

ARUSHA

GALLERY

*To go in the dark with a light is to know light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
And find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
And is travelled by dark feet and dark wings.*

Wendell Berry

The Dark, Too, Blooms and Sings

What to do when the world gives way beneath our feet? When the certainties we hold to be our truest coordinates start to shatter and implode? When all of our carefully laid plans are thrown into chaos and disarray, and we are ousted into topographies of the unfamiliar which will not be placated, negated, ignored. How can we learn to trust that even in the terrain between stories, maps still exist?

SHOOKETH brings us into the archetypal arena of the descent, the rupture, the universal journey of the human soul that centres change and transformation as the only constants. We are reminded that regardless of how much we may like to think we are in control of our destinies, that there will always be trajectories of the incomprehensible which are beckoning, hidden from view.

Since the publication of Whiten's last book, *Icon Oracle*, in 2018, the world has faced a colossal rupture in the form of Covid 19, although arguably still overshadowed by the enormity of the climate crisis, with the delicate fabric upon which all life depends increasingly frayed. Both of these crises are encapsulated within an even larger one, a lack of meaning, summarised by Frederick Jameson's phrase "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism".

How amidst what feels so insurmountable can we find ways to navigate chaos and collapse, and reimagine crisis at both an individual and collective level? What can we learn from those who have journeyed through treacherous terrains before, and brought back gifts to share with the whole?

Written over 5000 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia, the myth of Inanna tells of how the Great Goddess of Heaven and Earth, Queen Inanna, was called to listen to the Great Below, to lean in and

attune her ears to the realms of the underworld - to death, the unfathomable, the unknown. On learning that her twin sister, Ereshkigal – the Queen of the Underworld – is mourning the death of her husband Gugalanna, Inanna decides to descend beneath the worldly realm to attend his funeral. Before she begins, she adorns her body with seven royal objects to signify her status and power – including a turban, jewels, beads of lapis lazuli, a sceptre, her crown and robes.

One by one, on her descent into the underworld Inanna encounters seven gates. At each gate she is required to relinquish another object from her stately attire, and on exiting the final gate, she is completely naked. We might think that by this point Inanna is stripped of her pride, but she then transgresses the rules of the underworld by sitting on Ereshkegal's throne. For this she is hung from a meat hook in the corner of her sister's throne room and left to die. Later, two creatures, crafted from the dirt beneath her grandfather's fingernails, arrive to rescue Inanna. But before they do so, they provide comfort to Ereshkigal in her grieving for her husband, and grateful for their witnessing of her pain, she grants them access to her sister's body, which they sprinkle with the food and water of life. Inanna is reconstituted, revived, and returns to the land of the living.

Inanna's descent contains elements of an initiatory journey that perhaps many of us recognize, when we have found ourselves suddenly cast adrift from structures of safety and security, and forced to enter a dark night of the soul. Perhaps the initial rupture came from loss, heartbreak, sickness, betrayal, death or some other form of crisis. Regardless of its cause, there was no other choice but to let go of what is familiar, and come into contact with a larger grief or sadness than perhaps anything we have ever felt before. Through this we are awakened to a deeper, broader sense of ourselves and our purpose, along with a greater sense of connectedness with nature, and the cycles of life, death and rebirth.

On viewing Whiten's collection at least two images, for me, carry echoes of Inanna's descent, with the sense of connectedness conveyed in the containment and enclosure of the figure within the elemental. We see how the larger holding of nature can provide sanctuary and safe refuge, and become a vital and necessary temenos to hold and support the alchemy of transformation. In *Dancing the Cave* we see the tremendous emotion of an open-mouthed figure, legs splayed against the cleft wall in the opening of the cave. Perhaps this human is screaming with the efforts of labour. Perhaps they are contorted in their death throes. It is a primordial image of both vulnerability and strength, where the dusky grey tones of their skin seem to bleed into the pallor of the interior rockface. It is not always clear where the edges of human end, and where rock begins. They are both a creature in the mountainside, and the mountain itself.

In *Dancing the Nest* we are met again with the central image of a naked human contorted into a pose of intense vulnerability, but this time folded in on themselves, somewhat foetal, their skin imbued with the red purple tones of a newborn baby. The containment gesture is presented this time as an encircling nest made from huge pieces of driftwood, dwarfed by huge boulders and rocks, which are

also of similar hues to the figure's skin tones. There is a sense that we are witnessing a ritual, some sacred initiation, a moment of potency and transformation. Yet again despite the intensity and struggle conveyed in the posture, the human is held, witnessed, protected by the larger landscape.

Carl Jung placed descent as central to the initiatory experience, asserting that even without active participation in formal rites of passage to mark transitional life stages, that something innate in the human condition will still seek these experiences out. In *The Young Woman and the Cavity* there is the sense of catching one such initiation in process, with a young woman straddled and staring into the cavernous innards of a tree. The pose seems to indicate that her curiosity extends beyond the edges of the tree, and that she is also exploring into her own nature, peering in with a desire to know more. Perhaps she senses that beyond the platitudes of conventional culture which equate adulting with 'growing up' that a more rooted sense of belonging can be found from growing down into the dark belly of the earth.

SHOOKETH, like the ancient, geological landscapes which hold many of the human presences within the collection, points to a larger map of meaning which Whiten invokes us to remember – that humans are not separate from nature, but rather embedded within a cartography of relationships in constant flux, cycle, dependency, and dialogue. And when we remember this connection, there is the capacity to find the strength to bear what is unbearable and to die to the old. To let new life find its way through old fissures again.

- Lindsay Alderton, November 2022