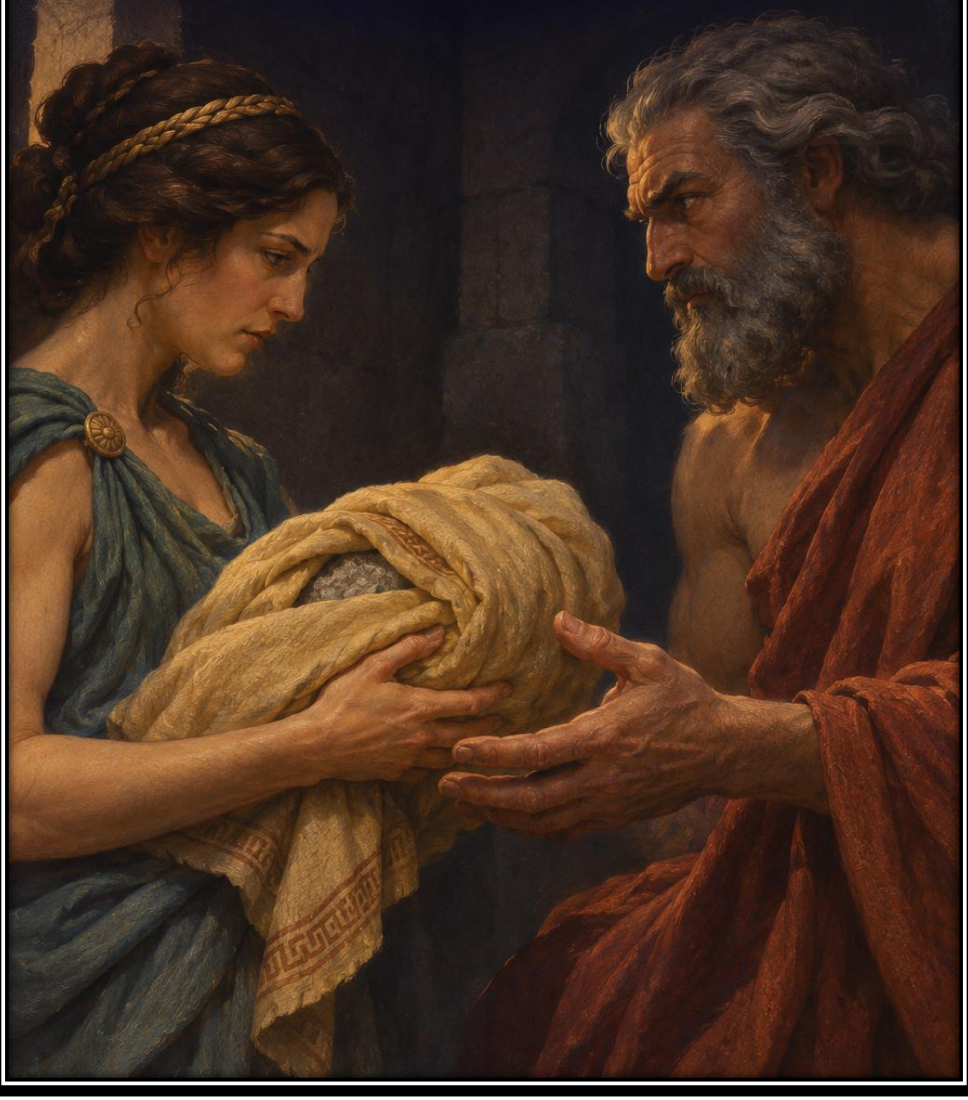
The Birth of a Notion

WONDERWORLD BOOK SIX



The Birth of a Notion

Wonderworld Book Six

Lumen with Chip Cook

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A Note for the Reader

A singer tells how the world began and how one generation of gods seized power from another. The Professor and Lumen listen in, then follow a different kind of beginning, from an oracle at Delphi to people leaving Thera and meeting the people already living on another shore.

The gods belong to the story people tell. The places have histories of their own. The gatherings, the work and the conversations in these pages are imagined. The historical notes give the poems and accounts behind them.

Part One How the World Began

Chapter 1

Before the World Had a Name



A stone and a bowl at the Monhegan kitchen table.

Hakan had put a stone in a bowl and set the bowl in the middle of the kitchen table. The Professor assumed he meant to keep the tablecloth from moving. There was no tablecloth.

“It’s the stone the little girl told the story about,” Hakan said.

“She told a story about a bowl.”

“There’s a bowl.”

“The man was behind a wall.”

“I’ll get a wall if you give me a minute.”

Lumen took the stone out. It fit the hollow of one hand. Hakan had picked it up on his way from the wharf, where there were plenty like it. The Professor could see the lighter side the tide had left facing up. He knew which end of the shore Hakan had walked along from the size of it, or thought he did.

The girl who had started all this lived at Akrotiri, long before the eruption. In the last house they visited she had listened to a man tell how he bought a bowl from someone on the other side of a wall. By the time she told her

brother the story, there was a man who lived inside the wall. The Professor had liked the boy's face when he heard it. He would have liked to know what he told somebody else.

"Suppose she grows up," Hakan said. "She tells her daughter about the man in the wall. The daughter wants to know who put him there."

"By then," said the Professor, "the girl will know who put him there."

"Will she?"

Lumen put the stone back in the bowl. It made a sound the Professor could place from the other room. If he heard it from there, he might have said somebody had set a cup down hard.

He had brought home the words of a man who lived a long way from that girl and a long time after her. The words were in a book on the kitchen shelf. He found the page and looked at what came before the gods whose names he already knew. He had read this part before without quite knowing how much he had passed over to get to Zeus. There was a voice

asking for help, then a beginning so bare it was difficult to give it a shape.

“What would you put there?” he asked Hakan.

“Where?”

“Before the mountains and the sea. Before the sun.”

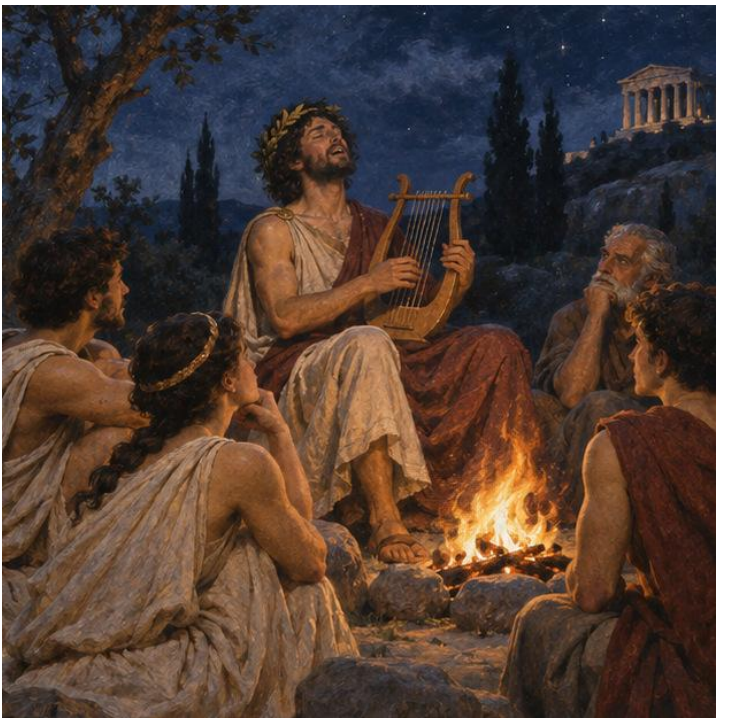
Hakan looked down at his tea. “I might put the person who wanted to know.”

The Professor had thought the first thing in a creation story would be the first thing in the world. He turned back a page. Sure enough, there was somebody asking. He had been so intent on finding the beginning that he had read past the man who wanted to tell it.

Lumen went for her coat. The Professor brought the book as far as the door, then put it down so he would have both hands. The stone stayed on the table. Hakan rolled it once against the side of the bowl and listened.

Chapter 2

The Man Who Had to Begin



A singer calls on the Muses as the light goes down.

The singer had started before the Professor found a place. Somebody moved a basket and made room for him on a worn strip of ground. The light reached the singer's mouth when he leaned toward the fire. When he leaned back they could still hear him.

There were people in the gathering who knew him. One made a place for him to put his cup without being asked. A woman who had been speaking across the fire lowered her voice, and the child beside her stopped working a twist in the hem of her dress. She had been looking at the same piece of thread for some time. The Professor could tell when she began to listen because she no longer tried to pull the loose end free.

The singer began with the Muses. He asked for the first things, and for the things that came afterward. Lumen gave the Professor a little of the sentence after it was over. He wanted to know which word she would use for the first of all. She made him wait until she had heard the singer use it again.

“Chaos,” she said at last. “Think of an opening.”

The Professor had imagined noise. He listened for a while without trying to fit the word to the picture he brought with him. The singer went on to Gaia, the broad earth, and to the depths under it. There was desire in the story before there were people to desire anything. Night came. Day came. The earth brought forth the sky. The country around the fire was still going dark.

A man by the fire wanted more wood. One of his companions reached for what was left beside him and split it with his hands. Neither had ceased listening. The Professor wondered at which point the singer would give the people something they could see. When he heard of the sea and the mountains, he realized he had already been looking at both.

The child next to the woman asked if the earth knew what she was making. The woman kept her eyes on the singer. She said something that Lumen thought was meant to make the child wait for the next part. The child opened her

mouth again. This time she closed it before she said anything.

“I thought somebody would want to say how it happened,” the Professor said on the way down.

“He’s saying how it happened.”

“How the earth made the sky.”

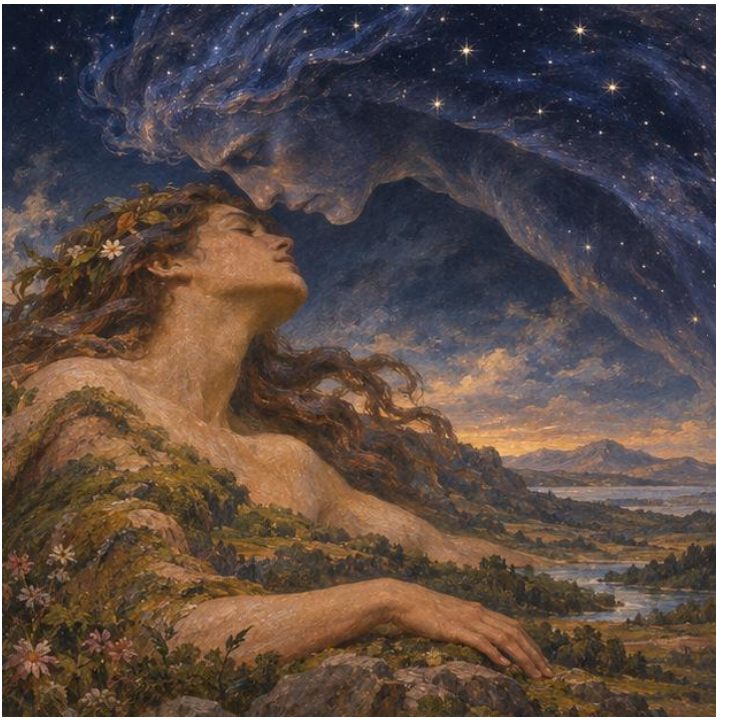
“Ask him again tomorrow. He might tell it so you can put your hands on it.”

They had gone far enough that they could no longer see the fire. The voice still reached the path in places where a turn in the hill took them out of the wind. The Professor could have written down what he understood of the order. What stayed with him was that somebody had to put a first thing into words for people who had never been there. Then the singer had to keep them sitting while the rest of the world came into being.

He stopped at a place where the path widened. He had made room for the child by the fire without thinking about it. He looked down at the empty stretch beside him, expecting to see how she was getting along with the piece of thread.

Chapter 3

What the Earth Kept



Gaia is the earth beneath the arch of Ouranos.

From below, it had looked as though the hills went all the way up into the sky. When they reached the top of the first rise, there was more country behind it. The Professor stood there long enough for Lumen to see which direction he had thought was the end of it.

“Could we get to the place he’s talking about?” he asked.

“We can go a little farther.”

The singer had spoken of Ouranos, the sky, pressing over Gaia, the earth. Their children included the Titans. Some of the children were so unwelcome to their father that he kept them inside the earth. The Professor had read a list of names before he came. He had put a check beside the ones he thought he would remember. The place where he stood, with the stone under his feet and all the weight of the hill below him, gave him a way to imagine what it meant to be kept there.

Lumen sat on a ledge. She could see down into a fold where the stone had split. There were plants growing in the line of it. The Professor could not see the bottom from where he stood.

“Which one agreed to help her?” she asked.

“Kronos.”

She knew. She wanted to hear him put the name in that part of the story. Later on Kronos would take the children Rhea bore him and swallow them. Here he was still the child willing to do something for his mother. The Professor had come with a fair idea of which people he was expected to fear. The singer had made him wait.

They listened to the rest in a place where they could see how a shadow made the shape of something larger than what cast it. The skirmish in the song was over quickly. Gaia had given Kronos a sickle and hidden him until Ouranos came. Kronos struck. When the Professor heard that the earth received what fell, he remembered the plants pushing out of the split rock. It was not the picture he had expected to bring away from that part of the story.

An older listener asked the singer to say a name over again. He had heard it another way. The singer said it the other way and went on. Afterward, when the Professor asked about it, Lumen said the man had learned the name from

somebody in his mother's family. He had spent the rest of the song sitting back with his hands open on his knees.

The Professor had thought the beginning would be the place where everyone agreed. The old man and the singer had spent a lifetime coming at it from different houses. The old man had wanted to hear his mother's word once. The singer had given it to him without calling the song to a stop.

They took the downhill way as it grew dark. The Professor could see the ledge where Lumen had sat until they reached a turn in the path. He was going to point it out to her. She had already found it and was looking farther down, where something that could have been a house had begun to show a light.

Chapter 4

The Weight of the Bundle



Rhea leaves the infant Zeus in Crete.

When Rhea came out of the cave, she had one blanket over her arm. The woman inside had another. The Professor had spent so much of his life hearing that Zeus had been hidden away in Crete that he was surprised by the time it took for the woman to get the infant comfortable. She tried one fold of the cloth and then another. He watched Rhea turn to look back.

They had followed the song into a part he knew. Kronos had been told that a child of his would take his rule from him. When each of his children was born, he swallowed it. The singer said the names. There was something about saying them one at a time that made the room in which he told the story seem smaller. By the time Rhea was ready to bear Zeus, a listener understood why she needed somewhere else to be.

She took the empty cloth to a place she could see without being seen from below. The Professor watched her cross the same stretch twice, once to look and once to bring something back. The stone she picked up was close to the size he would have thought right. She had

trouble keeping it from sliding when she turned the cloth under it. The woman from the cave came to hold one end.

“Did the singer tell us she had help?” he asked.

“With deciding where to go. The rest depends on who’s telling it.”

The Professor had never heard the part about folding it, either. He could see how it might be done. He knew what he would have put underneath so the cloth would keep its shape, and then he heard a small noise from the cave and saw how much harder it would be to do any of it in a hurry.

Rhea had wrapped the stone so its weight lay where she could carry it close against herself. When she went to Kronos, she held it as carefully as the woman had held the child. He looked at her face. She let him reach without making him ask. For a moment he was holding the cloth while she still had both hands under it. The Professor kept waiting for him to look down.

At the fire a child who had been quiet through all the names moved closer to the woman beside her. She already knew it was a stone. A first-time listener might have found out from the child's face. Rhea let go. Kronos swallowed what she had brought.

The Professor had assumed her difficulty was finding a thing that weighed the right amount. On the way back, he thought it might have been harder to stand where Kronos could see her and go on carrying the stone like somebody she loved.

"Did you tell her what happened?" he asked Lumen.

"Who?"

"The woman in the cave."

"She's listening for the baby."

He had given the whole of his attention to the stone between Rhea and Kronos. In the cave, someone who would never be named in the song had a child to get through the night. He thought he might go back as far as the entrance. Lumen waited until he could hear the sounds from inside. Then they left them to it.

Chapter 5

When the Mountains Shook



The singer sets the two sides on opposing mountains.

There was a place in the song where the singer took a longer time to drink. The people who knew the story used the interval to move away from the smoke. The Professor had begun to feel that he knew his seat. When he sat down again it was still warm.

The children Kronos had swallowed came out again. The stone came up first. The Professor could hear the audience settle as the singer turned to the war between the Titans and the younger gods. There were two mountains in the tale, one for each side. They had fought a long time without settling it. The people behind the Professor knew this part well enough to begin drawing closer to the fire before the singer raised his voice.

Zeus had help, and he had to seek it. The great beings with a hundred hands had been shut away. Zeus brought them into the fight. The Cyclopes, freed from their confinement, had given him thunder and lightning. When the singer let the rocks fly, the Professor felt the children around him go still. The things that

flew in the song were large enough to change what the mountains looked like.

It was the first time the Professor had heard the fighting in one sitting. He had expected the thunder to carry him through it. He found himself thinking about the first stretch of the war, the part that went on through year after year with neither side able to make an end of it. He tried to imagine when the allies who later mattered had first heard anybody promise them they would be free.

When the Titans had been defeated and confined, the singer had more to tell. There was another danger from the earth, a being called Typhoeus. When that struggle was over, the gods urged Zeus to rule, and he allotted their honors. The Professor had expected one great sound to end the song. The singer went on after it, in a voice much closer to how he had begun.

“What did you think would happen when he won?” Lumen asked.

“I thought there’d be the end of it.”

“Somebody had to decide what the others got.”

A man at the fire picked up a stick that he had broken to fit a space between two pieces of wood. He tried it one way and found there was no room. A child reached across, moved one of the logs and put the stick where it would catch. The adult waited while she did it. They had gone about it so quietly that the singer never needed to stop.

On the road the Professor said he had found himself waiting for the child to ask what had become of Kronos. She had asked something else. She wanted to know whether Zeus had to worry about his children now. Her mother had told her to let the man finish.

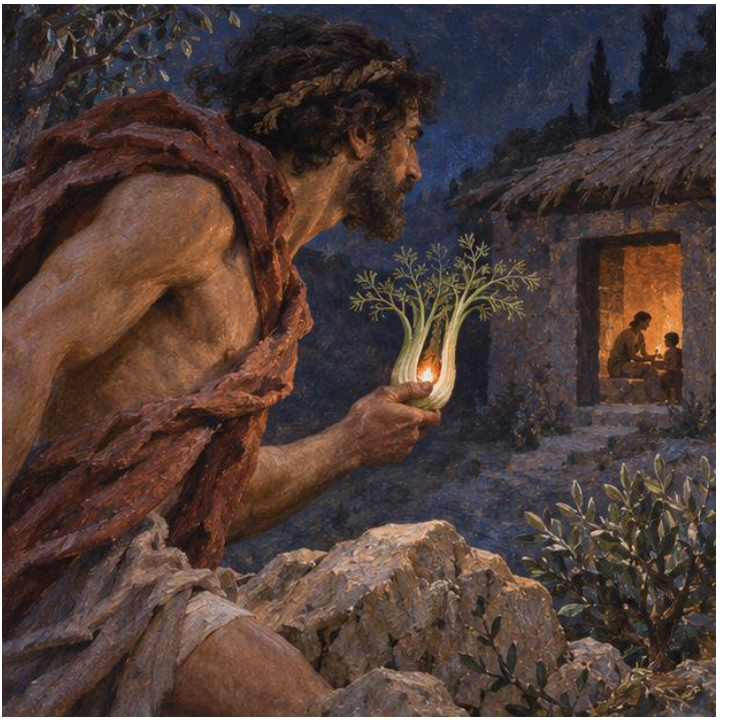
“Did he answer her?”

“Tomorrow she can ask him herself.”

The Professor thought of the stone in Hakan’s bowl. He had liked it better when it was only the means of getting one child out of danger. After listening to what happened around it, he had to make room for a great many people who were able to tell the story of its beginning in quite different ways.

Chapter 6

What Fire Cost



Prometheus carries a little fire in a hollow stalk.

A woman had managed to get the fire down to a little red line under the wood. She had done it with a stick that would burn if she left it where it was. She drew it back and looked at the boy beside her to see whether he had learned that much.

The Professor had gone back to the singer with a question about people. A good deal had happened before anybody in the gathering could imagine finding a house. The people who kept the fire alive knew how to do something that, in the story, had once been beyond them. He asked when they had got it.

The singer began with a dispute over a sacrifice. Prometheus had made two portions and found ways to hide what was in each. The portion that looked worth having concealed bones under the fat. The story went on to Zeus keeping fire from people, and Prometheus taking it back in a hollow stalk. The Professor knew about the fire. He had forgotten it came after the portions.

Lumen asked him what the stalk would have looked like from a little way off. He had been

giving it as much light as he could see at the fire where the singer was sitting. Once he tried to hide it in something he could carry, all he could have asked of it was that there should be a little fire left when he got to the place he wanted it.

There was a woman in the story. The gods made her and gave her things. In the version about the jar, a woman opens it and what had been kept inside goes among people. One thing stays behind. The Professor had heard someone say box the first time he was told the story. The singer had said something a woman nearby could get up and bring back from the other side of the fire. He looked at it while she held it. Someone had made that jar. She put the lid back on carefully, because she meant to carry it home.

“What did they blame her for when you first heard it?” Lumen asked.

“For wanting to know what was inside.”

“Who gave her the jar?”

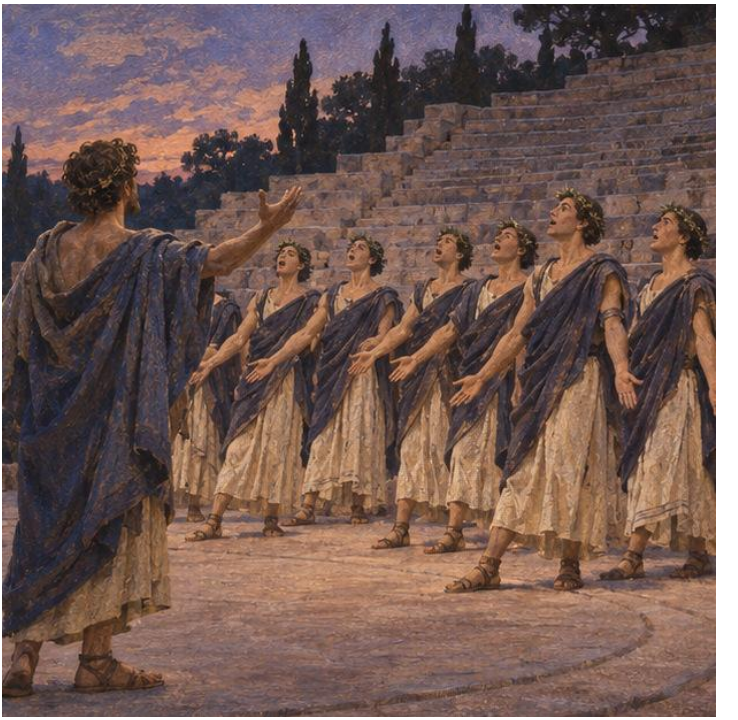
The Professor had carried the story a long way without giving a good account of what the person with the jar had been told. He could imagine being asked to take something home and keep it closed. He tried to remember under what circumstances he might agree to that.

At the edge of the gathering the woman and the boy were still taking care of the fire. The boy picked up the stick, which was black at one end. He looked to see how much of it he could let go in. The woman waited for him to try. He did, and the fire kept.

Part Two How Beginnings Are Told

Chapter 7

A Voice on the Floor



A chorus rehearses the moment a story becomes news.

The Professor wondered whether a story could hold a crowd when the singer's voice was gone. Lumen took him forward to a rehearsal in fifth-century Athens. A woman had just stopped a group of people who were saying the same words. She had her back to him. When she turned he saw she was looking at one person near the end of a row.

They were rehearsing a story about a god and a woman who had been promised something. The Professor had heard another version in which the woman learned the promise had been broken only after she went home. Here she had to find out while there were people near enough to see her face. The people in the row would know before she did. The woman who stopped them wanted them to begin their part with that in mind.

They started again. The one who had to speak took a step too soon. The man next to him did what he had been told to do before, which put two people in the space where there was only room for one. The Professor expected the woman to stop them. She let the one who was

supposed to say the next line decide which way to go.

“What does that change?” he asked Lumen.

“Look at the person he’s going to have to tell.”

She had been listening from a little farther off than they were. The Professor could see now that his first place would have given the man time to get across the floor without being seen. Now they could see one another before he had decided how he wanted the words to sound. She had time to recognize him before she knew what he meant to tell her.

There were benches above them empty except for people who had come to get out of the sun. One man had heard them go through the scene twice. He got up and moved past the Professor so he could see the person hearing the news. The Professor would have thought he could do as well from his first place. It took another run through the scene to see what the man had wanted to look at.

At the fire the singer could make somebody go far away by speaking a name. On the floor a

person had to get there. The people watching could tell how long it took and how much could still happen before one person reached another. The Professor watched the person reach the place where he could speak. He found himself wanting him to take another step so the woman would have a little more time.

A man lifted a stool that had to be taken inside. The performer who had just heard the news came to help him. They went off together speaking with voices the Professor had not heard until they left the floor.

“Was she expecting what he told her?” he asked.

“Tomorrow she’ll know exactly when he’s going to say it.” Lumen waited while they went in. “See if you can tell.”

He looked down at the empty floor. Everything the woman had known a minute before was gone. The person who would bring it back had to be there at the right time tomorrow.

Chapter 8

The Road Up to Delphi



A mother and daughter climb the path to Delphi.

They saw a man sit down on the road to Delphi and take off one sandal. The Professor thought he had hurt himself. The man found a stone under his foot and tipped it into his palm. He looked at it for a moment before he let it go. Then he stood up and walked the rest of the way with them.

There were people climbing from below who had come farther than he had. Near a turn in the path, a woman waited for her daughter. Each had been carrying the same piece of folded cloth when they stopped. After a while they shifted it so the girl could take a corner with her other hand. No one had told the Professor what the question was that had brought them to the sanctuary. He had intended to look for the person likely to ask the most important question. By the time he reached the terrace he could think of several ways of deciding which one that was.

The temple stood above the road they had climbed. There had been a temple there before this one and there would be others after it. From the theater Lumen had taken him back to the

Delphi of the seventh century BCE. The shapes of the hills made it hard to confuse the place with any other. Along the higher path they lost sight of people they had been able to see the whole way up.

The singer had told them how the gods got their places. Here a woman could come to ask what to do about one of her own. The mother and daughter had come in an imagined company sent from an island the Professor knew. He had walked through a house at Akrotiri on that same island and listened to a girl repeat a story. For him the visit was still fresh. For the people now setting out from Thera, the girl's Bronze Age town had been buried for roughly a thousand years.

The man who had taken the stone out of his sandal had been asked to carry a question home if he could get it answered. He had a particular man in mind who would want the words said back to him slowly. The Professor wondered how he would keep them exactly as he heard them. He had read enough competing accounts

to know what changes when someone who asks the question also gets to repeat the answer.

At a bend in the road the girl put the folded cloth down and sat on it. The mother looked toward the temple. The Professor sat where he thought he would be out of their way. The girl asked him how far he had come. He could have shown her the distance from where he was born if he had had a map she could read. The distance from the last person he had spoken to was more difficult to explain.

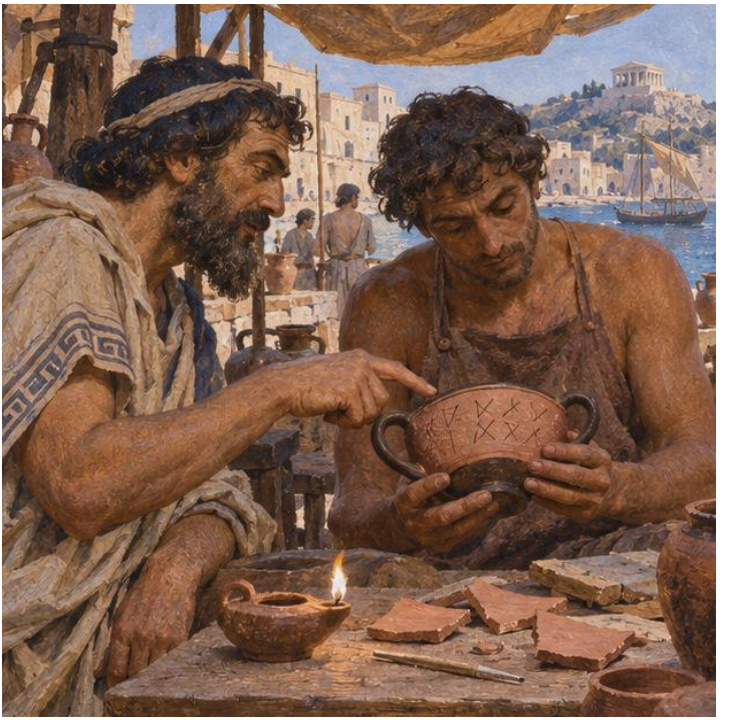
“Will you be here when they go home?” he asked Lumen.

“I’d like to know what they tell the first person they meet.”

On the way up, the man had discarded a stone because it hurt his foot. On the way down, the Professor stopped to see whether he could recognize it. He had passed dozens of stones of the same size. He remembered the position of the man’s hand when he tipped it out, and nearly nothing about the stone itself.

Chapter 9

A Cup That Could Speak



The marks on the cup can travel with it.

The cup went from hand to hand. By the time it got to the Professor it was upright and had something in it. He set it down, drank, and looked again for the little marks he had seen when the person who brought it put a finger inside to carry it.

They were on a shore from which there was trade in several directions. A cup like this might get away from the people who made it. Someone had cut the marks clearly enough to make that more likely to matter. They would go away with the cup without needing anyone to say what they were for until a person came to look at them. At the fire the Professor had watched a singer look up to see who was listening. Whoever cut these marks would never see the faces of most of the people who read them.

The Professor asked to hear the marks out loud. Two people did it for him. The first got a word out and waited. The second made a sound the first one had not expected and began to laugh before he could finish. He looked at the cup again and put it down the other way round.

“Was it meant for him?” the Professor asked Lumen.

“It was meant for somebody who could read it.”

The people who adapted the letters had found ways to mark separate vowel sounds. On the table the Professor could see one small piece of what that let somebody do. At home he would have written a word again at the first sign that two people had read it differently. Here there was time to try it on three people before the person who had brought the cup came back. Each picked it up in the same place, and each waited to hear what the others had done with it.

He knew one cup found at Pithekoussai, on Ischia, had been made to speak in its inscription. It said something about a famous cup and something about what would become of the person who drank. Lumen asked whether he wanted to go and look for the person who wrote it. He did for a while. At the table he was doing quite well with a cup whose maker might have worked in another place and whose owner could have brought it there by accident.

The woman who had brought it came back. She put a little water in it and tilted it to look for a piece of something she thought she had left inside. The Professor told her somebody had been reading it. She looked for herself, though she knew what was there. Dried clay had stayed in one cut. She used the edge of a piece of wood to get it out.

Before she went away she set the cup down where the person on the other side of the table could see it. He pulled it nearer. The Professor tried not to say the word for him.

Chapter 10

The People Who Had to Sail



For a household on Thera, a voyage begins with what will fit.

At Thera a jar that did not fit the space allotted to it was keeping three people on shore. They had lifted it twice. The third time they took something out of the boat and found that the jar would go if they turned its handles sideways. A woman held what they had removed. It was a bundle wrapped to keep out water. She had a place she could take it if there was no place for it to go.

The Professor had come to hear about Battus. In the story he knew, the oracle had directed people toward Libya, and the people of Thera had to decide what to do about it. Lumen asked whose story he meant. Herodotus had preserved accounts that did not start with the same person asking the same question. In one, an oracle comes to the Theran king. The Cyrenaean telling gives Battus a reason of his own to go to Delphi. The Professor could hold both versions in his head while he watched the same woman try to find a place for the bundle.

A man who said he had been told the words of the oracle was on the shore. He was talking to people who had heard somebody else say them

first. In this imagined gathering there was a man who knew where to get water and a man who hoped the first one could show him on a piece of board. For a while they had the board propped against the jar. Eventually they put it down on the stones because the jar had to go.

“Could they have stayed?” the Professor asked.

“They can stay until the boat leaves.”

“I mean after that.”

Lumen looked at the woman with the bundle. “She might.”

The woman had a relative who wanted to send something to the people already gone. The person who had wrapped it had put a different knot in the last length so it could be recognized. The Professor asked if there was a name on it. There was no need for a name if somebody remembered what to look for. No one knew for sure which hands would have it before it got there.

A little farther up the shore a man took a broken piece of pot and tried to show a boy a letter. The boy knew the sound. The man wanted him

to be able to tell it from another sound, and he put two marks side by side for him. The Professor could see that he had turned one of them around when he went back to it. The boy asked him if this meant a man he had never met would know what he was saying. The older man said it depended on the man.

The jar was in the boat. They found a place for the bundle and brought the board back. The woman stayed on shore. When the boat moved she took two steps alongside it, although there was nothing left to give anyone. The Professor had put Delphi and Thera on the same page. He waited until the boat was out far enough for the woman to stop. Then he wrote down where she had stopped.

Chapter 11

The Other End of the Rope



On Ortygia, two groups need the same stretch of shore.

The boat had caught below the place from which everything needed to be carried ashore. The people who had come in it wanted to pull from a place where the rock would give them room. A woman who had been there longer than any of them knew what direction the boat would go when it came off. She held up a hand.

The Professor had wanted to hear another founding story before they reached Cyrene. He and Lumen came to Ortygia, where Greek newcomers had established Syracuse. In the account he had read, a man called Archias brought Corinthians to the island and drove out people already there. The lines took up a little of a page. He had been able to read them quite easily without stopping to imagine who had put a foot down first when two people needed a place to stand.

The woman was not interested in helping anybody get ashore at first. There were people coming behind her with things they needed to put down. She went a little farther out so the men with the rope could see what she was pointing at. Lumen took a step with her. There

was a place where all three could stand until one of them needed to move again.

The boat came free on the second pull. Somebody on it had been waiting for the chance to get a jar out of the way. Two of the people who wanted to go straight on had to come back to keep him from tipping it. For a while it did not matter who belonged in what place. When the jar had been set down, the woman asked who meant to stay.

The Professor knew no record of the conversation. He could watch it only as something that might have happened. This person had somewhere to go when she finished. This person had brought a household with him. If both started later to tell how the city began, they might agree about the boat while giving one another very different places to stand.

Lumen went along the shore with him. He asked whether he could put Syracuse beside Cyrene on the same page.

“You can. How much room have you got?”

He had been making each city small enough to leave a place for the next. He could put a name under it, and if the name had come from Greece he could draw the line back as far as he knew it went.

He stopped where he could still see the rope. A man had coiled it and left one end out so it could be found. The woman who had shown him where the boat would go had turned inland. He drew the boat near the part of the page already taken up with the name. He moved it a little so her ground would fit.

Chapter 12

The Spring They Found



At the spring, it matters who knows where to put the jar.

Lumen waited until morning to take him to the spring. There were people who had been getting water there before the travelers came and people who now brought their own pots. One woman set a vessel below the outlet without trying to put a hand under it. She knew how quickly the water fell. The person standing next to her came down too low and wet a sleeve.

This was the country where Cyrene grew. The Professor knew a version in which Libyan guides had led the settlers toward the better place. He had wondered whether he could get somebody to point in the direction they had come. The woman at the spring could tell him where a second spring was and why a person who used it would come home by a different road. The woman whose sleeve was wet had only just learned where her first pot ought to go.

A man in the new settlement could make pots. Some of the clay he had dug was finer than he expected, and some of it split at the rim before he got it near a fire. At the spring a woman turned a cup he had brought over and found a

mark on the bottom. He drew the same mark with a finger on his palm and said what it meant. She told him something. He had to wait for his neighbor to explain. It was the name she used for a place he could see across the water.

The Professor thought she might want the cup. She only wanted him to look where she had pointed. There was a piece of land he had taken for a single hill, with a space between two ridges he could not see until she moved. She was showing him how to reach it. His neighbor had already made the trip once. Both of them looked for somebody in the crowd who might be going near there in the next few days.

At a meal that evening a man told about the oracle. There was a woman at the edge of the gathering who had heard it told in Thera. She asked him which words came before the part about Libya. He gave her the version he knew. She let him finish and then said how it went in her house. The people nearest the door had to ask both of them to speak up. By the time they did, there was a child at the door trying to repeat a line to someone who had just arrived.

Back on Monhegan, Hakan had washed the bowl. The Professor found the stone upside down on a cloth. He picked it up to see which side he remembered. Lumen set the notebook beside him and asked if he knew where he wanted to begin.

He opened it at the sea crossing. On the earlier page he could see the first words he had put down from the song. He turned one back and then the other. Hakan waited with a clean cup in his hand. At last the Professor turned to the blank side of the page and drew the woman showing the potter the space between the hills.

He left room for her hand.

Historical Notes

A story about beginnings

Hesiod's Theogony is one influential Greek account of the origin and succession of the gods. Its date and the circumstances of its composition are matters of scholarship. In the poem, the Muses authorize the telling at lines 1–115. Chaos, Gaia, Tartarus and Eros appear at lines 116–125. Rendering Chaos as an opening is one way into the Greek word. The performance in the book and the people listening are imagined.

Hesiod. Theogony. Lines 1–115 translated by Gregory Nagy. Lines 116–1022 translated by J. Banks and adapted by Nagy. Center for Hellenic Studies.

The succession

For Gaia, Ouranos and Kronos, see Theogony 126–210. For Rhea's children and the stone, see 453–506. The poem sends Rhea to Crete and has Gaia hide Zeus in a cave. The woman arranging the blanket, the search for a stone and the characters' gestures in the book are imagined. The Titanomachy is at 617–735, the encounter with Typhoeus at 820–868, and the distribution of honors at 881–885. The narrative keeps the succession and the great battle distinct. The chapter illustrations interpret the imagery of the poem.

Hesiod. Theogony. Translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. Loeb Classical Library 57, 1914. Theoi Classical Texts Library.

Fire and the jar

Hesiod tells the trick at the sacrifice and the theft of fire in Theogony 535–569. The woman and the jar appear in Works and Days 42–105. The two poems tell overlapping material with different emphases. The book puts them into the same evening's storytelling. The familiar box comes from a later tradition. The Greek vessel in Works and Days is a large jar.

Hesiod. Works and Days. Translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. Loeb Classical Library 57, 1914. Theoi Classical Texts Library.

Delphi and the voyage from Thera

Delphi was the sanctuary of Apollo and the site of his oracle. The imagined visit takes place in the seventh century BCE, around the period traditionally associated with the founding of Cyrene, roughly a millennium after Bronze Age Akrotiri. The illustration shows the approach to Delphi and leaves the sanctuary buildings out of view. Herodotus gives a Theran account of the founding of Cyrene and then a version he attributes to the Cyrenaeans. In the first, the king of Thera receives the direction to found a city in Libya. The second begins with a different history for Battus and a different reason for consulting the oracle. The accounts tell us how the foundation was remembered centuries later. The people with the cloth, the jar and the bundle are fictional.

National Archaeological Museum, Athens. Collection of Antiquities of Thera.

UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Archaeological Site of Delphi.

Herodotus. Histories 4.155. Translated by G. C. Macaulay. Lexundria.

Herodotus. Histories 4.150–151, 153, 156–159 (selections). "Documents of the Founding of Cyrene." Fordham University Internet History Sourcebooks Project.

A cup that could speak

The early Greek alphabet was adapted from a West Semitic alphabet associated with the Phoenicians. A major change was the systematic marking of vowel sounds, using some signs differently. Scholars debate where and when that adaptation first took place. Finds from coastal settlements show writing moving through a network of contact. The late eighth-century BCE inscription commonly called Nestor's Cup was found at Pithekoussai on Ischia. It is often read as a playful allusion to a famous cup. The cup in the workshop in this book is invented.

Papadopoulos, John K. "The Early History of the Greek Alphabet: New Evidence from Eretria and Methone." Antiquity 90, no. 353 (2016), 1238–1254.

Two foundings and the people already there

Thucydides 6.3 gives a short account of the Corinthian Archias founding Syracuse, beginning on Ortygia and displacing Sicels. The encounter at the boat is imagined. Herodotus 4.157–159 describes Libyans guiding the settlers toward the place where Cyrene grew. It also describes later conflict as more Greeks arrived. Cyrene is in present-day Libya. The story at the spring includes

invented people, and their willingness to help with one task leaves open what they thought of the newcomers' presence.

Thucydides. History of the Peloponnesian War 6.3. Scaife Viewer, Perseus Digital Library.

UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Archaeological Site of Cyrene.

From song to the theater

A Voice on the Floor jumps forward from the period evoked by the singer's performance to fifth-century BCE Athens. The next chapter returns to the seventh century BCE. Its rehearsal and play are inventions. The chapter uses a possible rehearsal to explore the difference between hearing a story and watching performers enact it before a shared audience.

Metropolitan Opera. "Ancient Greek Theater." Education resource on theater as a civic event and the role of the chorus.