Chapter 63. “Mystery”

Drinking alone at North Mountain, sent to Wei Six

I never heard of ancient hermits
buying a mountain to hide in.
With Dao, all acts are pure,
why worry if people are around?
Now, as I descend this mountain ridge,
all noise subsides, the earth’s at ease.
A range of peaks unfolds across my doorway,
a trickle cuts through rock, pulling down countless springs.
The folding screen of cliffs is lost in clouds,
their caverns unfathomably deep.
At dawn and dusk the river shines its true colors,
the woodland air draws tight with evening chill.
That’s the moment to pick the Red Persimmon
and cultivate the Mysterious Feminine.
I sit with precious texts and the moon,
brush the frost off my zither.
In the darkness I pour wine
and watch the shadows and empty the cup again.
I miss you, out roaming the world’s dusty wind,
why don’t you ever laugh at yourself?

北山獨酌寄韋六

巢父將許由，未聞買山隱
道存跡自高，何憚去人近
紛吾下茲嶺，地閑喧亦泯
門横群岫開，水鑿眾泉引
屏高而在雲，竇深莫能准
川光晝昏凝，林氣夕淒緊
于焉摘朱果，兼得養玄牝
坐月觀寶書，拂霜弄瑤軫
No one can tell us anything about Wei Six. (His number indicates that he’s sixth in the birth order of his generation of male cousins within his family lineage.) So we imagine something like this, that he is a kind of uptight friend of Li Bo who wants to do a mountain retreat but never quite gets there, and he thinks he ought to purchase the right property first, with the correct qualities, and only then will he be able to get away from it all.

Li Bo’s poem subsumes two background stories. The first:

The Sage-King Yao invited Xu You to administer all Nine Provinces of his kingdom. Xu You was unwilling to hear of it, [so he fled to the mountains], where he used to wash out his ears in the waters of Ying River. One day his friend Chao Fu came by, leading a calf that needed water. He saw Xu You washing out his ears and asked him why. Xu You replied, “Yao invited me to administer the Nine Provinces, and I hate the sound of it. That’s why I wash my ears.”

Chao Fu replied, “You live among high cliffs and deep valleys. Human speech and human ways can’t penetrate here. Who can even see you? But in your mind you still go out floating and roaming, seeking to hear of name and fame. You’re polluting my calf’s mouth!” So he led his calf upstream to give it water there.

The second story comes from the first:

Zhi Daolin wanted to buy the monk Zhu Fashen a mountain. Zhu Fashen replied, “I never heard of Chao Fu and Xu You buying a mountain to do retreat!”

But Li Bo changes this up. “Where there’s Dao, all activities are pure,” he says. Roaming this world, only divinity. So you don’t need a mountain, but you also don’t need solitude, famelessness,
non-pollution, red persimmons, anything. And Li Bo himself doesn’t even need to bother laughing at his friend. Perhaps he addresses the last line of the poem to Li Bo, “I demand that you sneer at yourself!”

This is a sweet poem. And we could stop right here, were it not for the Mysterious Female. The poem says:

That’s the moment to pick the Red Persimmon and nourish the Mysterious Female.

于焉摘朱果, 兼得養玄牝

I’ll let Laozi take care of this for us. In chapter 1 of the Daodejing he speaks of desire and desirelessness, and then adds:

Together I call them Mystery. More Mysterious than Mystery, the gateway to all marvel. 569

同謂之玄。玄之又玄, 衆妙之門。

And then he adds in chapter 6:

The deity of the valley does not die. She is called the Mysterious Female. The gateway of the Mysterious Female is called the root of Heaven and Earth. Like the soft fabric of everything. Use it and it never wears out.

谷神不死, 是謂玄牝。玄牝之門, 是謂天地根。綿綿若存, 用之不勤。

The valley, that is, the vagina. (The is the interpretation of the Xiāng’ěr 想爾 commentary to Laozi.) The full-on feminine. From her gateway all Heaven and Earth emerge, that is, all of appearance and non-appearance. Primordially gendered — and indeed, in ordinary usage this Female (pin 牝) is always tied to her consort (mu 牡).
The sublime Isabelle Robinet goes further, telling us that the Mysterious Female "is a passageway, an entrance situated at the junction of Non-being and Being; it allows Yin and Yang to communicate with each other, and is the place where Yang opens and Yin closes." This is not a unidirectional birth canal but an intermediary moment. And thus itself in-nate, that is, unborn.

But sometimes the Mysterious Female is just the Dao. Again, Robinet: "like the Center itself, it has no shape, no direction, and no fixed position."

Indeed mysterious. It is dual, it is singular, it is unmodified. In this logic, we don’t get to transcend duality. Nor even sublate it. We’re stuck with the shebang — there’s no higher or lower view. If you set the yin–yang circle spinning, you can’t tell how many of anything there are:

![The yin–yang circle](image)

Li Bo tells us that he will cultivate the Mysterious Female. If we follow the traditions of Daoist cultivation, this means he will engage particular hygienic practices of diet, pharmacology, sexual yoga, and the breath control techniques we now know as Qi-gong 氣功. Here the Red Persimmon would represent a parallel, substance-based approach, wherein that fruit is the cinnabar used in the elixir of transcendence.

But Li Bo is doing something more mysterious. He is writing a poem.

Mystery. The first thing she asks us to do is to shut up already, and see what’s always already here.

Poetry is just the luminous...
silence that won’t shut up. If you look inside that deep valley of poetry’s mouth, you’ll hear words clambering, rushing to effect the appearancing of Ten Thousand Things. In that diaphanous clamor, Li Bo is only an action verb. He won’t stand still long enough to be an immortal, even a banished immortal.577