Your without!

Scratching at her throat, her bared breast,
Ereshkigal arched her spine bow-wide,
seizing, convulsive, bile dribbling from her slattern-mouth:

*I am become a suicide,
I am become a stick-and-wheel game,
my sister's corpse battering
the band of my womb.
There is a hook puncturing my lung –*

Oh! My lung!

Little cubs, hungry to imitate,
the golem cried:

Oh! Your lung!

Crouched on her knees and squatting
as if a peasant calving in a turnip field,
she leaned her weight against the white trunks
of three tooth-trees,
grown tall and sere-branched,
their enamel chalk-perfect.
In their Pythagorean frame,
Ereshkigal vomited, holding her own hair back.
She grimaced in the choke, lips peeled back,
and sobbed with hitching sighs:

*I am sterile as scalpels –
what is this mass?
It has a mouth full of cat-claws,
black-buttocked zygote,
it is a basket of piscine tumors,
that is all this body could ever birth
since it was pulled below the rootline.*

Oh! My child!

Little gramaphones, itching to play her back,
the golem sang:

Oh! Your child!

Ereshkigal who sucks the water from the village well
rocked back and forward on her heels,
and blood seeped from beneath her
onto the polished floor. Her anguish-whisper:

It is her,

it is her.

*Her name is writing itself on the walls of my womb,
Inannainannainanna,
over and over, stutter-script,
and she will swallow me up,
within to without. She will take*

*the bloodless diadem,
the hematite necklace long as my jointed arms,
the robe of aloe and asphodel,
the ointment of hartsblood and galena.
Also the breastplate of beaten silver, in which I cry:
Stay off from me, stay.
She will take the ring of iron and opal.
She will take the cubit measure.*

*I will be bare
I will be nothing.*

*I am become a suicide,
I am become the cannibal-queen,
chewing my way out of my own flesh.*

*It was then Ereshkigal saw them,
paunchy as gingerbread children,
and she crawled to them,
dragging her belly like a serpent,
her fingers stubbing into blood-bruises
on the stone, ash-flakes flying,
she toppled to her elbows,
and she who seeds the meat with maggots
wheezed – choleric suppliant! –
holding out her arms to the golem:*

Oh! My darlings!

(Oh! Your darlings!)

*Please, please,
before she comes gnawing
out of my innards like stringy seed-pulp.
Cut into the gourd of my belly,
slash the throat of whatever wolf-fetus
soaks its fur in me.
Please, oh –*

*Get it out.
Get it out.
Get her out of me.*

The golem looked at each other and blinked.

We don't know how.

She began to pound her stomach
like dough for Saturday bread,
punching shrieks from her bones.
The golem blinked.

*We came for the corpse on the wall.
The one hanging up like a trophy-gazelle.
The one rotting into cheeseskin and humors.*

Ereshkigal laughed, a three-penny soprano.

*That body belongs to myself.
But slice me in eighths,
dash out the brains of my cancer-daughter,
and I will give you the cut wheat
bundled into stacks, and yeast
mounded in a smoking cairn.*

The golem blinked.

*We do not want that.
What would we do with it?
We came for the corpse on the wall.
The one hanging up like feast-roast.
The one separating into lymph and marrow.*

Ereshkigal of the black river-hair scowled,
glanced over her heaving body
to the mirror-body hanging behind her throne,
hair black as ice over deep water
covering it from the crown of its crown
to nacre-toes swinging low.

*That body belongs to myself.
But get your clumsy hand around a cleaver
and gash open this unlanced boil,
snap the neck of the grotesquerie that fills it,
and I will give you the river
inundating its banks in just correctness,
year young and year old.*

The golem blinked.

*We do not want that.
What would we do with it?
We came for the corpse on the wall.
The one hung up like a winter jacket.
The one putrefying into gases and yellow fat.*

Ereshkigal bore up, on all fours,
gravid as the springtime earth.

That body, she husked, belongs to Inanna.

The golem tsked.

*We do not care who it belongs to,
you or she or a grocer of yams.
We came for it; it is what we want.*

::

The golem clucked over the body,
unhooked from its height.
Behind them snow-flooding Ereshkigal
lay curled around herself
in the primordial mass of her hair.

From between her legs,
afterbirth hemorrhaged,
black blood clotting
like knots tying themselves.

She mewed, softly,
alone.

*It is over.
It is over.*

The golem displayed their cure-all medicine;
they propped open the corpse-mouth
with a tooth-twig,
and let the Water of Life
dribble past her tongue.

They lifted the head,
careful to support the neck,
and pull the threads of hair from her face.

They took the Bread of Life,
which small-handed Nishubur
had branded with a name
that meant pomegranates split open,
obscenely red on the yellow grass.

One held lip from lip,
the other planted its cake
deep in the corpse-throat.

And slowly, like a mouse just dry of its dam,
love-wielding Inanna
opened her eyes in the dark.

The shugurra, crown of her crown, lay on her hair.

The lapis necklace, wide as her whittled shoulders, lay on her throat.

The robe of milkweed and spun sapphire lay on her body.

The ointment of malachite and soot lay over her lids.

The breastplate of beaten bronze, in which she crowed:
Come into me, come
lay on her breast.

The ring of gold and jacinth circled her wrist.

The measuring rod and the line rested snug in her hand.

Somewhere above her,
strained through a net of palm-roots,
she could smell the straining of the light.