

THE FUTURE IS A GAMBLE (ASTRAGALOMANCY)

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They say the first houses were built in Delphi three thousand years ago. But there are always older things. From the ancient cleft in the rock where the oracle is housed, there is a path up the mountain, and in a few hours' walk you'll find yourself in the Korykos cave, sacred to many: the nymphs, the Muses, Pan, Apollo. There, small terracotta women, older than Apollo and Pan, sanded smooth by worshipping fingers, were buried deep in the cave's mouth. Revelers walked up the mountain by moonlight, torches in hand. Later supplicants moved up or down the mountain, their feet polishing the path's stones to a glassy sheen, and the spirits and nymphs and gods they held dear flickered and sputtered and waned and changed. Signs of new gods are built on old ones. A sheaf of Demeter's corn over an orthodox door. Something more ancient scratched below the corn.

In daytime, the cave is suffused with a blue light that is not the light of machines but of molecules scattering, and if you sing in the middle of it, as my daughter did one day in the middle of June, your voice echoes around the sound of water rushing through rock.



Or is it wind? If you dig around in the dirt you can still unearth the ancient anklebones of sheep or goats, *astragaloï*, used to gamble or prophesy, for those learned in astragalomancy¹. We all know the future is a gamble, and we all hope for the winning roll. That is the imagination at work, or the imagination's lack, forming a dark well with no water or air, hoping prophecy will fill it. Will it be filled with words? We can give the future a shape like a supple brown paper bag, stuffed with rich dark, with ripe tomatoes, with myccorhizal filaments, with liberation, with joy. A bottomless bag. The future holds everything.

We have three of those anklebones locked away in a box in this house, taken from just above the hind foot of an animal that was alive thousands of years ago. One bone for each of us: me, my husband, my daughter. The former mayor of Delphi drove us up into the mountains, and we hiked to the cave together, where he scratched in the dirt with a stick far from the cave's mouth, and pulled forth the bones. It is said that 23,000 ancient knucklebones have been found in the cave. We ourselves don't have enough knucklebones for a traditional divination, which would take five bone dice, but I could roll one bone five times.

Now, where is the box with those bones?

This was a world humming with divine communication. The leaves trembled in godly prophesy. Birds flew in the shape of messages. Spots on the sheep's liver you were eating for dinner told a story about your future, as did fire, vegetables, stars, beans, babies' farts, sand, sneezing, and ripples on water.

The future refracted into myriad possible directions.

We try to gather one story about the past, but the past also splinters when we finger it.

1. *astralago*: anklebone; *mancy*: prophecy

If you're walking from Delphi rather than driving, you find the path to the cave by scrambling around past some goat pens up above Delphi's cemetery. If you go down to the graveyard, across the road from the museum devoted to my great grandparents (housed in their stone house), enter the gates (walk past my great grandmother's grave), and hang out over the edge, you'll see the ancient Delphic theater. The town itself used to be on top of the site, but in the late 19th century French archeologists shifted everyone over about a mile so that they could keep digging. The past displaces the present. The present displaces the past.

This was place of the omphalos: the navel-stone that spoke in the voice of the gods, or the stone Rhea gave Cronus to swallow instead of their baby, or the stone that entombed the ancient murdered snake. This was the place, later, where Zeus's eagles crossed mid-air or went talon-to-talon or kissed beak-to-beak, marking yet again the center of the world. This wasn't any old bellybutton. This was Zeus's grandmother's, Earth's, the place she connected all of us to herself, the place, you could say, that gave the biggest birth, turning what was inside out: leopards, horses, goats, grasses, rabbits, Zeus, humans, mountains, gods, rocks. She was called Gaia and she pushed it all out and here it all is. Not ours, but ours to care for. What are we doing with it?

"In every living thing is stuff that once was rock," wrote Lorine Niedecker, a poet who lived in a little cabin at the conjunction of a lake and a river. "In blood the minerals of the rock," she says. The world-navel is made of rock, an element that does not seem to budge, but it is in fact in constant motion. Wind and water move it, iron particulates are carried to rivers from which we drink, particles change bodies, and song, too, moves stone. We know sound can start an avalanche and puncture flesh (eardrums, most commonly), and we know that Orpheus moved stones into place, building walls, even whole villages, with the sounds of his poems.

Gazed on too long, the navel begins to grow fillets that stretch back on themselves, knotting you in; this is what happens when humans mistake Earth's fruits for their own.

For example, the minerals in my cell phone, the mining and sale of which too often trigger blood-soaked atrocities.

Last night, I dreamed I was in a small forest clearing gathering joyful things—fruit, flowers, nuts—when I saw a wooden sign a little ways up the slope, hidden in the trees. “Hotel,” it said in childlike letters, and then I noticed shadowy figures lurking in the woods. *Go away!* I tried to shout, but as in all my dreams of danger, my voice was heavy, unable to lift its stone wings out of my body. No sound came. When the rapist, the monster arrives, my voice-box breaks. Who will hear me if I can’t cry out?

It turns out the dream place was already occupied, by corporate ghosts. *Go away!* my mouth said but not my voice. Now I could see that the olives I’d gathered and placed on a makeshift pedestal had already been eaten. All that was left was gnawed pits arranged as if there were still fruit. Pit, a synonym for grave. The administrative ghosts had eaten all the flesh and left us with corpse-fruit.

So, do we stay in this clearing and let them fool us, or do we wink, leave the pits and walk on?

You can’t live in a burned down house. That’s the wisdom gate you get to walk through, says my friend when I tell her the dream. You can’t keep knocking on doors to places that don’t see or hear you, places that leave the pits and try to disguise them as fruit.

what if the whole thing is rigged to leave you pits for your soup? why does this omphalos look so phallic? how do we put flesh back on the fruits? does [major company name] want me to let me in on its conflict minerals? how do we have a fruitful conversation?

The sacred site of Delphi is still filled with the remnants of cool, quiet sculptures, offerings brought from all over ancient Greece and beyond, gifts for the oracle. They

lie scattered about the hillside, marble watchers whose skin has been worn by wind, living their own interior lives, witnesses to the follies and human triumphs.

I want to say they carry the auditory zero, a nothing I don't yet know how to hear.

The Oracle, you ask?

Says Aeschylus: "First, in this my prayer, I give the place of honor among the gods to the first prophet Earth (Gaia)."

Obviously, the most ancient prophet is Earth. There was a serpent protecting her navel, coiled around the rock. Along comes Apollo, four days old, and sends his first arrow flying, *shwunk*, straight into the snake's heart. Patriarchal takeover, by a babe.

Unlike your mammalian ventricles, a snake's heart converses directly with itself. Bathed in luminal, milky blood, a post-feast python's chambers unfold like the heart of an athlete. The murdered serpent tumbled into a fissure in the rocks, and from its body arose fumes that showed the future (out of our mother-past). This was a sweet-smelling rot, like that of fermenting apples or leaves, the interior breath of the earth. Putrefaction is a secret process. We don't see it from the inside, but must interpret what has happened: Here, a body fell. Here, a body was momentarily forgotten.

Here, a body went to work with earth and air.

For killing the dragon that guarded her oracle, Earth sent future-telling dreams creeping into the minds of sleeping women and men, democratizing her divining powers.

Apollo had other plans. A local village girl was chosen to replace the snake and communicate what Earth's insides had to say. A tripod was set up over the rock on which the girl sat (some say the smoke infused her genitals), sniffed the ethylene



fumes seeping out of oily limestone, and told. In tongues. Interpretation trouble. Priests (no other woman besides the girl was allowed in the temple) repeated what the priestess said in gorgeous verses which were in turn heard and many times messed up by the listener.

Divinations took place around the seventh of the month (honoring Apollo's birthday), nine months of the year. So, you had only nine days on which to ask your question. Huge lines formed, in which the travelers chatted, gossiped, worried, laughed. It was like being in New York in the 1980s—I don't know exactly, I wasn't there—but maybe you felt desperate yet like you were in the center of the world, so you knew almost everything, but not this one thing: the future. Someone sprinkled cold water on a perfect goat. If it shuddered, divination day could proceed, and the goat went to the knife. If it didn't shudder, they tried a whole bucket of icy water.

The priestess spoke of things like heralds in scarlet and marble statues that poured sweat, said who was the wisest man alive (Socrates), told Alexander the Great he was invincible, could mess you up with a misplaced comma—was it after “die” and “not” or between them?—, predicted your fame or your death, and warned of murdered snake-mothers coming up from behind.

Sitting under some linden trees in Vienna, I ask my friend Monika why she thinks the Oracle spoke in verse. “To keep the possibilities open,” she says matter-of-factly. “Only idiots and the feeble-minded take a poem or the future to mean one single thing.” I have two friends named Monica, and one is Monika and one is Mónica, but they are pronounced almost the same. It keeps things open-ended.

I text Mónica, who lives in New York City, and ask her why she thinks the Oracle answered in verse. She texts back, “Bc prophecies are circular, not linear.”

I also have a friend named Alice who told me a few weeks later that she asked her knee doctor, “What is my future,” speaking of her knee. The knee doctor said (presumably in French, because this took place in Paris), “You want me to be a medium.” Knees don’t know their own future either, nor do their doctors.

The Greeks call the future το μέλλον, like a melon, a sweet fruit of the summer you can gnaw to the rind, which protects its treasures, the flesh being a thing of the future from the flower’s point of view.

“Sense is endless,” says Monika, and I think, this is a story about the future, and how we’ve always been worried about it, and about how it keeps shrinking. Currently, I am anxious about the heat of the future, and our trouble having fruitful national conversations about that, and very many other things.

When I think about how hot the future will be, I think, I am so tired of being human. I would like to be an otter for a week, and not think about the things humans do.

Do lions ever get tired of being lions?
Are they done with the future?

The future is many places; some are far away and some are not. I keep jumping into the near future over and over, until I’m exhausted. I’m done with the future, it’s too hot there, I say, but the future is not yet done with me. And who will take care of the future if I give up on it? By I, I of course mean us. I don’t have the skills for the future, except the skill of love, which, as it turns out, I’m still learning. I’m still a novice at love.

Really, we don’t ask the Oracle what will happen in the future, we ask her for a way to open a road, a conversation, an indication on how to proceed with our business (which is life). The Oracle’s job is to prompt us, Plutarch says, “to inquire, to listen, to discuss.”

Oracle, tell me: how can I see my great grandmother? How can I hear my great grandfather? What were those fuckers up to? Why can't I trust in their vision of spreading world peace? Every morning I awake to bad news.

I drank from the Kastallian spring, the first thing you do if you want to invite a vision. I drank and I saw. What did I see?

The hounds of history coming after me.

Before antiquity but told then, Zeus ordered Apollo to atone for the snake's murder by throwing a big feast. Those are the Pythian Games, named for the python he slayed. You could see the latest play, win a laurel crown for poetry or in the javelin toss or for music. People brought heavy gifts to the god. Rituals to mark the shifting of world order. From Gaia to boy-god, from scattered groups of people to polis. From finding what you needed nearby to developing trade routes.

You might come to Delphi for the games. You might come to Delphi because the sacred fire of your town had gone out, and in the inner hearth an eternal flame was tended and kept alive, free for all for rekindling. You might come because you wanted to colonize a new region and you came to ask how to do it. You might also come to Delphi because you had an unsolvable conundrum to which only the Oracle could respond.

In her most famous prediction, the Oracle tells Croesus that if he goes to war with the Persians a great nation will be destroyed. Croesus is thrilled and runs off to battle, but of course the great nation destroyed was his own. The composer Pauline Oliveros advises: pay attention to the difference between hearing and listening. So often, I hear but forget to listen.

How to listen to a nation? Cacophony.

The oracle's final pronouncement told that Apollo no longer had an oracular laurel or speaking fountain. The talking water had dried out. The flute had fallen to the ground. The ventricled heart no longer spoke in a tongue human ears could readily hear. After history, the sibyl will lose her body and become a wandering voice.

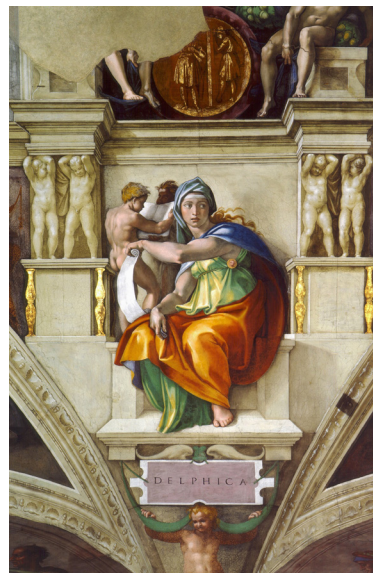
Carved into the entrance of Apollo's temple are three phrases. Two are famous: Γνώθι σε'αυτόν. Know thyself. Μηδέν άγαν. Zero excess.

One is not. Έγγύα πάρα δ' Άτα. Does it mean "Go bail and woe is at hand," and if so, what does that mean? Or does it mean "Thinking one strict way brings ruin"?

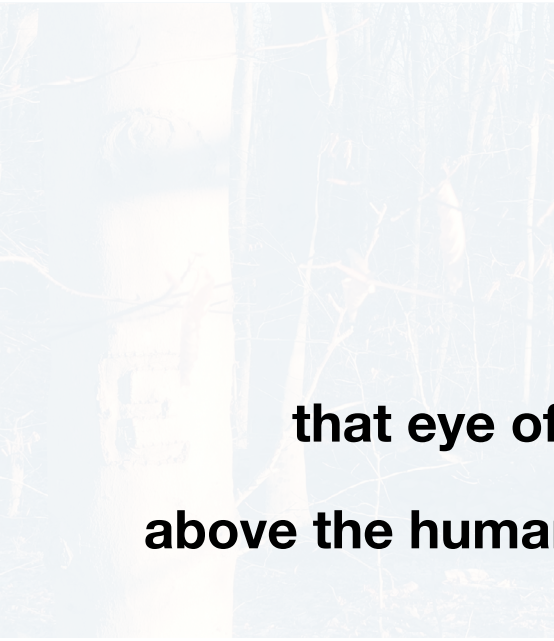
Maxims recorded from other parts of the site: Admire oracles; don't make fun of the dead; at your end be without sorrow. And the one I have been musing over: χρόνου φείδου. Save time. How do we save it, and who or what do we save it from?

There was also a mysterious, large letter E carved into the stone, which Plutarch called a "show object," a "sacred offering." A vowel can carry if not all then many things. The E of DantE, the E of Eleni, the E of Evelina, Eva, of Everybody and Everything.

Michaelangelo's Delphic Sybil looking to the future or the past; worried







**that eye of the tree that sees
above the human-carved E**

**tangled with
nymphs and spirits**

**Time Does Not Finish
Even if we do**