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—
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-mané 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.
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.
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—
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.”
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.”
“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 
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!”
“Aiiieeee! 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;
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 …
they were carbuncled 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.