

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 6

*The Adventures of the  
Faithful Counselor*

A Narrative Poem

by  
Anne Sheldon





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To Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer,  
authors of *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*  
(Harper Collins), which brings Inanna from  
cuneiform, across the millennia, into English.  
*The Adventures of the Faithful Counselor* is based  
upon this fine book.

In the first days, in the very first days,  
In the first nights, in the very first nights,  
In the first years, in the very first years,  
When everything needed was brought into being,  
When everything needed was properly nourished,  
When bread was baked in the shrines of the land  
And bread was eaten in the homes of the land...

*Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*  
by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer





# *Inventing Braids in Uruk*

## 1. Crossing Tigris

We emerged with names.  
Fur and tree-memories  
and the blur of a life that is travel  
slipped away downstream  
with the bodies of those  
who were not gods.  
It is the fiercer river.

We came upon Euphrates  
and smelled the baking bread.  
Staring at the sunset,  
crimson poppies, the ibis,  
our own new skin,  
we were breathtaken and breathtaking.  
We had no word for “brick”  
and suddenly we were a city—

Anne Sheldon

muddy streets, crowded booths,  
altars not yet dark with drying blood,  
the smell of piss and sweat  
already mingling with the roasting lamb.

And we were pretty,  
Gil and Nanna prettiest of all.  
After a few days and without any discussion  
(we hadn't invented discussion yet)  
we found ourselves staring  
at their cinnamon tans, their taut buttocks,  
the wonderful hair on their heads—  
when had he discovered oil?  
when had she invented braiding?

The third evening of the first week  
they coupled for us  
on the Altar at the White Dock.  
Everyone watched them twine and cry,  
watched whispering, palm to palm,  
with tears of joy.  
It was a day or two before  
we realized we could do it, too—  
in this new way they showed us,  
with this leisure and concentration,  
like a dance. We knew about dance.  
I think we had always known about dance.

It was a good time for me.  
I was taut then, too,  
and taller than Gilgamesh.  
He didn't mind.

As soon as the new days  
began to fall into the new nights  
someone would be at my side.  
Man or woman, it didn't matter.  
Not then.

## 2. Gilgamesh Makes Inanna a Throne But It's Not Enough

Canals had already been dug,  
and Holy Irrigation Ditches, but not by us.  
Fields had been cleared to circle Uruk,  
and barley planted, which would soon  
be harvested, and stored in Sacristy Bins,  
but not by us—  
even if, like Gilgamesh,  
we woke up one morning mostly mortal.  
Only his mother, Ninsun, was a goddess.  
His father was just a king,  
and dead, at that.  
So when Nanna went looking for a husband  
Gil wasn't even in the running.  
Shepherd God or Farmer God?  
Gil was just a Hero.  
(I waited outside the garden,  
loving them both.)

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But he had already given her  
more than any man of purer blood:  
When the First Date Palm  
came whirling down Euphrates,  
Inanna pulled it out, dragged it home,  
and tucked it neatly in the Holy Dirt.  
(She was strong then, too,  
before she learned how many favors  
she could garner with her favors.)  
But a Serpent came  
and a Lion-headed Bird.  
They ate green dates and hissed  
and fouled the ground and failed to worship  
and kept the Goddess from her Tree.

Nanna also had a sudden family  
but her Brother the Sun would not help  
and her Parents the Moon would not help  
and Grandfather Wisdom would not help  
her drive the demons from her Date Palm.  
The First Suitor, Dumuzi the Shepherd God,  
was off in some other woman's sheepfold.

Inanna stormed down to my little temple  
on She Cries From Afar Street  
sure I could deny her nothing.  
I took my spear to the Tree  
(and they both deserved to die,  
for the smell alone)  
but the bird-mane flashed in the windy sun  
and the snake-scales spelled a word  
no one had spoken yet.

All golden skin and braids of jet,  
Inanna hissed, “What good are your shoulders,  
Ninshubur, your lapis spearhead  
and your muscled thighs,  
if you cannot kill?”

It was true. I couldn't raise my arm,  
for wide-eyed wonder,  
against the stinking foreigners.

Gilgamesh, however, when he was called,  
strapped bronze across his chest in the summer heat  
and strode into the garden.  
He ironed the Serpent's skull  
with the flat of his axe  
and clove the lion-head from the Bird of Thunder.

Nanna stood at the gate with shining eyes.  
“Build me a throne, my hero. Make me a bed.”  
(I stood outside, wanting them both.)  
He smiled, pleased to be who he was,  
as she unstrapped his armor  
and licked the sweat from his shoulder.

Gilgamesh pulled the Date Palm up by its roots.  
He carved Inanna a throne and a bed.  
He placed them in her Shrine.  
Inanna admired her Throne.  
Inanna stretched out long on the curving Bed...

Afterwards, she made for her lover  
a Royal Rod and a Royal Ring  
from the roots of the Date Palm Tree.

Anne Sheldon

They were his farewell gifts.  
It was after this he took an interest  
in being king, in building walls,  
in every other man's fiancée.  
But that's another story.

### 3. Waiting for the Cookies to Bake

Sugar cookies were baking in the Holy Oven—  
cut with little crescents made of tin—  
while Nanna mixed pink frosting.  
It's too hot to bake in Uruk, always,  
and she only wore her apron.  
She knew I loved her sugar cookies.  
I knew she must be planning something,  
must be hoping for a favor.  
I stood behind and reached inside the apron bib.  
She leaned against me for a while  
before she sighed and nudged me off.

“Now that I'm queen, Ninshubur,  
with a City, Throne, and Bed,  
I'm going to visit Grandpa Wisdom,  
down in Eridu. Now, before the Husband comes  
and slows me down with babies.”  
Sucking on a frosting-covered finger,  
she gazed down the hallway  
into the green darkness of the Chapel.

“Things are sweet in Uruk, Nanna,”  
I remarked, slipping my hand between her thighs.  
How could it be that they were cool?  
“Date palms, fresh bread, wine and lovers ...  
But Eridu is only danger.  
Six kinds of monster live in Eridu.”

“Also the Holy Creatures of Civilization.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “and six kinds of monster.”

She slapped my hand away and turned.

“We are unfinished, here in Uruk,”  
she began, shaking her finger at my nose.  
“We do not have the Leaving of the Card  
or the Song of the Loom.  
The widow is speechless at the pyre.  
Bread is not enough.  
Fingers made sweet in the honey  
of the Boat of Heaven  
are not enough. Canals are not enough.  
The Cock of the Hero is not enough.”

“And why should it be?” I whispered,  
licking my fingers. She smiled  
and took my breasts in her dough-sticky hands  
and we lay down on the cool tiles,  
though she did not for a moment  
forget the cookies. They were golden  
when she got to her feet and took them out.

Anne Sheldon

I was half-asleep when she remarked,  
“The cookies will burn,  
Ninshubur, if I’m in danger.  
Come to me, My Faithful Companion,  
Sweet-fingered Counselor,  
if my cookies frizzle up in charcoal.”  
Next morning she was gone  
in her little skiff, the Boat of Heaven.

Later she would tell me  
how Enki greeted her with butter cakes  
and how he toured her through the Shrine;  
how the Holy Creatures spoke to her  
with lapis lips and teeth of diorite:  
the Rejoicing-of-the-Heart, with gleaming eyes,  
the Shepherd-in-His-Sheepfold,  
with his sleek stone plaits.  
She stroked the strong scarred hands of Carpentry  
and the ruptured brows  
of the Setting-Up-of-Lamentation.  
They greeted My Lady Inanna.  
Grandfather Wisdom invited her to dinner.  
(She didn’t see the monsters  
but she thought she heard them snoring  
in the walls.)

They drank and ate and drank and ate and then  
they only drank. The drunker Enki got,  
the more he admired her beauty  
and the honor accorded her  
by the little stone gods.  
She gave Enki a backrub and tousled his white wisps



and, even though she did not let him  
reach beneath her flounces,  
by daybreak he had given her  
all his murmuring idols.  
Once they were safely stowed  
inside the Boat of Heaven,  
Inanna set sail for home.

#### 4. Lonely for the Queen of Heaven

After she left for Eridu,  
I could have gone to my own snug temple.  
I chose to stay at the White Dock  
and stroll the garden, chew a date,  
read belly-down on the library floor.  
(I remember the books as leather-bound,  
not hunks of dry clay, but I may be wrong.)  
Wherever I came in, the acolytes scuttled out.  
I was left to myself and finally, by myself,  
I wandered down the green-lit hallway.

Now that she had a Bed,  
the altar was mostly for killing livestock.  
The smell stirred up memories  
of the time before we crossed,  
but they wouldn't quite come loose.  
I had looked forward to standing at my ease  
in the green light of the Chapel—

Anne Sheldon

not kneeling, not praying,  
but scratching my back on the edge of the altar,  
maybe playing solitaire on the marble flagstones.  
But suddenly it wasn't nice to be alone.

I missed her.

Not just her easy beauty,  
but the polished joy she shed on everything,  
from the prowess of Gilgamesh  
to the newly dug canals  
to her own cookies.

As if she had made us all.

And maybe she had.

I didn't want to fletch new arrows  
or play the flute or wrestle or nap or hunt.

I wanted to be doing anything—  
or nothing— in her presence.

I took a candlestick, glazed sky-blue,  
from the niche where it burned  
and flung it hard onto the altar.

A new design, white random clots of wax,  
sprang up within the seraph wings  
of dried fowl blood.

“Well done, Faithful Warrior. Feeling better?”

I knew his voice, didn't need to turn,  
but when I did,

Gilgamesh looked different  
in the green light, viewed from the altar.

Nowadays, no one but Inanna and the chickens  
viewed life from the altar.

“I dropped it.”

He smiled, shaking his head, rustling his uncombed curls. The remaining candle picked out the angry white of his eyes and the oily shine of his biceps.

“You’ll make enemies of the servants, when they have to scrape that wax up. Never make enemies of the servants.”

“Fuck the servants.”

“Not what I had in mind.”

“Inanna will be back, tomorrow noon. She’s not through with you, even if she plans to marry someone else.”

“Not what I had in mind, either. I’m bored with the Bed of the Mother of All Creation. No room between the sheets for all of us, her and me and the Liturgy of the Word and the Just War and the Domestication of Swine.”

“She loves you.”

“She needs me. Sometimes. Like she needs you.”

“She’s supposed to need me. I’m—”  
What was I to Inanna? “—her Faithful Counselor.”

Anne Sheldon

He laughed. "You're a goddess, too.  
But not Queen of the Universe. I like that.  
I like your not-quite-pretty nose.  
Always liked wrestling a little with you,  
before we do it.  
I can't wrestle with the Queen, anymore."

He looked lonely then, all the anger gone.  
He took my big hand and brought it to his beard  
and kissed my palm.

"Keep me company a while, Ninshubur."

## 5. Waiting for the Cookies to Burn

I don't know if it was the best,  
or the best I'd ever had with a man,  
but it was fine. And knowing  
she would rage to find us  
writhing on the Chapel floor  
made it even sweeter.  
And the moments before he knew  
he could have me that day,  
the rough beginnings of seduction,  
were new to me and pleasant,  
the almost-pleading  
becoming the hard insistence:  
*You are necessary,*  
*you are bread and water and fire,*

*I take you.*

I had felt this power with Inanna,  
surprised to find  
how far insistence would take me,  
but it was sweet to *be* the object so desired,  
to be the thing required for life.

I woke smelling something burning.  
Not a great fire,  
just something somewhere cooking too long.  
I turned to his snores  
to lick our lovemaking from his beard.  
Just so much asked and so much given,  
ending in sleep.  
Nothing more. Except—  
perhaps a child. Which would change everything,  
I thought, smiling and breathing deep ...  
breathing charcoal ...

*Come to me, My Faithful Counselor,  
if my cookies frizzle up in charcoal...*

I rolled away, leapt to my feet,  
and sprinted down the hall. Tiny pyres,  
little crescents of black sand,  
decorated each blue tile.  
And no flame but the sun through the window.  
The cookies were burning of their own accord,  
or hers. And for how long, I wondered.  
I ran back for clothes and sandals  
and started out the door.  
Gil stood rubbing his beard, puzzled and naked.

“They’re burning. I have to go.”

Anne Sheldon

“What’s burning?”

“The cookies. Her cookies. She needs me.”

“What kind of crap is that?”

Don’t go. You’re crying.

She can take care of herself. Don’t go.”

He held me and I held him,

my not-quite-pretty nose deep in his messy curls.

“She needs me,” I repeated.

## 6. The Triumph of the Faithful Counselor

Kneeling in the skin coracle

I poled downstream. My weapons

lay in the straw on either side.

They could pierce the leather hull of the boat

as easily as pierce a monster hide,

but I wasn’t worried yet.

The river-power seemed to be my own brown muscle,

my righteous speed of rescue.

I left behind me sticky passion, doubts.

Once I had failed her, in her pride.

I would not fail her now, in her peril.

The Queen of Heaven required me,

She Who Makes All Things Simple.

The sky grew dense and troubled,  
the clouds braided and swift as animals  
or wrestlers. The wind whipped the river  
and snapped the rushes  
as I cleared the bend that leads to Enki's Shrine  
and saw Inanna doing battle  
with the Wild-Haired-Creatures-  
Who-Live-Beneath-the-Floors-of-Eridu.  
Evidently, Father Wisdom had changed his mind  
about his gifts.

All the withies of the Boat of Heaven  
are licked in place with spells  
but it's still a coracle of skins, like mine,  
and now it was weighted down  
with Father Enki's *objets d'art*.  
The gunnels wobbled dangerously close  
to the water line, the more so  
for being yanked and hauled by monsters.

Two or three floated dead,  
poled through the eye or mouth,  
but there were still five.  
If they hadn't spaced themselves  
evenly around the boat,  
the Holy Creatures of Civilization  
would long since have sunk  
to the sandy bottom of Euphrates,  
and Inanna would be swimming freestyle  
to the bank. There was no smug grandeur  
about her now, long hair streaming  
black ribbons across her eyes.

Anne Sheldon

The Wild-Haired Creatures  
were bone-white and hump-backed  
from a lifetime spent in Wisdom's basement,  
but their ropey arms were strong and clever  
from hunting rats and millipedes.

As the monsters howled and laughed,  
the Holy Creatures shrieked their anxiety:

“Oh, Lady, take us home! Please, take us home!”

“Don't imagine for an instant we can swim!”

“Aiiiee! Look to your left, your left!”

“Holy Mother of God,  
if I could only cover my eyes!”

Meanwhile Inanna defended herself  
and her ill-got necessary inheritance  
with only the sharp-hooked boat pole  
and a swift desperate accuracy.

I seized a javelin— and pictured it  
puncturing the Boat of Heaven—  
and threw it anyway, screaming in frustration.  
I got a fat, hairy thigh, thrashing near the bank,  
but my scream was more effective than the spear.  
They all sprang out of the churning water  
the way that frightened frogs jump in,  
eyes popping and arms flapping.  
All the way back to Eridu they hugged themselves,  
as if they'd just discovered  
they were cold and wet.



I struck a casual pose, feeling gorgeous,  
as I nocked an arrow to my bowstring, just in case.  
The pleasure in her laughter  
seemed well worth what I had left behind in Uruk.

“The Faithful Companion strikes!” she cried.  
And from down inside the Boat of Heaven  
a little stone diva added,  
“An extra teaspoon  
of divinity for those lungs, my dear.”  
Not a moment too soon—out of the roiling sky,  
a flock of pterodactyls came funneling down  
for Inanna and her tchachkas.

Killing the first was sweet,  
the dull *thok* of flint slicing leather  
and muscle. Dropping four more  
in the time it took to pull four arrows  
from the quiver made me arrogant.  
I screamed again.  
Before any had dared to touch the sacred boat  
with stinking talon or featherless wing,  
they sprang away into the western sky.  
Inanna laughed and clapped,  
the Holy Creatures chirruped their relief,  
but I spread unbelieving fingers  
over the lips and throat that had birthed  
My Scream of Power.

In that long and stormy afternoon  
Grandfather Wisdom sent against us  
the Ear-Splitting Kugalgal;

Anne Sheldon

the Green Serpents of Enunun;  
the Leopards-Who-Guard-the-Doorways-of-Eridu;  
and the Lidless Watchmen of Iturungal.  
None were the equal of My Battle Cry.

Poling all the way against the current,  
the journey home was hard  
but the Holy Creatures entertained us,  
chanting stories never heard before.  
And when they were introduced to Uruk,  
as I tied up at the White Dock,  
fresh water ran through the streets  
and the people sang.

Suddenly another coracle hove into view.  
The wet tendrils of the boatman's white beard  
curled and dripped.  
Ever quick on the uptake,  
Inanna called, "Wine for Father Wisdom!"  
Her favorite acolyte ran in,  
grabbed a goblet from the Sacristy,  
filled it, ran back, and, kneeling deep,  
presented Grandpa Enki with refreshment.  
He drank deep. And spoke:

"So, Granddaughter.  
Let Uruk become the ally of Eridu.  
You have kidnapped Civilization  
with only the weapon of your charm."

He could just bear the theft  
by chalking it up to charm. *Her* charm.  
Giving her a little bow, he continued.

“The Holy Creatures will illumine  
each niche prefigured in Heaven  
for the human family.  
Now each man and woman will know their place.  
Now each will keep to their place.”

And Grandfather Wisdom smiled at me.  
I didn't understand why.  
Not then.

## 7. Happy Ever After

I was shouldering books  
(clay tablets scratched from edge to edge  
with history now rethought  
and quaint theologies)  
onto the attic floor in the new Shrine  
when it struck me.

I'd been as thrilled as anyone  
with the New Age, and more than most,  
with parties given in my honor  
and inventive attentions from Inanna.  
Each day brought novelty:  
an elegant new ritual might emerge  
(the funeral as fascinating as the carnival),  
or, at breakfast, the First Croissant  
and the First Coffee Mug.

Anne Sheldon

A new song might issue unbidden from your lips,  
making you the avatar of spinsters  
or blind shepherds.

I wondered briefly what Gil was making  
of all the changes in Reality,  
but I never saw him,  
never had a chance to seek him out.

And the new Shrine was splendid,  
each polished block of marble  
streaked with cream.

And I didn't mind at first that we were moving  
to make room for Marriage:

bigger bedroom, nursery, sewing room,  
den for the Dumuzi, the Shepherd God,  
and a parlor for Inanna.

I was losing my own temple,  
but I'd be gaining a new bedroom,  
a Jacuzzi, and a gym in the basement.

But, at the top of the ladder,

I realized: *this* is where I'll spend my time.

Where else could I be alone, but the attic?

Not in a bedroom next to theirs.

Impossible to be so close  
and have to listen.

I saw the future: Creature of the Garret,  
browsing on photo albums and 78s and old books,  
damming a running wound of loneliness  
with motes of dusty sunlight.

Breathless with panic,  
I scrambled down the ladder and ran,  
weaving my way between the movers.  
In the Hallway of the Holy Creatures  
the Art of Song cried out,  
“What’s wrong, Ninshubur?”  
But I had no breath  
to spend on Her Plumpness.  
I ran out into the hot street  
along the brown canal to find Gil.  
We’d leave the town.  
We’d hunt, drink, and fuck ’til daylight.  
Why, even now, I thought, it may be  
I carry his child.

But on the mortal side of town  
a wall of bricks was rising,  
already higher than the date palms  
and still unfinished. Why?  
I couldn’t think.  
And young women tented in black?  
To shield them, as it turned out,  
from the heated glance of Gilgamesh.  
He had a new palace, too,  
even larger than Inanna’s.  
When had all this happened?  
I sprinted up the steps  
and pushed the guard aside  
who tried to keep me from my old lover’s throne.

There were jewels everywhere,  
rubies, diamonds, amethysts ...

Anne Sheldon

they were carbunched on the corners of tables,  
spiking chair spindles,  
at the juncture of each angle in the room.  
In the blinding glitter  
I didn't see, at first,  
the thin unhappy woman by the hearth:  
Ninsun, Mother of the King,  
Immortal Egg that took the Dying Seed.  
I bobbed my head quickly.

“Good day, My Lady.”

She smiled a little. “Ah, Ninshubur.  
Shall I order tea? I long to hear the gossip.”

“My Lady, I only came—”

The smile disappeared. “He's gone.  
Do you hear nothing of the world, over there?  
He and his new horned hero, Enkidu.  
Gone to slay volcanoes.” This was a sneer.  
“At least it gives the brides a rest.”

“In which direction have they gone? Perhaps—”

“What a fool you are, Ninshubur.  
These are Boys-at-Play. Don't you have  
a little stone doll for that?  
They don't want a woman tagging after,  
particularly not one like you.  
Someone smaller, younger, prettier,  
perhaps, someone they could seduce or rape.  
Not that they don't fuck each other.

Not that I *know* they fuck each other.  
I know nothing. I am told nothing.  
But *they* are the Dragon Slayers now, my dear.  
I wonder what your job will be,  
in the New Jerusalem?"

No longer sprinting,  
I left the palace with an ache in my gut.  
I made my way to a quiet wood  
where I remembered a clear small pond.  
Stroking the place under my heart,  
I knelt to look at myself in the still surface.  
Was I so plain? So tall? I was.  
I am still young, I whispered. *Still young...*  
*I will always be young.*  
Then I noticed three other women  
hiding in the shadows. Unveiled.  
And there, surely, for the same purpose.  
We had invented the Anguish of the Mirror.

I got up and began to walk away  
and felt the sticky cling of blood  
between my legs  
and knelt again and wept.