

A HISTORIAN'S TAROT

by Carla Nappi

COME CLOSER

That's good.

Today, we're going to read together.
I'm going to read for you, and with you.
You've come to me because of my relationship
with time. (I was going to say, Because of what
I know about time. But really, what do I know?
What can anyone *know* about time? I can't claim that.)

You've asked me to read the cards and tell you
what I see. (This is reasonable. I'm a historian.
It's my practice. It's what I do. I'm glad you've come.)

To read is to begin, and this will
be a series of beginnings.

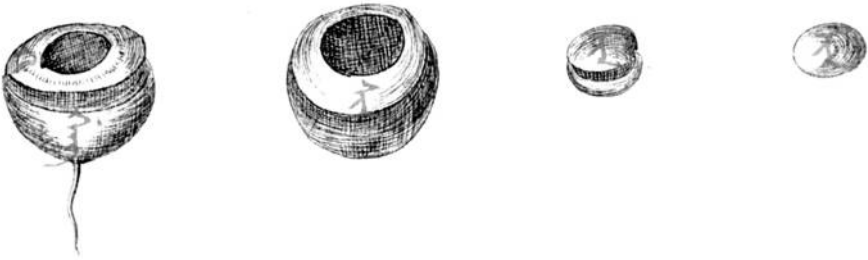
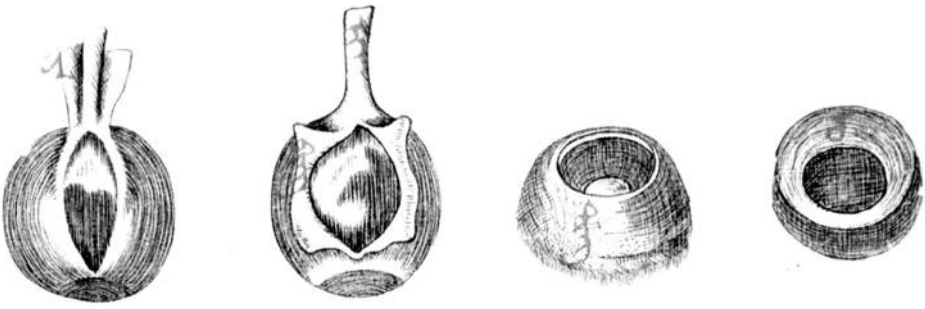
Now let's shuffle the cards.

Please cut the deck for me.

Thank you.

Sit back, now.

Here's the first.



۱۰۰ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۰۱ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۰۲ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۰۳ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۰۴ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۰۵ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۰۶ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۰۷ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۰۸ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۰۹ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۱۰ . بخت و شانس

Here, we have THE EIGHT OF EYEBALLS. You'll remember the eyeballs as one of the minor suits in our deck.

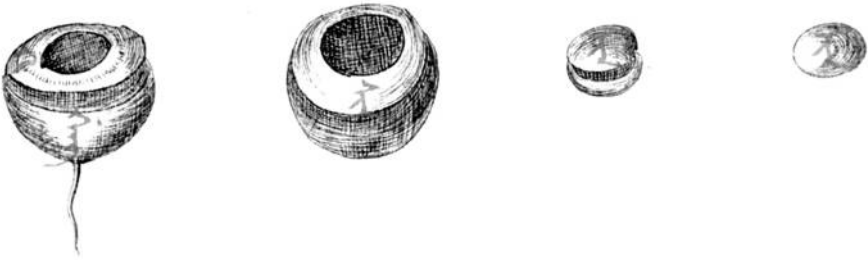
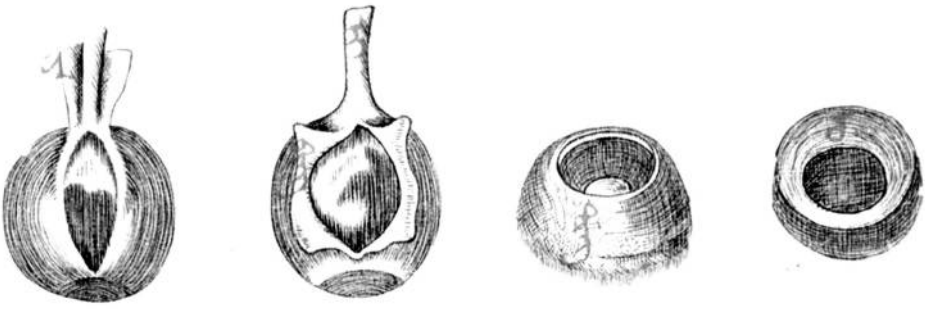
(The Intestines signify the relationships of a story, the narrative and its voices. The Finger Bones represent causation, explanations of change, the consequences of the action of the story. The Nerves point us to the placement and movement of the story in time, the period, the era, the context. And the Eyeballs represent the archive, the materials of a story.)

This card is showing us something about the collection through which you make yourself, and in making yourself, making the stories you tell about the world, its pasts, and its possible futures. (About you, your past, your possible futures.)

Eight is the number of reflection and balance, a pivot number. It comprises two fours, the number of stability. But here, in the suit of Eyeballs, those fours are mirroring each other, making an archive of mirrors where it is unclear what the object is and what is its reflection. Perhaps the archive is all and only made up of reflections, this card proposes. (Perhaps you are merely made of reflections, the card asks you to ask yourself.)

Watch the image, moving left to right, as the reflections seem to get smaller and smaller. You should be mindful of the ways that mirrors consume what's caught inside of them, the card says. A creature made only of reflections eventually becomes a ghost. Attend carefully to the dialogues emerging from what seem to be separate parts and objects, make life with the relations, lest the connective tissue that you work so hard to weave finally comes undone, breaking you apart.

(Not to worry: like all of the minor arcana, this signifies a temporary state.)



۱۰۰ . بختیاری
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 ۱۱۹ . بختیاری
 ۱۲۰ . بختیاری

And here is THE DIVINE BUTCHER.

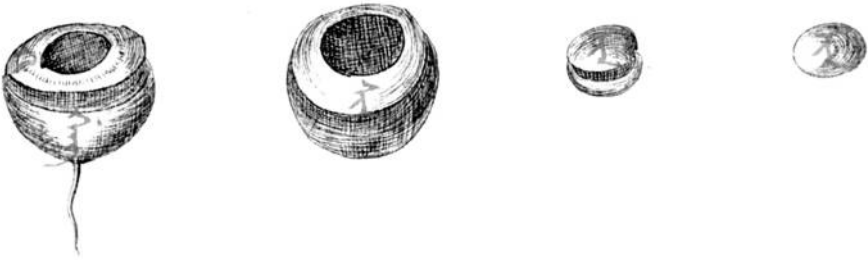
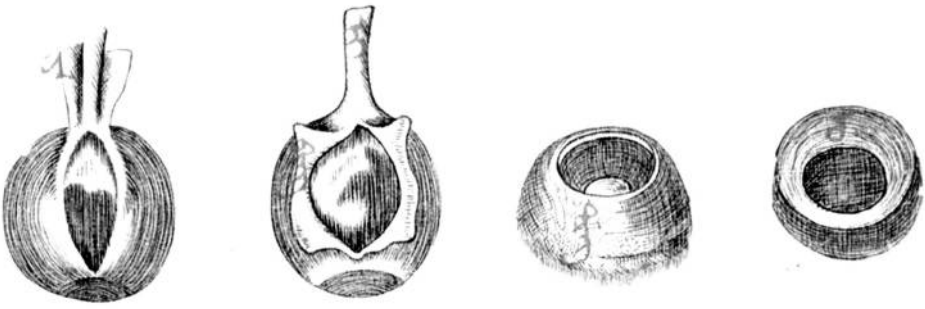
You might see the organs on the table, bleeding language onto the page. But this butcher isn't about blood. Look again at the script below the organs as a tracing of the movements of her knife.

This is a card to look at—to read—with the spirit and not with the eyes, as The Divine Butcher might.

(You'll recall the story of Butcher Ding, once upon a time, in early China. Butcher Ding was cutting up an ox for a very important man. With every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every movement of his feet, every thrust of his knee, the butcher slithered the knife along, and the knife was part of his body, and it made a kind of music, and so his body made a kind of music, and all was in perfect rhythm and he sliced through flesh as if performing a dance. "This is marvelous!" said the very important man. "What skill!" Butcher Ding put down the knife. And he said to the very important man, "What I do is not about skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years, I no longer saw the ox. Instead, I learned to follow my spirit instead of looking with my eyes. I don't try to perceive, nor to observe, nor to understand: my spirit moves where it wants. I go along with things as they naturally are, strike in the big empty spaces, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint." He continued, "The blade of the knife has no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into the spaces between the joints, then there's more than enough room for the blade to play about. Whenever I come to a complicated place, a problem to be solved, I dwell in the problem, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until the whole thing comes apart at once like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, and then I wipe off the knife, and I put it away.")

How an object comes apart makes it into itself. How you attend to an object helps it to come apart, and thus to become itself. This is what the card is saying.

And so, pay attention. And become the butcher. In the movements of your mind and body, recognize the thing as you help it to come apart. And as you recognize the thing, recognize yourself. And in that moment of recognizing yourself in the world as you attend to it—you help create it by attending to it—call down gods. Enchant the world. And help it to come apart. Because you are the butcher. (As any reader must be.)



۱۰۰ . بخت و شانس
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 ۱۰۸ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۰۹ . بخت و شانس
 ۱۱۰ . بخت و شانس

For the next card, we have THE CARETAKER OF MINOR GODDESSES.

This card is about prophecy, and about the kinds of stories that become possible when things are juxtaposed with other things.

If you start at the top left and move clockwise through the images on the page, you'll note the major symbols on this card.

THE GODDESS OF SPROUTING SEEDS.



THE GODDESS OF HEARTS THAT GROW INSIDE OF APPLES.



THE GODDESS OF EMPTY BIRDS' NESTS.



THE GODDESS OF TINY COLISEUMS BUILT BY TINY INSECTS TO STAGE THEIR TINY PLAYS.



THE GODDESS OF REFLECTING POOLS.



THE GODDESS OF MACARONS.



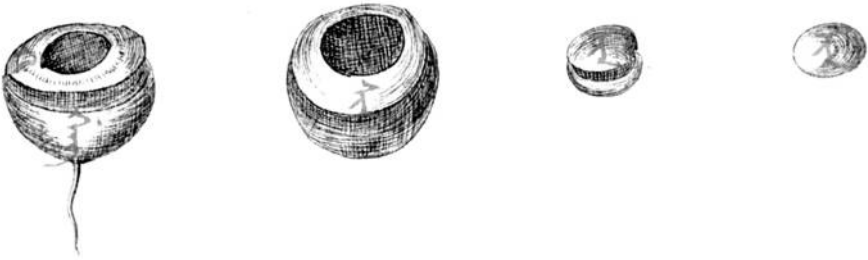
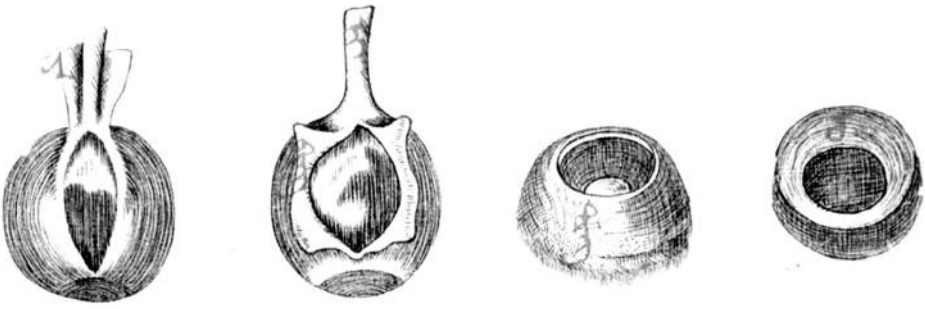
THE GODDESS OF EMPTY FLOWER POTS.



THE GODDESS OF LITTLE PLANETS THAT GROW FROM THE GROUND BUT ONLY GROW HALFWAY BEFORE GETTING TIRED AND FALLING ASLEEP AND DREAMING THE REST OF THE MINOR PANTHEON INTO AND OUT OF BEING.



Which of the goddesses are you today? Choose one, and make her an offering.



۱۰۰ . بختیاری .
 ۱۰۱ . بختیاری .
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 ۱۰۹ . بختیاری .
 ۱۱۰ . بختیاری .

Here is THE TRANSLATOR.

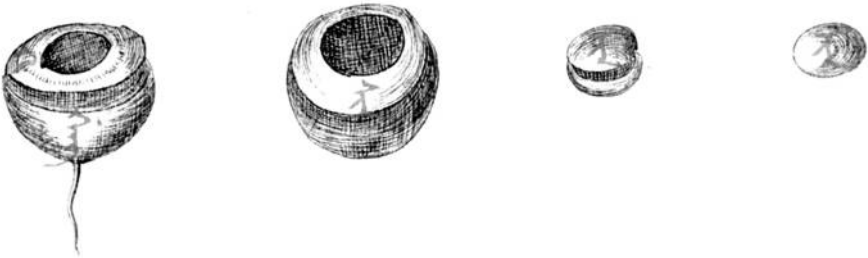
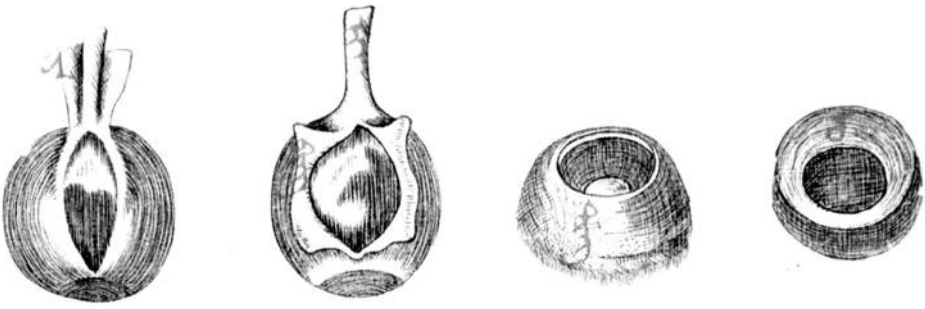
This card indicates that a turning is to come. It's a card of metamorphoses.

The images on the card refer to the well-known story of the origin of translation. (The woman who wrote her name on a slip of paper, and fed it to a worm, and watched as the worm spun a cocoon around itself, and then slept with the cocoon under her pillow, and each night when she dreamt the creature in the cocoon took on the shape of what she was dreaming, and spelled out one letter of her new name across its delicate skin, until finally it emerged from the cocoon with her new name embroidered/tattooed on its wings and a body that was its own history, an archive of its transformations and of her dreams and her naming. This is where we get the understanding of translation as tattoo, as a rendering of ourselves into ourselves by letting other creatures read our dreams.)

When you are reading a text, the card reminds you, you're reading yourself. No more and no less.

When you're reading this card, you're reading yourself.

As your gaze takes in the script, it uses it as thread to weave the cocoon for the creature who will read your dreams, and who will hatch its meaning, but only for you.



الحکم . الحکم . الحکم . الحکم .
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 الحکم . الحکم . الحکم . الحکم .
 الحکم . الحکم . الحکم . الحکم .

Ah. THE PALEONTOLOGIST.

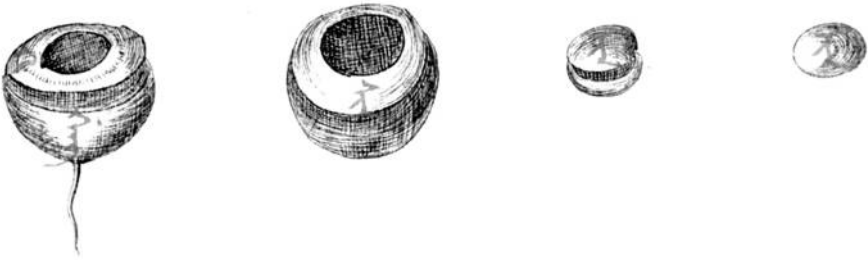
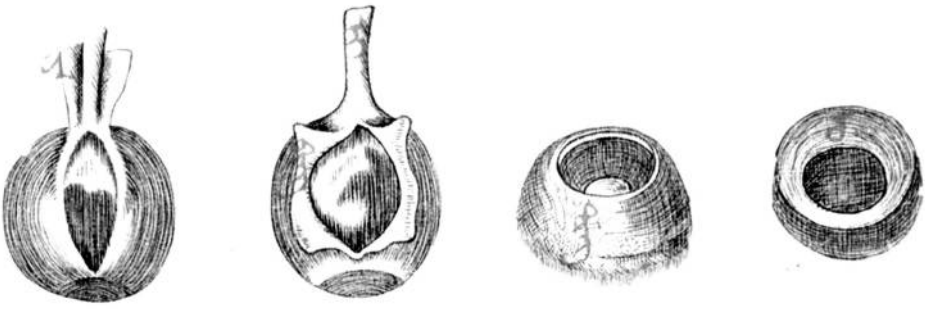
The symbols on this card are taken from a handbook of geological formations on an alien planet, described in a no-longer-extant copy of a letter found in the personal effects of a sixteenth-century Chinese medical doctor, who claimed to have received the handbook as payment from a patient he had treated. No one knows how it ended up in this deck.

See how the fossils rise up out of the soil.

Look: the sedimentary strata on this planet accumulate vertically. (Time is different, there.)

Imagine walking along the ground as the traces and bodies of those that lived before you rose up to meet you, lingered in the air, presented themselves to your grasp. Imagine, many years from now, whatever is left of your body—a footprint, some strands of hair—lifting itself into the palm of another, who will then remake you into their image of what you might have been, like an artist in a museum imagining a dinosaur out of a tooth. Imagine that is how you will eventually become who you will have been.

...It's unclear what this card signifies.



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 ۱۰۹ . بختیاری .
 ۱۱۰ . بختیاری .

And here, THE INTERPRETER OF INSECTS.

Like all of the court cards (the Interpreters, the Archivists, the Bards, the Astronomers), this card, The Interpreter, like the other Interpreters in the deck, is an aspect of The Translator, the archetype of the maker of language. This Interpreter is the ritual or sacred aspect of the maker. (It's unique in that it doesn't correspond with one of the four suits of the deck. No matter.)

Observe the bottom half of the page.

Follow the twisting bodies of these larvae made of language, their flesh unspun for display, ranked and ordered like the bodies of prisoner pilgrims caught in someone else's war between paper and time, text and world, their viscera raveling down and down and down until pinned by punctuation to the page. They have become what they've consumed, words made flesh, an accidental transubstantiation born from the simple creaturely act of trying to make a home, to eat a dwelling for yourself out of what confines you, making the text of your life sacred by bringing it into your body, basic survival a form of worship.

Here they are arrayed below the wormholes they've made, conduits for a kind of time travel for the reader willing to look at (with, through) them in that way.

It's a beautiful horrible dissection.

Isn't it.

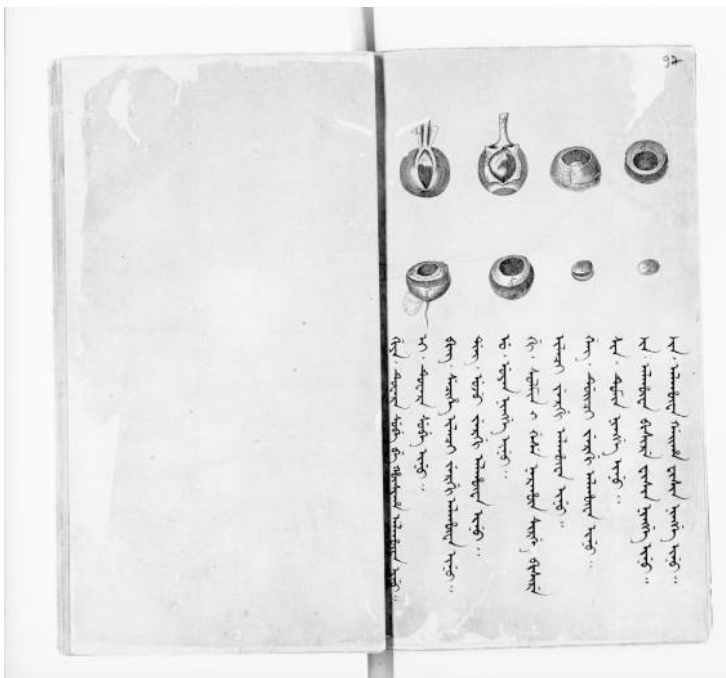


FIG. 1
Wargi namu oktosilame niyalma
beye giranggi sudala nirugan-i
gisun. Xi yi ren shen gu mo tu shuo
西醫人身骨脈圖說, p108. Courtesy
of the Bibliothèque nationale
de France. Département des
manuscrits. Mandchou 289