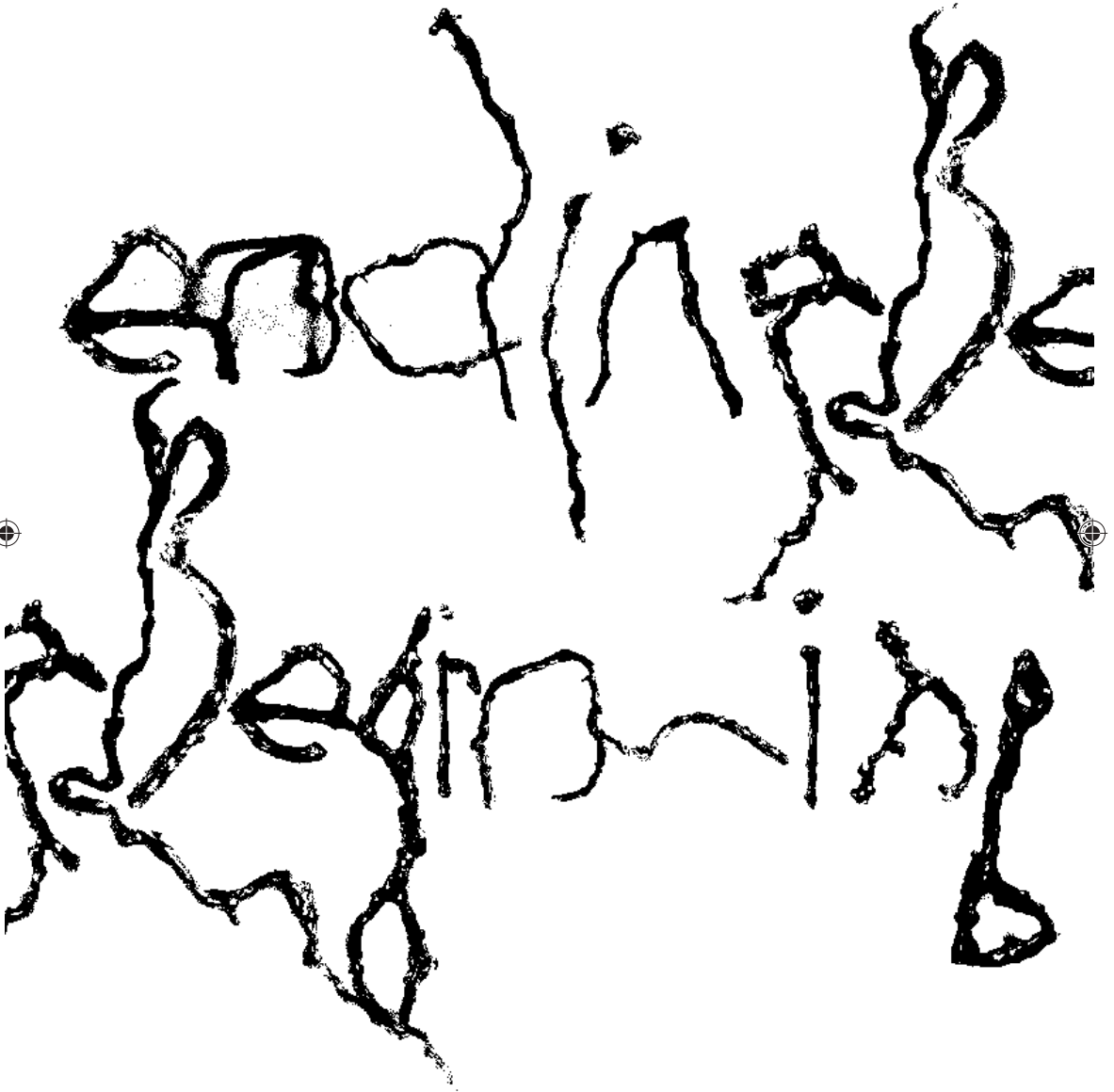


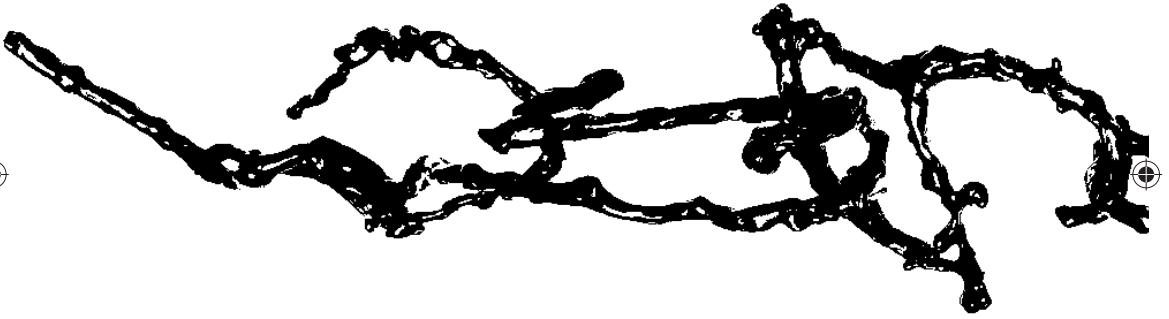


Endingbeginning



Maria Stella Lydaki







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For the Ones who Dare to Speak with the Air



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Introduction





Visiting Delphi

Earlier in the summer of 2021, a book about Delphi found me unexpectedly. It was like those sudden events that appear in one's life and make sure that you pay attention to them.

From my experience, when moments like these happen and a feeling of magic takes over my daily routine, I give them my whole presence. I spent the next few days reading the book and learning in depth about the past treasures of my Greek heritage. It was not until I reached the page which voiced the last oracle of Pythia, the mediator of the Greek God Apollo, that my eyes became full of tears. An unexpected longing filled my body. One that seemed to have been there all along, waiting for some words to pull it out.

The words echo like this:

*Tell ye King: the carven hall is fallen in decay;
Apollo hath no chapel left, no prophesying bay,
No talking spring. The stream is dry and had so much to say.*
A.D. 394

This missing voice desired to be heard. I kept wondering about this voice and how it relates to me. What force moved me? My tears seemed to have refreshed this stream, and a sense of longing was now looking for a place to dwell and transform into new life.





What is Delphi, who is Pythia?

The history of Delphi is inextricably bound with the history of the sanctuary and the oracle. To be more precise, Delphi only existed as a township under the shadow of the sanctuary.²

The sanctuary's fame spread across the world. The fame and power of Delphi was based on its oracle, which was one of the oldest in Greece. The Delphic myths provide clear enough evidence that every known method of divination was practiced at Delphi.³ But Delphi owed its fame mostly to the oracles delivered by the Pythia, the priestess of Delphi, who received direct inspiration from Apollo and spoke in his name. Thus, the god of divination himself delivered the oracle, using Pythia as a medium. Pythia was a woman over 50 years old. She was a simple, ordinary peasant woman, without any distinguishing mark until the moment Apollo allowed his inspiration to descend upon her.

In the beginning there was only one Pythia; but when the requirements of the oracle grew more numerous, two more Pythias were added.⁴

A Pythia's role was to take Apollo's place, to shed her ordinary identity, fall into a trance and deliver the divine messages in a series of mysterious, inarticulate cries.⁵ The equivocal replies of the Delphic oracle have become famous in history; they were so obscure, so incomprehensible that additional divinatory gifts were required to interpret them.





When we refer to the Pythia and the oracles delivered at Delphi, we have in mind how the god of divination himself, Apollo, let his voice be heard through the mouth of the entranced prophetess.

Between longing and belonging, a tale unfolds.

Between longing and belonging, a tale unfolds. This tale carries words that evoke the stream and, once the tale is over, you are refreshed by its fluid. This tale is called a lament. According to Rebecca Saunders, laments are embedded in rituals that are historically prior to philosophy; they mingle with the primitive, the illogical, and the feminine. Saunders continues by saying that they are situated on the borders between language and the unutterable, between the highly formalized and the improvised, and between dance, song, poetry, and narrative.⁶

In the hope that the creative act of a lament will embrace my longing, I wish to unveil its story.

Everyone became familiar with longing in 2020. Each person got acquainted with it while experiencing isolation during lockdowns. For that reason, I want to focus on the longing as well as the space where these longings can find a home to be poured in and witnessed. Especially, does this place already exist?

To do that, I wish to explore the tradition of lamentation. What is a lament and what can a lament be? To me, laments offer an artistic way to express the remnants of isolation left in our bodies.





Remnants is a word that links all my three examples. The first example speaks for the ‘remnants’ of Emily Dickinson, the experimental work of her envelope poems. The second example is about the remnants that the Dead Letter Office deals with; the place which stands for the oblivion of the dead.⁷ And lastly, the third example talks about ruins, the remnants that decorate the Earth.

Remnants and longings become synonyms in my writing. They both are leftovers: lingering pieces that one either forgets and allows to get buried (only to resurface again when the tides are low), or that one chooses to care about, wanting to find a way to let them speak their stories. By letting remnants be heard, they become remembered and honored for all that they have been through.





What are laments?





Lamentation in its broadened sense means to express emotions of loss lyrically. Laments are often linked with the death of a loved one. However, talking about laments with only death in mind would just scratch the surface, because they serve many other purposes.

Laments are an ancient tradition which originated as a response to loss across many cultures, one of which is the Greek lamentation, *moirologhia*. According to Ladia, the etymology of this word might come from the word *moira*, which means fate, but its origin should also be sought in the custom of the smell of the dead, which is suggested by the closeness of *myrologo* (lamenting) to *myrono* (applying myrrh).⁸ However, laments were not just used to communicate the mourning of a person's death, but any kind of loss.

The artist Saunders mentions that the concept of loss is an inextricable part of a complex web of interrelationships — with, for example, notions of mourning, trauma, crisis, negativity, absence, lack, memory, and death.⁹

Another aspect that characterizes laments is that they use a lyrical tone and dramatic mood. They can be calm one moment, and ecstatic in the next. They invoke the unspeakable to speak through them and have a dialogue. A lament is a play, where the linear way takes a break, and the non-linear way of expressing one self enters the space.

Saunders in her research on lamentation mentions that: “Laments use techniques of non-linearity and rearrangements of time and space, [...] stream-of-consciousness narration, multiple perspectives analogous to the lamentation's stichomythic form and shifting narrative stance”.¹⁰













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All these different techniques of expressions are meant to act as a container for the emotion to be in motion.

According to Varvantakis, a Greek anthropologist:

*Laments are used to both channel and regulate the emotions, holding the space for everyone present so that they can express their emotions but not completely lose control of them.*¹¹

They act as places for one to witness. By witnessing a lament unfold, one enters its space and is taken by its lyrical stream into a bodily experience.

According to the dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright, there is a distinction between merely being a spectator and being a witness: Witnessing is much more interactive, a kind of perceiving (with one's whole body) committed to a process of mutual dialogue, a dialogue on an energy level. To witness something implies a responsiveness, the response/ability of the viewer towards the performer.¹²

It seems that this distinction between being a spectator and a witness is an important element of a lament. To witness, in my understanding, is to be present and feel the weight that is being exposed. Laments communicate empathy and through this empathy one feels invited to share one's own emotions.

To me, the backbone of a lament is its rhythmical nature. A lament doesn't necessarily have to be accompanied by a sound, although most of the time it is. It is its repetitiveness that sets the space. The number three is an important element in artistic performances. The first time is to introduce, the second to recognize, and





the third to enjoy.¹³ By repeating a scene, a movement, a sound, or a word, the action starts to echo. It is through this echo that you are being comforted and held. This invisible container, which forms through the power of repetition, starts to embrace you.

Another element that defines a lament is that it often invokes absence. And that absence answers back through the voice that addresses it: “the singers address the dead and the absent and then lend them their own voices to answer back,” writes Guy Cools in his 2020 book *Performing Laments in Contemporary Art*.¹⁴ You could describe this process as a mediumship, a process where the body of the addresser empties, to be filled by a voice connected to the one whose absence has provoked the lament, bringing their missing voice back to the surface. This process heartens the ones who experience the longing, because it offers them a second chance at life.¹⁵ One more aspect of laments is their duration. There is a time frame that holds the space together with the repeated echo of input. This aids the participants and witnesses to maintain control over the emotional stream that is being channeled, and not drown in it.

To conclude my observations, it is through these three elements: repetition, invocation, and duration, that a space that can hold loss is being formed. The space of lamentation acts as a dam and supports the energetic stream of emotions that are released during its act.

So, where can we find laments nowadays? In which form? What distinguishes a lament from another type of artistic expression?

According to Cools, the artifice of mourning - whether it is embodied in photography, performance, sculpture,





or poetry - intensifies the affective capability of communication because it is more than simply a subjective 'expression' of an idea or an emotion: it is an act of transference, a process of translation that moves between the work and the viewer.¹⁶

Transference sounds to me an important aspect in the definition of a lament. I would describe transference, in the context of a lament, as a dialogue but without words. It reminds me of Albright's distinction between being a spectator and being a witness. Witnessing, as Albright mentions, is a mutual dialogue on an energy level.¹⁷ There is a transference of emotions being exposed. One is invited to channel one's own experiences and emotions into the lament, contributing this way to the energetic stream that is being held by each presence.

The artist Eleonora Fabião discusses energetic communication as follows:

I could explore a quality of interaction that interests me a lot, a kind of 'energetic communication'. It may seem abstract, but this way of acting upon someone is as concrete as it is effective. As some understandings can only be formulated by this kind of interchange, through the intersection of energy and silent talk.¹⁸

In his study Patric Dugganin talks about the importance of witnessing. He positions trauma-tragedy as a means by which society can engage in attempting to understand, contextualize and bear witness to its own social dramas and traumas. He argues that the performative testimony or re-enactment of trauma allows sufferers 'to mediate, think through or balance





“unwanted” emotions. This balancing of emotions is also one of the key aspects of the traditional laments. And he continues, that it is one of the main reasons why mourning needs to be performed in front of an audience of witnesses.¹⁹

So after having discussed some of the characteristics that distinguish a lament from other types of artistic expressions - the element of transference and witnessing - this energetic communication starts to shape and become less abstract in my eyes. If there is one thing to take with me about the nature of laments, it is that they are conductors of energetic streams.



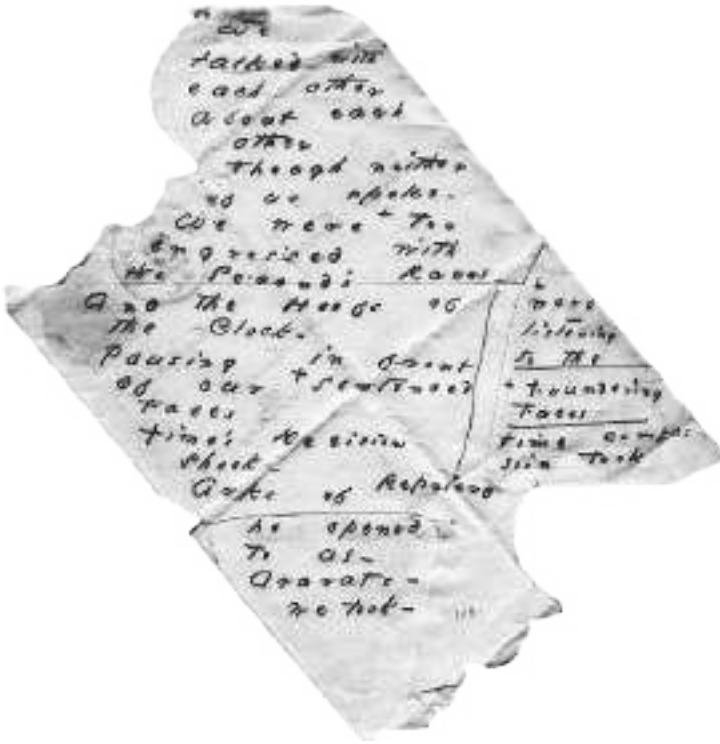


Examples 





Emily Dickinson — The Gorgeous Nothings



*Saved against all odds, unsealed for all the world to see.
 Slit open, unfolded, written across, and handed over to
 chance [...] ²⁰*

When I came across the book *The Gorgeous Nothings*,²¹ a collection of “envelope poems” from the poet Emily Dickinson, I was immediately mesmerized by how she made use of the envelope. Envelopes that

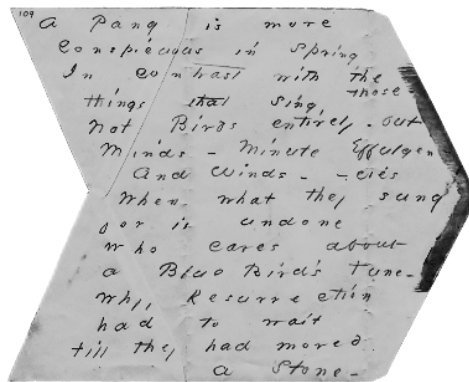




would usually enclose messages directed to specific persons were now scattered to the winds of the future, addressed to no one and everyone at once. These messages found their way out of their enclosure, as if they wanted to be seen not only by one pair of eyes but by many. With this unexpected action of words being exposed on the envelope, attention is drawn to them. Emily Dickinson brings the message from the private inside world of the envelope to its public exterior side, and the nature of exteriority and interiority are questioned.²²

*The envelope is a repository of damages it cannot heal or even contain: slit open, it functions not as a soothing bandage, but, rather, as a second and almost simultaneous site of rupture.*²³

The envelopes are turned into fragments that contain fragments themselves. They hold words that evoke attention. They catch the eye of the viewer with their vulnerable position of being exposed outside of the walls that protect them. They're open for the world to see, fragile textual homes that embody the hopes and transience of all our messages.





The envelope poems of Emily Dickinson are remnants to witness but also to hold. I can imagine holding them, bringing them close to me. The distance is more intimate because I can hear them.

*A not admitting | of the Wound” writes the poet. In this case the translation of the wound into words remains unaccompanied by an interpretive process that might help cure the speaker by turning her literal hurt into a figurative one.*²⁴

The analogical element is evident in the poetic action of Emily Dickinson in her envelope poems. The pathos of witnessing the ephemeral is evoked by taking care of the remnants that are meant to fall on the ground and disappear anonymously.

Emily Dickinson, to me, found her own way to bring care to the vestiges, by exposing them, like laments do; exposing the intimacy of loss. Her words speak to no one and everyone at once, inviting listeners to witness the pathos of her longings.

Emily Dickinson and Pythia

To me, Pythia looks like an envelope. She is the one who contains the message. She uncovered herself like an open folder — ready to contain its essence. Once she had obtained the message within her ‘walls’, she delivered it by exposing its content outspokenly. Pythia places the message outside of the walls that protect it: her body. Her body acts as an envelope that carries a message. Through voicing the inner content, she turns the silent message into sound, for everyone to witness.





It becomes an envelope of transference, one that stays still and its recipients move towards it to obtain its interiority. Through her startling conduct of streaming words in the open air, Pythia turns what she has been keeping hermetically sealed into a stream.

Emily Dickinson, and her outstanding action of voicing the empty envelopes, makes me think of the transmission of Pythia's oracle.

Openly vulnerable to multiple meanings, they are left as messages for future generations, inverted epistles that viewers can return to retrieve their wisdom.

The Dead Letter Office

The pathos of dead letters, messages that never arrive. What better example is there of communication gone awry?

The postal service was perhaps the first long distance person to person communication medium. In 1825, the United States Postal Service started a Dead Letter Office (DLO) for sorting and collecting mail with address problems. [...] The dead Letter office is often called "the morgue of the mails" and "the limbo of undeliverable mail". Limbo is the place of oblivion.²⁵

In this gap between memory and obliviousness, longing finds the perfect environment to surface and fill the body. In the absence of knowing where, when or even why a message hasn't arrived, longing brings up worries.





The DLO sought to reconnect lost letters and their owners. But when the waiting becomes longer than the longing, the dead letter office is faced with the materiality of the letters, which take up a lot of space. John Durham Peters in his 1999 book *Speaking into the Air – A History of the Idea of Communication*, writes that every three months the accumulated letters are ‘solemnly burned’ at a place outside of the city and are exhaled in smoke.²⁶

The type of longing that the DLO communicates to me is a longing that empties one first and then fills them with more longing. And, day after day, the circle repeats: more longing and waiting for more longing to come. The letter does not arrive, the years pass by, and the one who is waiting may even have forgotten what they have been longing for. But, the longing is still there, lingering, waiting for its way out. Stuck in this waiting, even the longing starts to have a longing of its own. What is the meaning of the letter burned in the DLO whose writer does not know it is lost and whose recipient does not know it was ever sent?

The DLO ends the waiting by fiercely burning what has been lost: unread letters, messages that never reached their listeners. By igniting them, the fire consumes the envelopes, and melts all longings.

The private meanings that were piling up are revealed for the world to breathe. The smoke fills the air with messages for everyone to witness. This way, private messages become collective ones. They are turned into silence. A silence of the past, which fills the air, and the lamentation of grief is transformed into the lamentation of silence.





The distant bodies, the sender and the recipient, are comforted by the protective substance of silence. They speak through this tranquility, as if it was a new language.

The DLO deals with disembodied voices which cannot reply. For Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American essayist, lecturer, and poet, of the 19th century, the impossibility of dialogue, gives us reason to celebrate the universe as a constant transmission to those who have ears to hear. He continues that it does not matter if the message is even intended as a message, as long as we receive it. Whatever meaning we find is left to our power of “creative reading”.²⁷

To me, Emerson’s ideology looks for oracles in places where another may perceive only the surface. It communicates the longing for clear communication despite the spatial or temporal ‘distance’. One can find refuge in the silent language of signs, because the creative mind can receive these private messages, and feel supported by a force from within. And often, tears come from dialoguing with the world of silence — the world of within. Tears, which wash away the fears and open up the ears for new ways of bridging the distance in moments of ambiguity.

*The Open Air Communication of the DLO,
Emily Dickinson and Pythia*

The dead letters communicate the pathos of the message that never arrives, a communication where the sender and the receiver have lost touch. These disembodied messages are turned into ghosts, wandering





in the air for someone to liberate them. The concentration put into forming them is transformed into ruminations which loop and long for an escape. The DLO turns the hopes and dreams that these envelopes contain into dust by fiercely burning them. Tiny particles that blend with the air, invisible, but lighter than the previous invisibility of their ghost form, are now traveling through silence to be heard by those who search for consolation.

The action of burning the letters makes them visible in a sublime way. Similarly, the envelopes of Emily Dickinson, which once contained private messages, are turned into spaces for poetry to be seen. Her words become visible by her vigorous action of tearing the envelopes wide open for the world to see her poems.

I cannot help but imagine how Pythia, in her way, had also turned the message from private to public — voicing the words of advice meant for one person into an allegory.

Ruins

Ruins. Whether those which I could hold and feel their weight -- like the envelope 'ruins' of Emily Dickinson or the lost envelopes of DLO -- or those that are too big to be held -- like the ancient ruins that stand tall decorating the Earth with their silent bodies -- in both cases, the weight is there. Their weight can be perceived not just by holding them but also metaphorically, through witnessing. Witnessing includes a metaphor, but metaphor in the sense of the word





transportation (in Greek, the word *metafora* is the same word for transportation). That is my definition of witnessing. I don't need to get too close to feel the weight. I can keep my distance, if I like, and imagine it being transported to me. Letting words or absence of words speak to me.

Silence speaks too. It speaks a language more elaborate than any other.

The torn-apart envelopes of Emily Dickinson, and the ones turned into ashes in the DLO are ruins that remain. They've made it into the pages of the recorded past. One visits these pages to be reminded of the beauty of the past. Similarly, one tends to the ancient ruins, which stand colossally in silence, waiting to be marveled at, and for someone to let out a sigh of awe.

Ruins have always been associated with the occult and dreams.²⁸ To me, ruins are places to witness, and places which allow my body to be held by a space that has completed its circle. They are reminders and keepers of memories. I like to visit ruins, I see them as treasure boxes, holding the human stories that their walls have witnessed. And, to me, the key is imagination. There is something in the gaps and cracks of ruins that the imagination loves to fill. Like glue, personal and imaginal stories can cover the broken parts. This way, every person who visits can contribute to the restoration of them, keeping the place alive by seeing it breathe again.

They are places where I can wonder and imagine poetry filling the gaps, but also reminders of my own vestiges. By letting my eyes caress the broken parts of ruins, I am comforted with my own 'broken parts'. They are places I visit regularly; I go to these places of





silence and absence to let my longings out. Silence and decay are there to listen with the care I crave.

*So many things vanish. Yet ruins remain in the landscape, reassuring the mind that death might not be the end. Is it 'lust' to linger in those places?*²⁹

The view of ruins depends on the presence of a human observer, writes Jacob Mikanowski³⁰, in an article about the art of decay.

This feeling of age, active, ongoing decay, makes the ruins feel as if they were alive. And thus, a dialogue with the viewer can take place: one with the silence and one's own longings.

The longing I experience when I visit ruins, especially those that have been around for thousands of years, first empties me and then fills me with silence. These ruins bring a comfort that words cannot describe. The closest I can think of is the comfort of surrendering. Cooper writes:

*We associate them with a place to witness the cycle of life and death, a place of contemplation, and a refuge from the worries and cares of daily life. And certainly in these times of being cooped up at home, there is a strong desire to have one's own reminder of vestiges.*³¹

It seems that it is always autumn when I visit ruins. The time of fall never leaves them. And thus they become places for me to visit when I experience too much 'summer', and my body cannot handle it.





The kind of summer that is the early summer, when the warm days have taken over the cold wind and the world starts to move at higher speed. There is no speed in ruins, but only stillness. My body slows down and rests for a while when I am there, until I am filled with enough silence to return to the world that moves like summer. Cooper continues:

*Ruined and abandoned places have never waned. Ruins make us feel connected to history, and to cultural memory.*³²


They are places that tie the past with the present and guide the future. In those places where the past remains, the hopes and dreams of yesterday find a safe haven to inhabit the empty space. Their condition of desolation acts as a container for human emotions. In front of ruins, my whole body slows down adjusting to the rhythms of decay, and it gradually opens up — pouring out a boundless awe.

Ruins and the remnants of Apollo's chapel

Scattered on the Earth and standing still, there are the remnants of a lost era. The ruins of the sanctuary of Apollo, the place where Pythia gave her oracles, has opened its roof to the winds. Memories are infused in the land and in the stones that let decay grow on them. Visitors come and go, taking with them the presence they came here to witness. The oracle has become the land itself and thousands of people still line up in the entrance of the sanctuary to gain a remembrance of the recorded human herstory.





 *No remembering, no longings, no laments*





The decay of memory, the loss of memory. For me, forgetting to tend to the remnants of the past outside, brings me a longing, but failing to lean to the ones 'inside', brings me a longing bigger than any other. Laments reenact memories; there are no laments without them. Memories are what feed the laments and keep them alive.

No man can remember the past. Some record it and read it the next day to picture who they are. Others live each day as a new one.³³

From the book *Einstein's Dreams* by Alan Lightman, this story is one of the dreams of Albert Einstein where people have no memories. In this world, Lightman links the perception of time to people's emotions. People in this world don't understand the past, which largely makes them happy because to live in the present is to constantly notice its newness. Those who stop reading the *Book of Life* (the book where they record their memories), seem to be happier than those who obsessively read and write onto it. It's healthier and more freeing to be unchained from the past.

Without memory, each night is the first night, each morning is the first morning, each kiss and touch are the first. A world without memory is a world of the present. Such people have learned how to live in a world without memory.³⁴

It is an easy option to forget in this fictional world compared to the world most of us live in, where memories stay with us and we learn to live with them.





Memories come and go. They comfort or discomfort the body daily. Some are more memorable than others and have the power to shape one's life. It is a question of relevance, as a collective body, on how to handle the tragedies that impacted not only on an individual level, but also on a collective one. Do we forget and move forward, or create spaces for supporting the memories who stay?

To me, this story communicates the longing of longing. Giving up memory means giving up not only the longing of waiting, in the sense of yearning, but also the longing to look forward as excitement -- an animated force that fills one with joy.

Grief and joy go hand in hand. By neglecting to tend to the remnants of the past, the body gets covered with a gravely mass that prevents one from breathing widely.

Which world would you rather live in? A world of longing and belonging, or a 'perfect' undecayed world?



Epilogue 





Laments are not only performed, as already stated, for dealing with the mournings of losses about death. They are spaces where one can witness all kinds of emotional states related to loss. One very recent phenomenon of lamenting is not just the loss of a future, but also the un-lived past. The isolation experienced during the numerous lockdowns across the world has raised this topic, making a longing for living, for breathing wide resurface.

My hope with my writing is that laments will become more known in the art scene. This way, the dry stream can be witnessed and heard, and the longing can find the belonging it seeks.

After having traveled from the high mountains of Delphi and hearing the last words of Pythia, to a world with no memory, a lament is being formed. The absence that all the referred examples embody, speak in the language of lamentation. Their symbolic nature matches the laments that give space for multiple readings and dialogues with the absence.

As my writing comes to an end, I am leaving you with silence. The same silence I experienced when I was in the ruins of the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. That silence that, if you're willing to surrender to it, covers you gently and tears you open.











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