

Map of Mountains and Seas

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Thus we live in a world that first existed inside the heads of others, a world built up through innumerable sustained acts of intentionality, a world where everything speaks not of nature and her processes but of its makers in their resistance to those processes. In a very real sense we can be described as living inside the heads of others, in an excess of interiority that obliterates our own relation to material origins, to biologies, to our bodies. In some way, making was intended to override the givens of nature, to create a world; that world has itself become a given whose terms are more limited in their scope for imagination and act. The world is so thoroughly made it calls for no more making, but for breaching its walls and tracing its processes to their origins. “Taking apart” has become the primary metaphor and “backward” the most significant direction: the creative act becomes an unraveling, recouping the old rather than augmenting the new.ⁱ

Rebecca Solnit

Map of Mountains and Seas is a photographic reflection on the 《山海经》, the *Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, a text with versions dating back to the 4th century BC. The *Guideways* is a confluence of real and abstract geographies. Hundreds of mountains and waterways are mentioned, but only a handful of these can be ascribed to identifiable locations (Mount Hua, shown here, is one of these few locations); in between are vast imagined spaces, along with descriptions of the flora and fauna, medicines, beasts and mythical beings that dwell there.



The artist and friend Zhang Hongtu referenced the *Guideways* in some of his recent paintings, and when we discussed these works he made an intriguing comment about an American who wrote a book in the 1950s claiming the geography described in the *Guideways* to actually be that of North America.



Untitled
2010
Zhang Hongtu

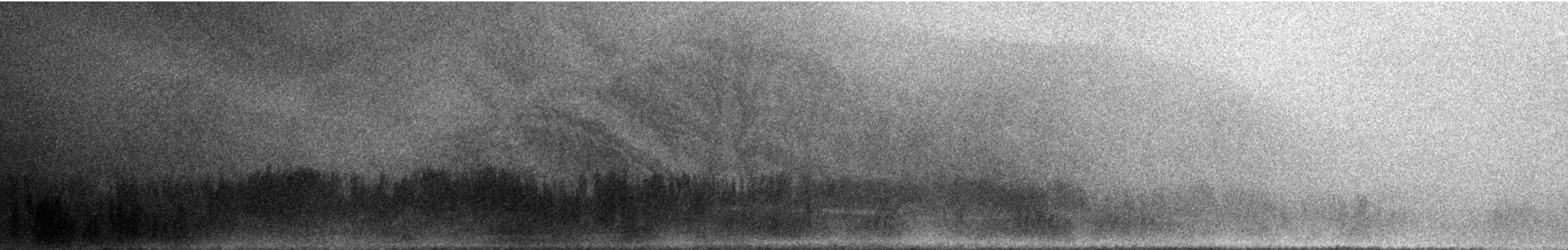


This comment was the spark that eventually led to my *Map of Mountains and Seas* series. The author's name is Henriette Mertz, a historian and patent attorney who, by the way, worked as a code-breaker for the U.S. government's cryptography department in World War II. In her 1958 book, *Pale Ink*, she does indeed propose that certain geographical descriptions in the *Guideways* match quite well with the geography of North America. We are looking at Mills Glacier atop Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park, one of the peaks specifically mentioned by Mertz.



Fusang (扶桑), mentioned in the *Guideways* as a mythological tree of life allegedly growing far to the east of China is interpreted by Mertz to mean “fir trees,” and she speculates that this might refer to the fir trees of British Columbia, Canada, shown here. For me, the inspiration to be found in Henriette Mertz is not her scholarship, or the accuracy of her claims of Chinese visits to the North American continent in millennia past. Rather it is a matter of identity, for scholars, artists or anyone who considers themselves to not be easily defined by specific borders. Where on the map is home?

In Richard Strassberg's comprehensive translation and commentary on the *Guideways*, he writes of the long history of Chinese philosophical schools and thinkers who stressed the need to classify things in order to create a sense of order: "This understanding was prerequisite to maintaining the proper interaction among things and to the exercising of effective human control over the cosmos." ⁱⁱ



Hybridity, in contrast, implied incommensurability, the lack of common qualities for making comparisons; chaos.



The following parable is from Zhuangzi's *Inner chapters*, the Daoist classic from the 4th century BC:

The ruler of the South Sea was called Light; the ruler of the North Sea, Darkness; and the ruler of the Middle Kingdom, Primal Chaos. From time to time, light and darkness met one another in the kingdom of Primal Chaos, who made them welcome. Light and Darkness wanted to repay his kindness and said, “All men have seven openings with which they see, hear, eat, and breathe, but Primal Chaos has none. Let us try to give him some.” So every day they bored one hole, and on the seventh day, Primal Chaos died. ⁱⁱⁱ













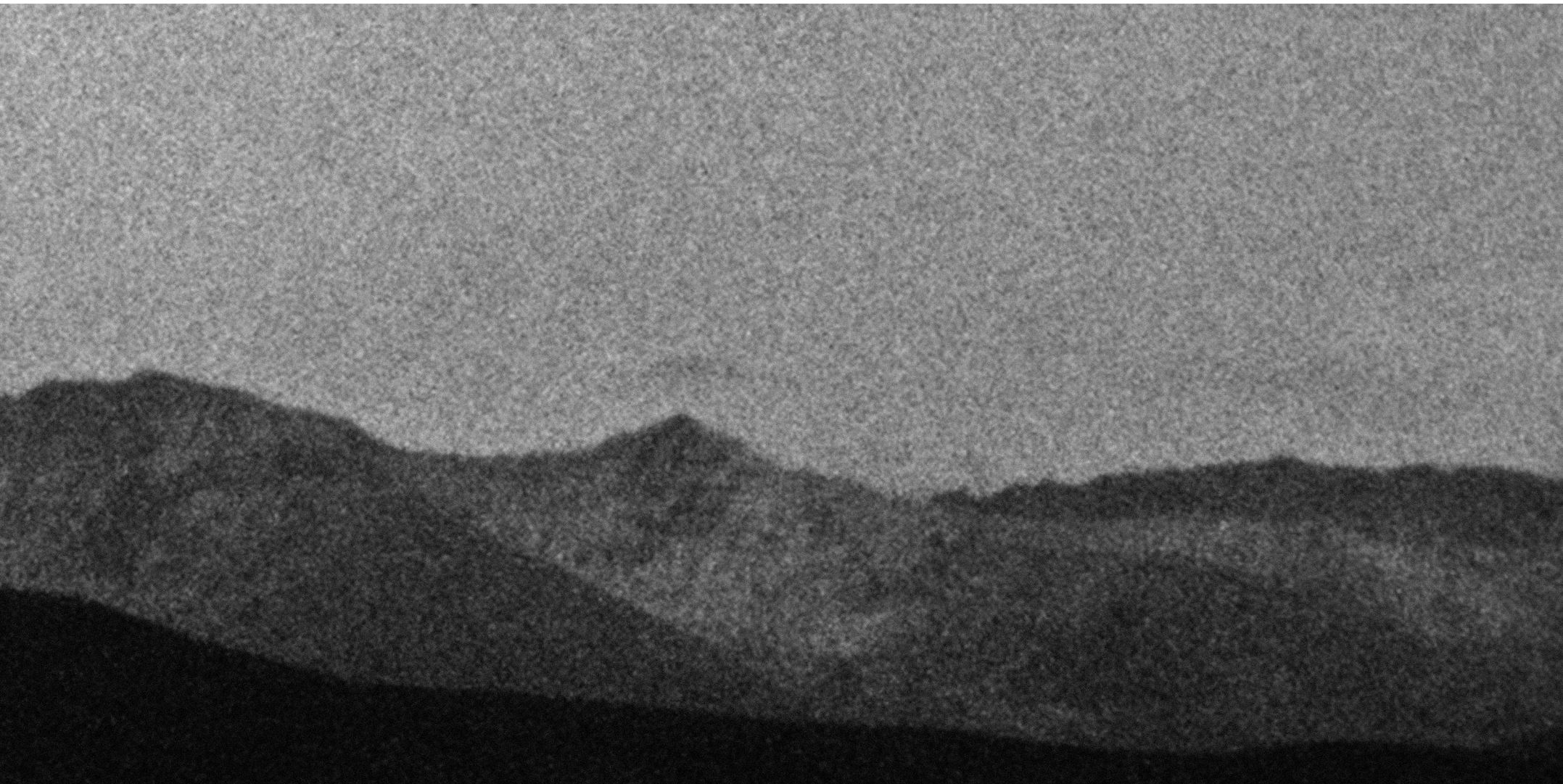




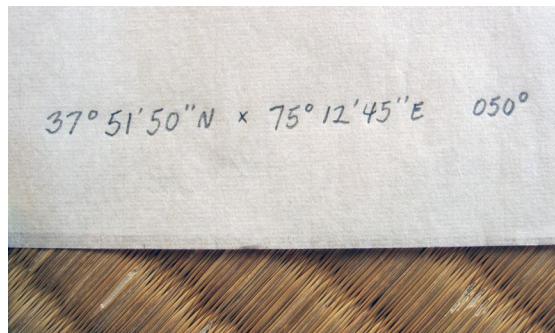








Every photograph is a map, no matter how abstract or minute an excerpt it is from the greater context of the world that surrounds it. After the photographs in the *Map of Mountains and Seas* series are mounted, I write the GPS coordinates and azimuth (degrees from north) along the edge of the work.

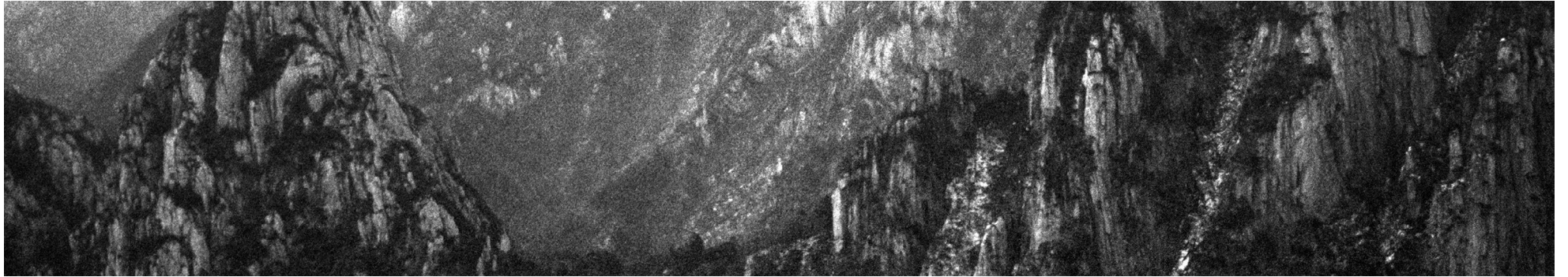


Were you to stand in the location on the globe described by the coordinates on the proceeding page you would see the scene below. But beyond that there is no further categorization.

What is today labeled on maps as the Kunlun mountain range in northwest China (shown here) should not be confused with Kunlun Mountain, the *axis mundi*, the Daoist paradise featured prominently in the *Guideways*. The latter is something much closer to the idea of the nature of things than it is to any specific place; a feeling of connectedness that runs ...



... through Huang Shan, ...



... through the Taihang Mountains, ...



... through the mountains of British Columbia.



Quoting Richard Strassberg again:

All the mountains [of the *Guideways*] are consistently presented as lofty zones devoid of human habitation. The geography ... is a natural, sacred, and esoteric one with virtually no mention of feudal states, towns, cities, districts, provinces, or other political divisions. In the *Guideways through Mountains* only the rivers emanating from each mountain indicate a connection with the world below. These are primarily presented as outflows of the divine essence of the peaks that eventually disappear into larger rivers, lakes, or the surrounding seas.^{iv}



Guo Pu 郭璞, a scholar who annotated the *Guideways* in the 4th century AD, wrote:

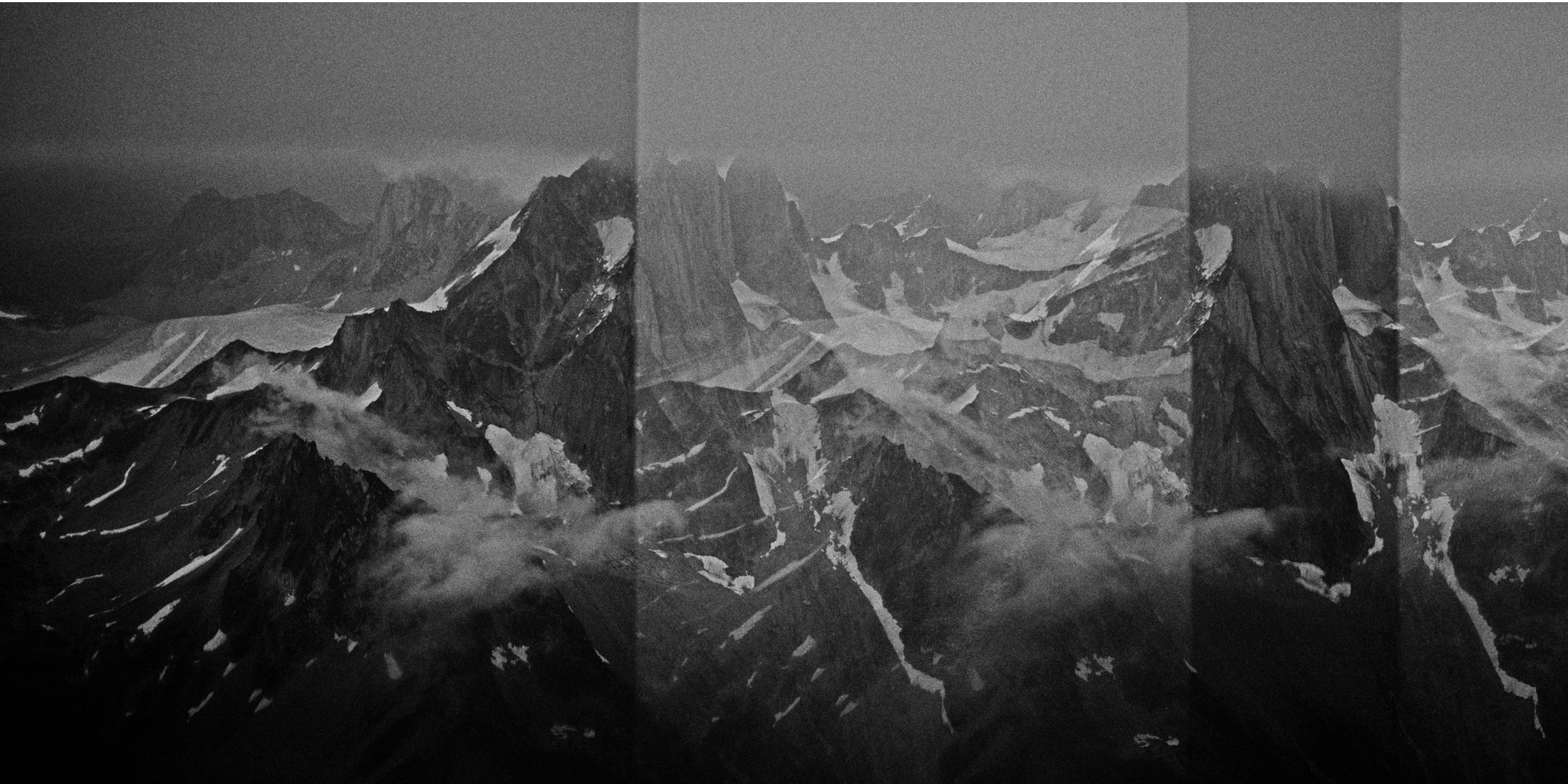
People who read the *Guideways through Mountains and Seas* today all suspect it because of its exaggerations and absurdly extravagant claims and because of its many strange and fanciful expressions. I have often discussed this by quoting Master Zhuang (Zhuangzi) who said “What people know is inferior to what they do not know.” ...



... I have certainly seen this in the case of the *Guideways*. For, how can one completely describe the vastness of the universe, the abundant forms of life, the benevolent sustenance of the *yin* and *yang*, the myriad distinctions between things, the admixture of essences bubbling over in conflict, wandering souls and strange divinities who take on form, migrate to mountains and rivers, and adopt beautiful appearances as trees and rocks? Yet,

Coordinating their diverse tendencies,
they resonate as a single echo;
perfecting their transformations,
they blend into one image.

People call some things “strange” yet they know not why they call them so; they call some things “familiar,” yet they know not why either. What is the reason behind this? A thing is not strange in itself; it depends on me to make it strange. ^v



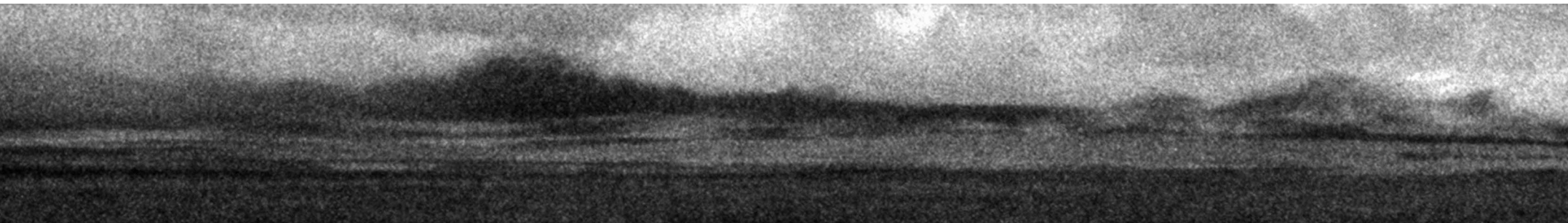






The use of photography as a tool for unmaking the world, for breaching the walls and ways seemingly set in stone, for restoring Primal Chaos, can be described in six short words by the poet Octavio Paz:

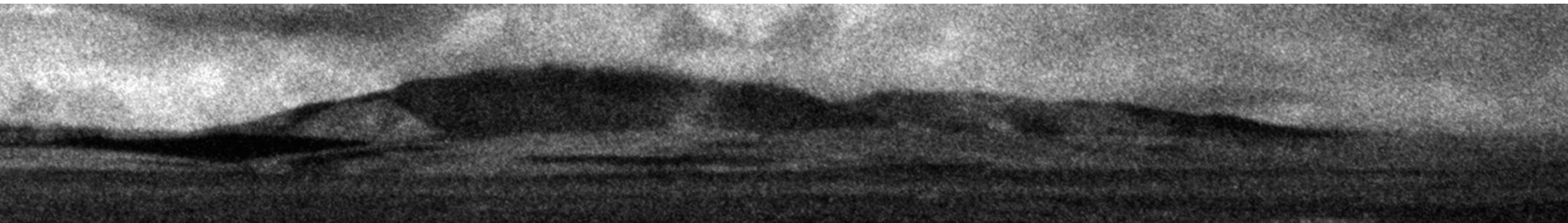
What is not stone
is light



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Endnotes

- i Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent*, University of Georgia Press, May, 2001, p. 164
- ii *A Chinese Bestiary*, edited and translated with commentary by Richard E. Strassberg, University of California Press, 2002, p. 44
- iii Translation from *Chuangtsu : Inner Chapters, a Companion*, by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English
- iv Strassberg, p. 38
- v Strassberg, p.17. For the original Chinese, see 《山海经校注》，巴蜀书社, 1996, p.541

世之覽山海者，皆以其閎誕迂夸、多奇怪、倣儻之言，莫不疑焉。嘗試論之曰：莊生有云，人之所知，莫若其所不知，吾於《山海經》見之矣。夫以宇宙之寥廓，羣生之紛紜，陰陽之煦蒸，萬殊之區分，精氣渾淆，自相瀆薄，游魂靈怪，觸像而構流形於山川、麗狀於木石者，惡可勝言乎。然則，總其所以乖鼓之於一響，成其所以變混之於一象。世之所謂異，未知其所以異，世之所謂不異，未知其所以不異，何者？物不自異，待我而后異，異果在我，非物異也。

世之覽山海經者，皆以其閎誕迂誇，多奇怪倣儻之言，莫不疑焉。嘗試論之曰，莊生有云：「人之所知，莫若其所不知。」吾於山海經見之矣。夫以宇宙之寥廓，羣生之紛●（紜），陰陽之煦蒸，萬殊之區分，精氣渾淆，自相瀆薄，遊魂靈怪，觸象而構，流形於山川，麗狀於木石者，惡可勝言乎？然則總其所以●（乖），鼓之於一響；成其所以變，混之於一象。世之所謂異，未知其所以異；世之所謂不異，未知其所以不異。何者？物不自異，待我而後異，異果在我，非物異也。

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