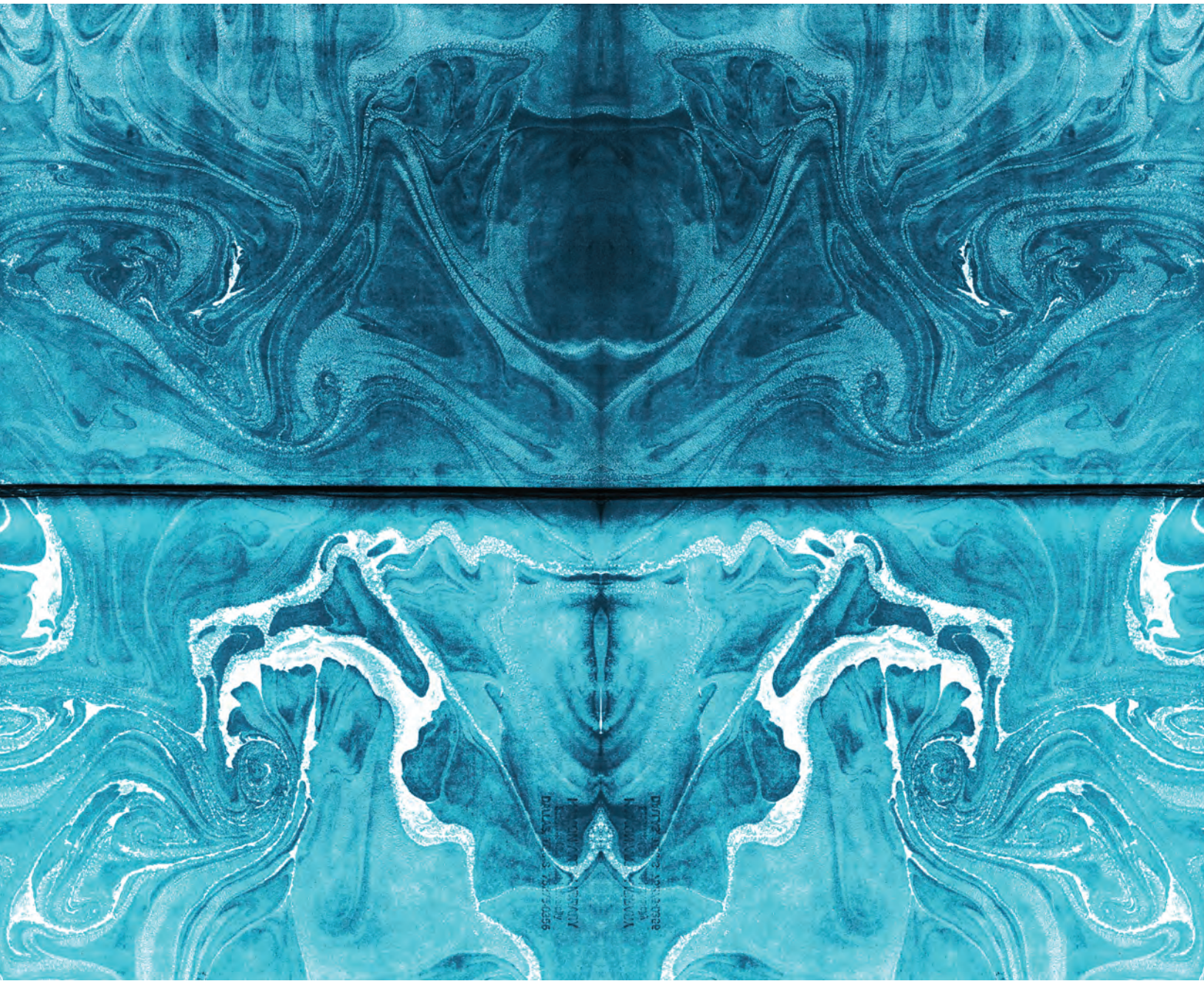
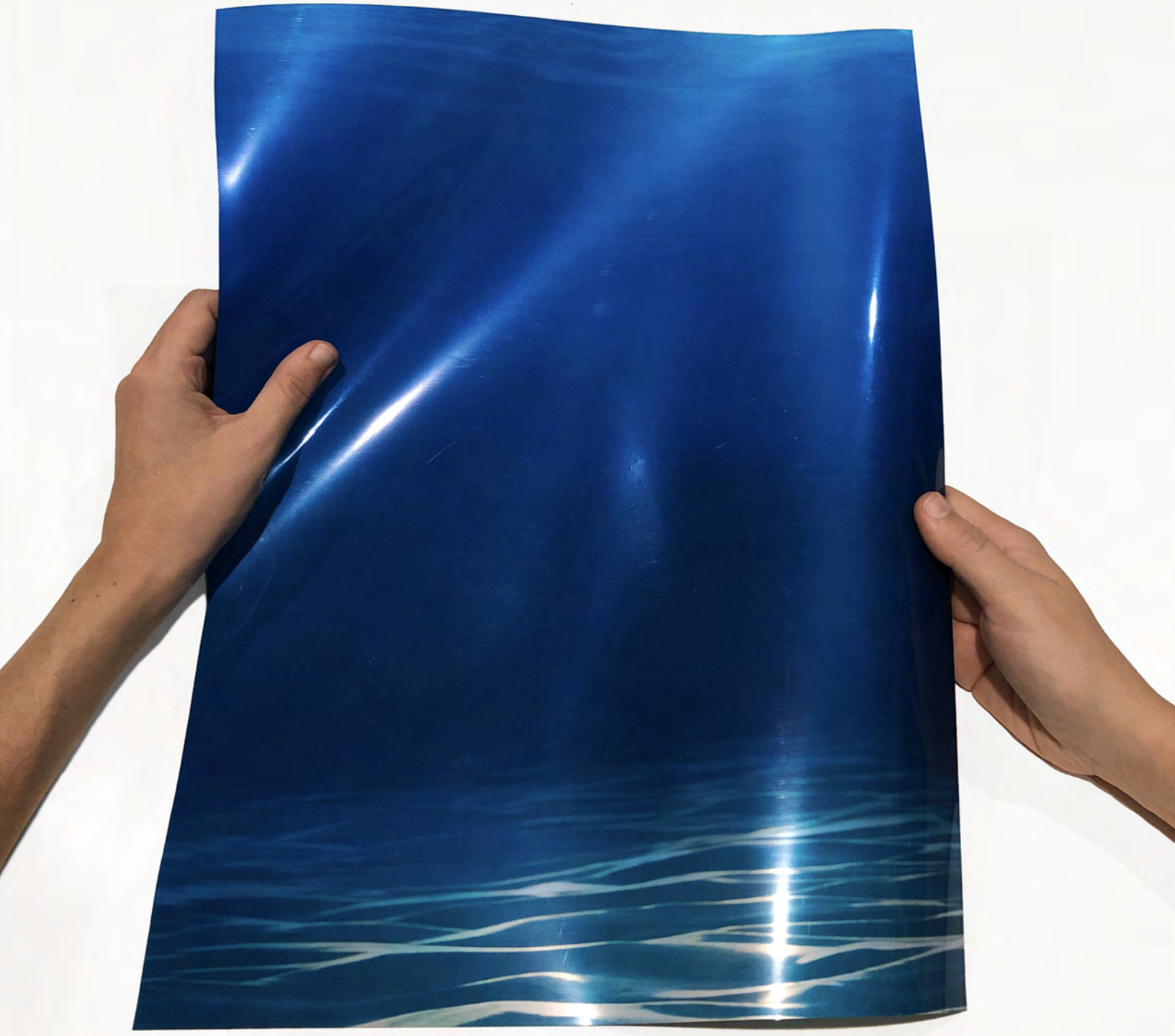
Study Notes for *Sounding*



Allyson Packer



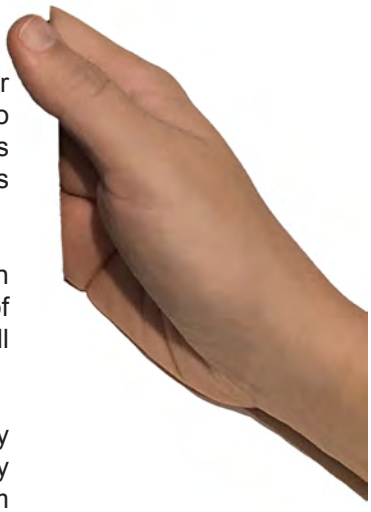
1. I spend a lot of time thinking about Lake Baikal. It is the largest lake in the world, if you're measuring by volume. It is also one of the clearest. It's a rift lake—a place where there's a geological rift between two land masses that deepens and moves, filling with water. The bottom half of Lake Baikal is so filled with sediment that it seems to me we don't truly know the bottom. We can sense it, of course, using sonar, but we don't know it. We haven't been there.

a. It's 5,000 feet deep and I can picture the magnitude of that.

i. I used to live in a city that was 5,000 feet in elevation. On the eastern edge of the city, ever-present, there was a dramatic mountain range. That city and those mountains were in the desert, but they weren't always.

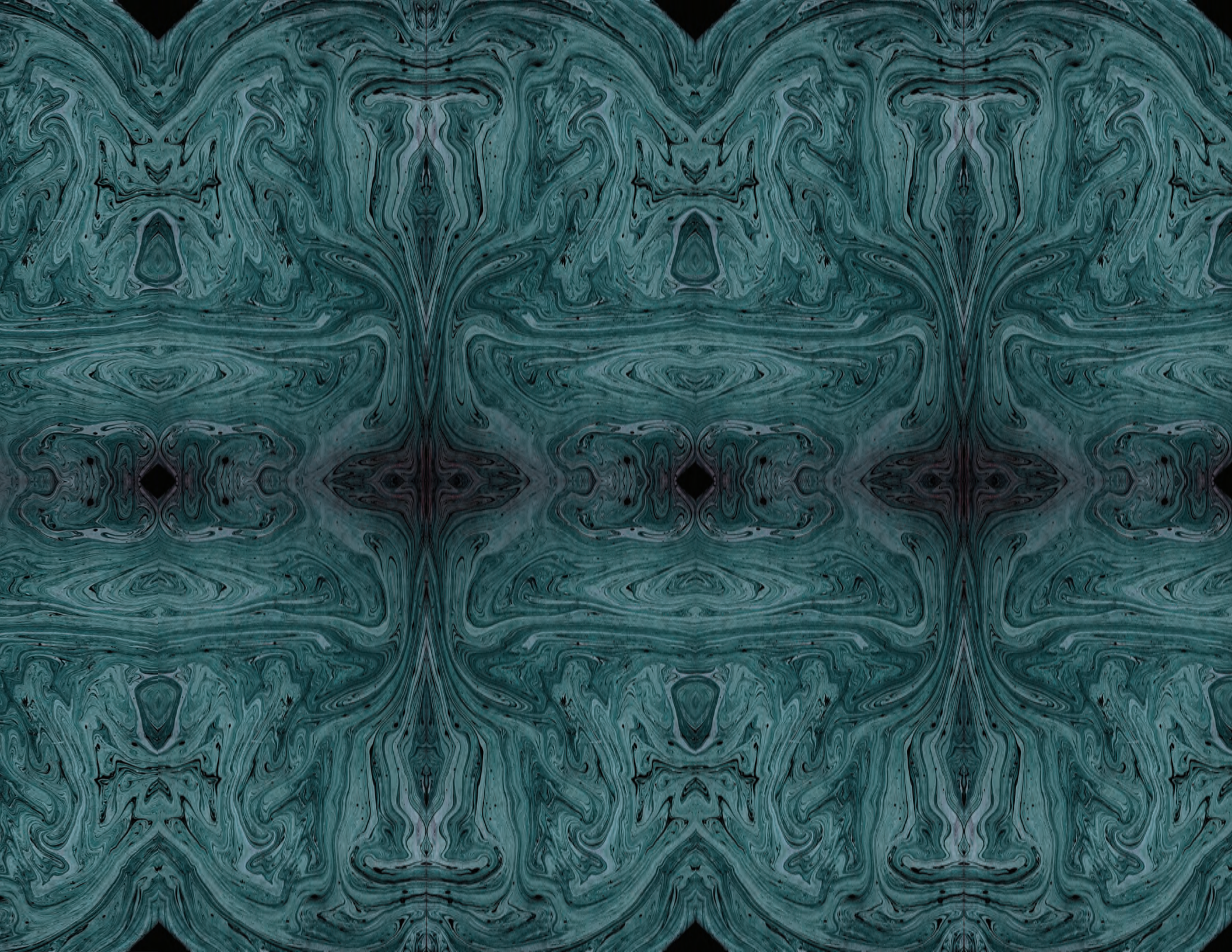
1. At one time they were at the bottom of an ocean. I would think about this sometimes, the entire landscape filled with water. I would wonder if the mountains would seem diminutive when confronted with the volume of an ocean.

ii. At their highest point, the mountains were a little over 10,000 feet. It became for me, as it does for everyone who lives there, a primary device for orientation. You always know which direction you're facing, because you can always see where you are in relation to the mountains.



b. And now I don't live there anymore, but the mountains have again become an orientation device for me as I try to imagine the bottom of a cold lake on a continent that I've never been to. I know very well what it feels like to stand at the bottom of 5,000 feet.

2. There are these seals in Lake Baikal. Small and white. It's unusual, nearly unheard of (except for this instance), that this kind of animal would live in a body of fresh water. And they're impossible to differentiate, genetically speaking, from the seals that live in salt water at the same latitude. But there they are in the landlocked lake and no one knows how they traveled so many thousands of miles to get there. It's a sweet little mystery and I like it, because I like mysteries. I can't get enough of them, really. I like stories about missing persons or mysterious sounds that come from deep space. It's one of my most base qualities, I think. I don't really try to advertise it to anyone, but if a person gets to know me well enough, they find out anyway. I like to be able to hold on to something that is unholdable, to rest my head on some sort of quantifiable uncertainty. I find it hopeful, I suppose. To think that there is some sort of answer and that our faculties are inadequate to discover it. I like the feeling of feeling small. Standing next to those 10,000-foot mountains and burying myself deep in the stacks.



1. Things that are both quantified and unknown.

a. Everything, if you think about it. To know about something, to have even thought about it for the very first time, is to quantify it.

b. It's how I think of Lake Baikal.

i. I have spent a lot of time looking at satellite imagery of it. You can see the borders and the surface area, its shape. I could reproduce that.

ii. But I can't quite imagine its volume. I have some idea of what the depth feels like, but what the combination of these things contains is unknowable to me. It's also how I think, in the inverse, of my own body. The thing that might be more familiar to me than anything else, the thing I can't escape from, also does things, conceals things, that I don't know of. The thought that I carry around intestines inside me is nearly inconceivable. It's alienating almost, the very, very complicated nature of this object, the tiny organisms that live in it and the mysteries of their bodies.

1. I want to get outside myself, to alienate myself from my own body. It's why I like optical illusions, why I like to feel small in the presence of something impossibly large, and why I like psychedelic music. And nothing is more psychedelic than going to outerspace in your mind and then bringing youself back into the mysteries located deep in your own body. In the bodies of microorganisms that live in your body. For your brain to try and conceive of itself.

c. There was a tornado in Dallas a couple of months ago. It cut right across I-35, and I drive through its path every time I go down to visit the library. You can see clearly where it was, it tore the walls off the buildings on either side of the highway. A hotel on one side and a warehouse on the other. There's nothing covering up where the walls have been torn away, so the you can see the inside of rooms and the loose wires blow in the wind. This depth that I didn't even know was there has been revealed.

i. I stop one day on the way down to take a picture. To try and figure out what seems important about revealing depth. When I get close to one of the buildings where the wall has been torn off, I look inside and I see something moving on the floor. I walk towards it and I realize that the entire floor is covered in a pool of rain water and it's reflecting a ceiling fan hanging above it that's blowing in the wind. I find the whole thing a bit shocking.

1. I'm drawn to this because it's horrifying and it's horrifying because it's like seeing a wound. I can barely stand it.

a….*and yet this same body, which is so visible, is also withdrawn, captured by a kind of invisibility from which I can never detach it. This skull, the back of my skull, I can feel it, right there, with my fingers. But see it? Never.*


Screenshot

1. When I lived in the desert, I took a trip once to caverns a few hours away. They are like the Grand Canyon of caverns. But it's different because they're underground. They're more of a mystery that way. To get to them you have to drive for a few hours through a rather uninspiring landscape. Dry patches of grass, rocks, a few cattle, occasional methane flares that are the only indication that you should be thinking about what's beneath you. They occur in greater density as you approach the caverns. I took this trip with my father when he was visiting me. The car ride took forever, the landscape becoming more desolate and the methane flares becoming more intense the further we got from home. And when we got there, when we walked up to the mouth of the caverns, it was relatively small and uneventful. I had always pictured it as something you enter in the side of a mountain, but it actually went straight down.

a. The start was slow and the first chamber stank of bat guano, a smell that reminds you that a bat is just another rodent. But then. The path becomes steeper and you descend through the chambers more and more rapidly.

i. You realize the drugs have set in and you're tripping. You're very deep into something that exists on the other side, below, the level of your normal operations.

1. There are vast cathedrals underground, and even more magnificent cathedrals under these. And you are getting to peek at something, to get inside of something, that you shouldn't be able to perceive.

a. And you let these things swallow you up for a while, don't think of where you are in relation to the surface.

i. They're like two halves of something floating next to each other, or above and below, but their landmarks have no bearing on one another. When you are deep in one world, you can't navigate the mysteries of another.

b. But there is a channel, these chambers, that allow you to pass back and forth between them.

2. And when you exit, because you must eventually, it feels stark to see the open landscape.

ii. You know the caverns are still down there, an enormous blue-black bubble beneath the surface, but whatever they are feels unnavigable from your standpoint now. You know them, have known them, but you cannot perceive them, their depth, from where you stand on the crust.


SMU Only
for SMU students, faculty & staff
please save your work often & logout when finished
3:38
Thursday, 16 July
HP LE1901w

The image on the lock screen for this computer is a photo of Whararikiki Beach in New Zealand. It's a pleasant image to look at on a desktop computer because it creates an illusion of depth: Looking out through the natural window of the cave, you see islands in the distance and it feels almost as if you are looking at an actual space and not at a screen.

This photo is the standard lock screen image for all devices equipped with a Microsoft Windows 10 operating system. At present this operating system is on over 200 million devices, including this one.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Screen Sho...M copy.jpg


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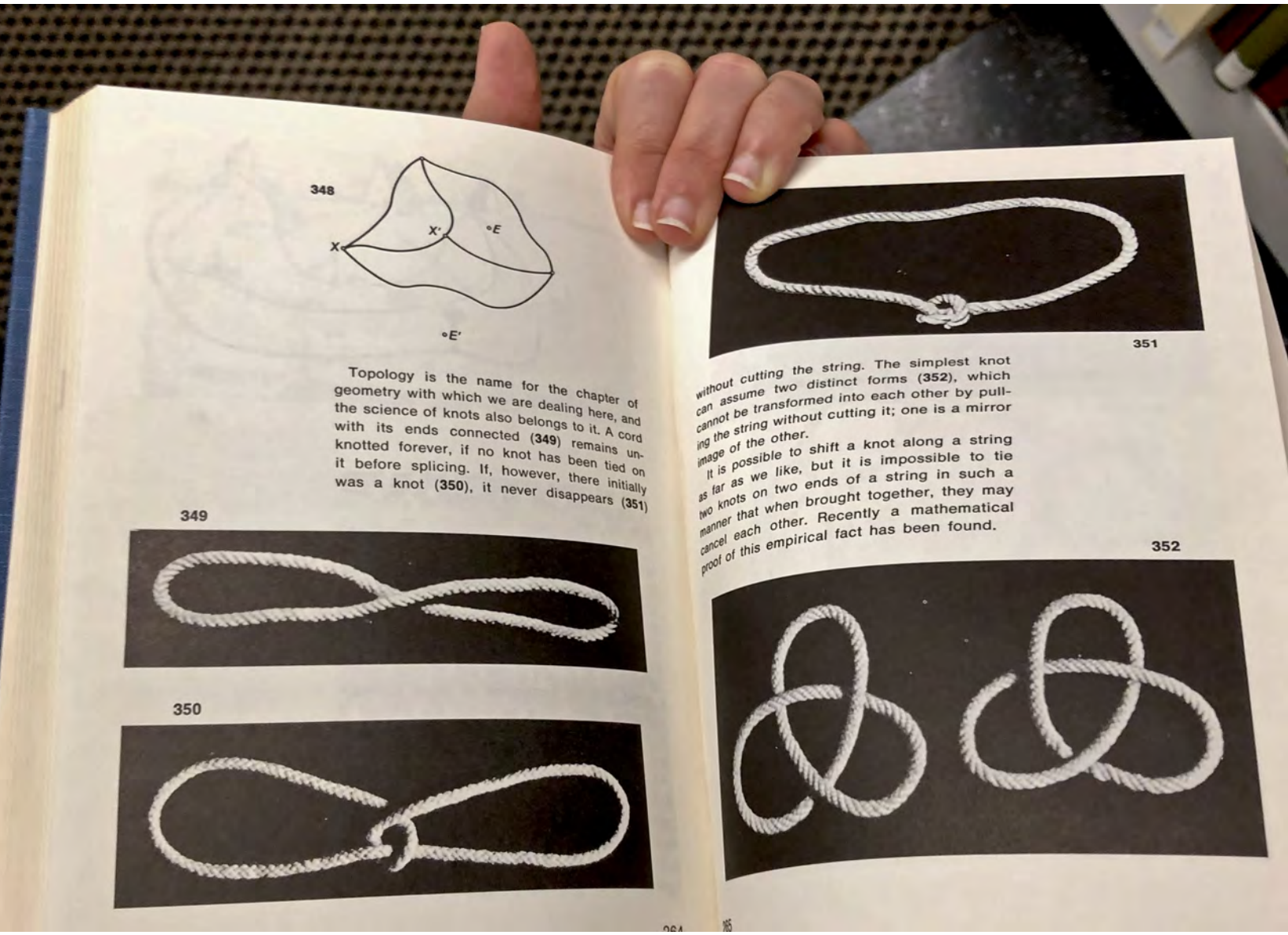
1. A loop is infinite. Or is it finite because it's closed? I suppose it depends on how you think about it. Are you traveling along the loop or are you looking at it from the outside?

    a. In the basement of Hamon Library there is a book by Douglas Hofstadter in which he develops a concept called the *strange loop*. A strange loop is something that creates itself. Think of a mobius strip, or M.C. Escher's drawings of hands drawing themselves. Think of holding two mirrors up to face each other.

        i. Think of a paradox.

            1. Don't think of a paradox.

b. On the shelf just below that book is a book with these images:



c. And on that shelf, I found another book with this stuck in it as a book marker:

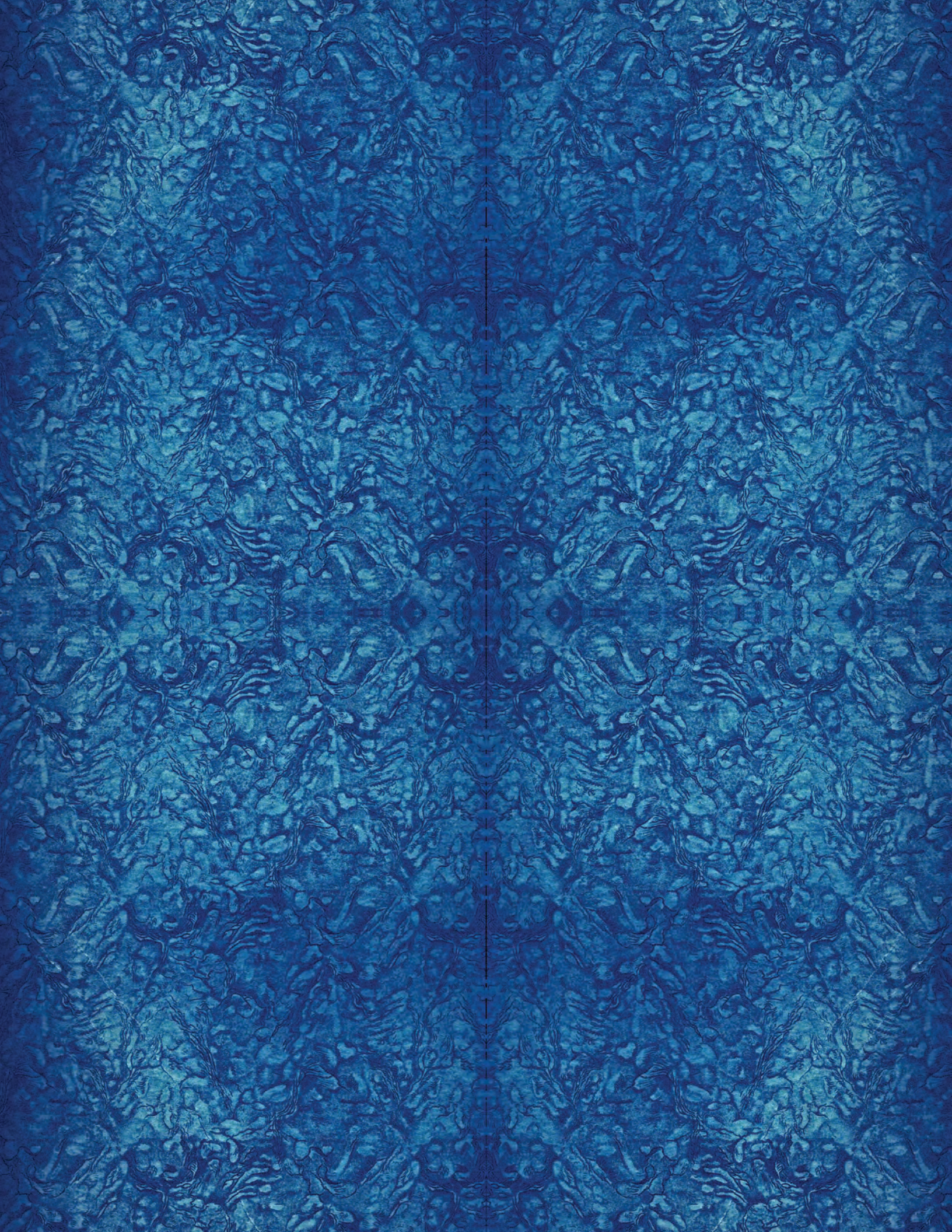
Antique Company Mall
213 E Virginia
McKinney, TX 75069
(972) 548-2729

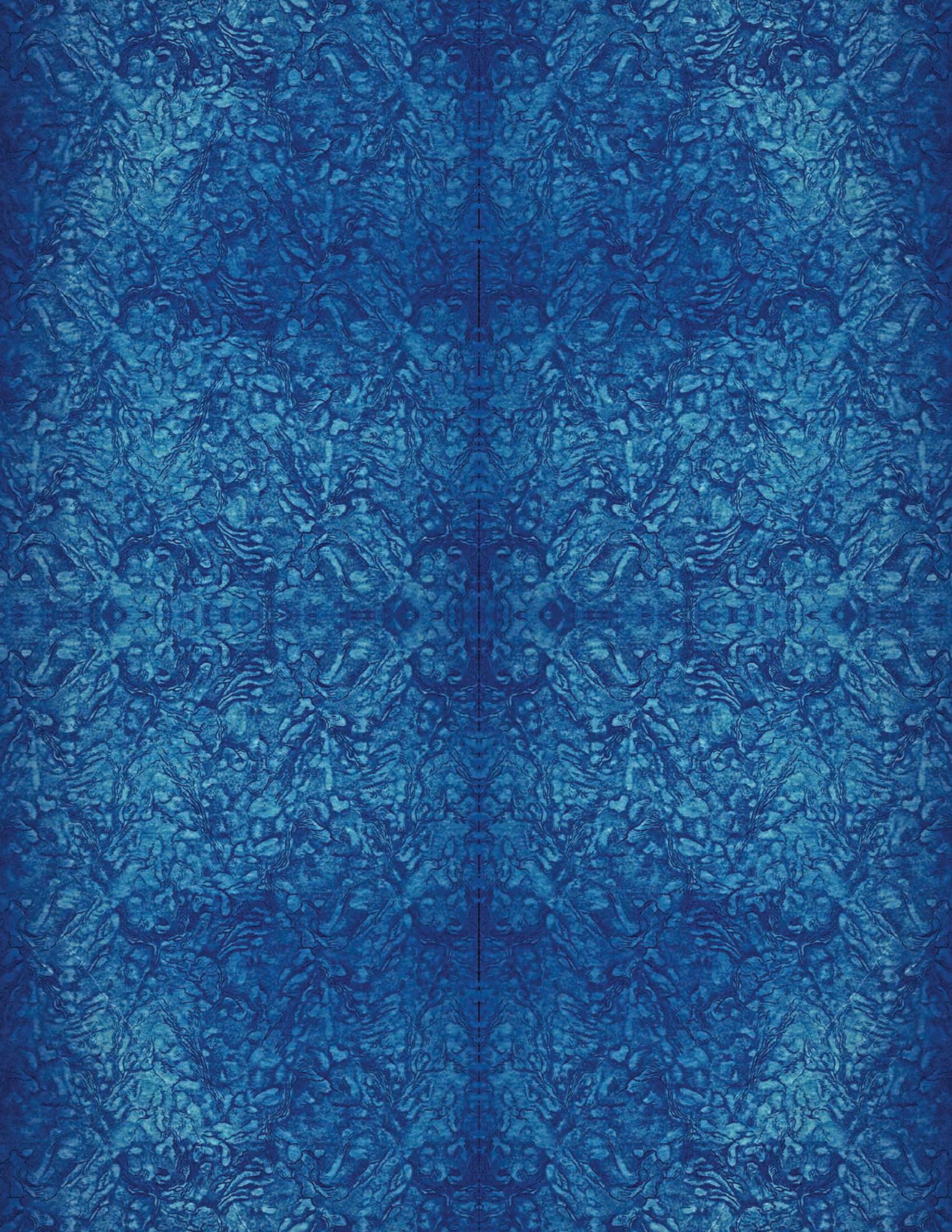
B 08/31/97 16:56:27 63093
CHECK

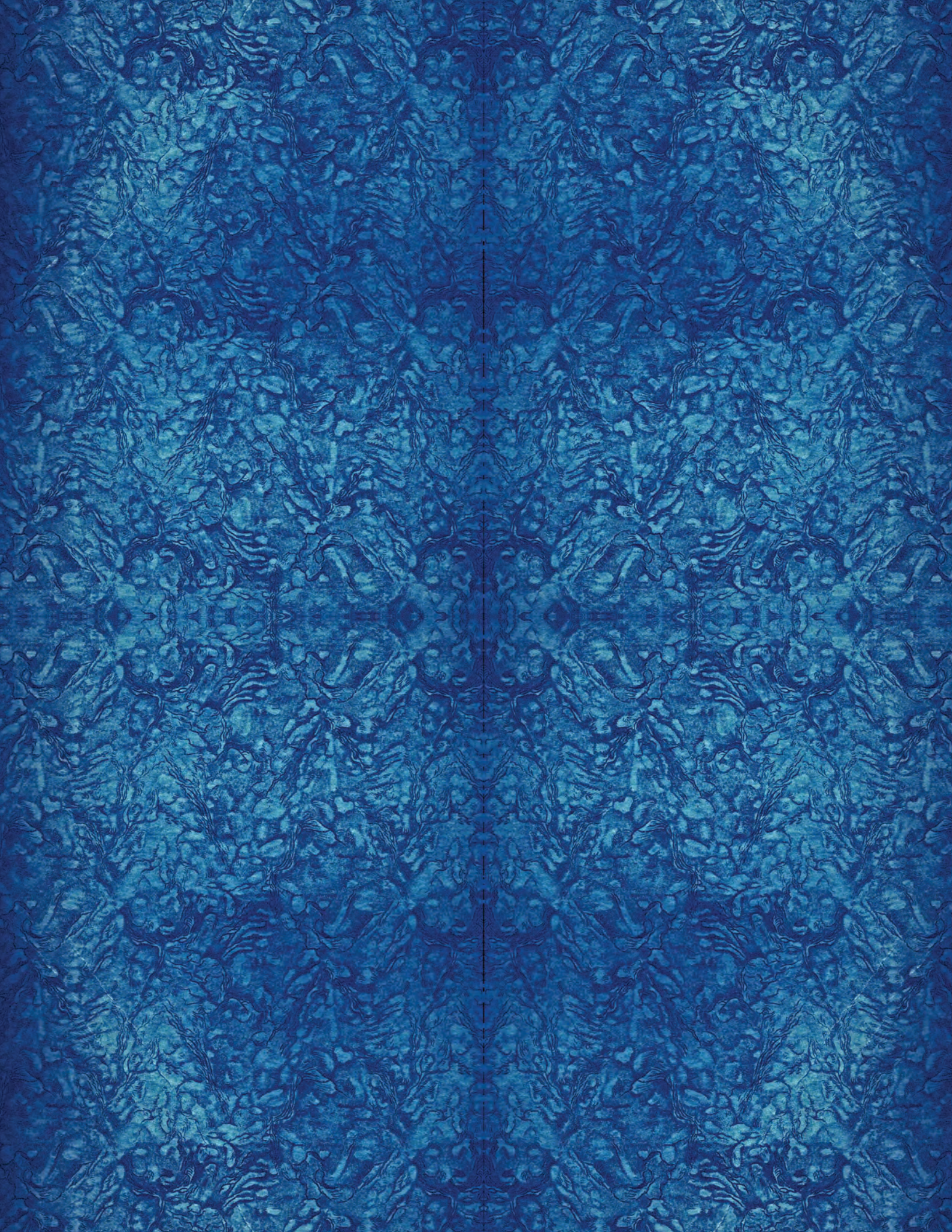
Description	Qnty	Ext Price
025 025 STEREO CARDS@010	12	53.46
Total$		53.46
Sales Tax$		4.41
All Sales Final	Total$	57.87

SORRY ALL SALES FINAL
NO REFUNDS OR EXCHANGES

d. And it makes perfect sense that these books are near each other. I like very much the idea of organizing a collection of library books. One set of knowledge leads you to another. I wonder if the books at the very end of this library, the books on the top floor, loop back down again to the books in the basement?







1. Sometimes it feels like buildings have these fundamental shapes that are trying to emerge out of the very solid materials they're built from.

a. In *The Libarary of Babel,* Jorge Luis Borges describes a fictional infinite library. At the beginning of the story, he tells you that this library is a stand-in for the universe.

i. His universe-al library is made up of hexagons.

1. Imagine the shape of a hexagon.

a. Now imagine many, many hexagons.

i. Now imagine all these hexagons pushed up against one another so that they fit together forming larger and larger hexagons out of the component parts, until they extend out over a horizon.

1. And they are stacked on top of each other too.

a. So maybe there is no horizon, just things that extend beyond what your eyes can perceive.

i. *When I am dead, compassionate hands will throw me over the railing; my tomb will be the unfathomable air, my body will sink for ages, and will decay and dissolve in the wind engendered by my fall, which shall be infinite. I declare that the Library is endless.*

b. When I was in graduate school, I lived in Chicago. I would often visit the Harold Washington Library, the large central library downtown. It was just a few blocks from where I went to school. The whole thing is this big Po-Mo mess: Greek revival, Mannerism, and Beaux-Arts references, with brick, several kinds of marble, terrazzo, copper, brass, tile, all shoved up against each other, and these outsized gargoyle things on the exterior of the building. It's nine stories high and the architects designed it in this funny didactic way with the popular lending library at the bottom, and then sections for business, science, technology, government, social science, history, literature, and the arts in ascending order up to the eighth floor. On the very top floor is a reading room they call the "Winter Garden," this glass-enclosed court with marble floors, Greek-style pediments around the windows, and trees growing out of these huge marble containers.

i. The whole thing makes you feel like you're in a Piranesi etching

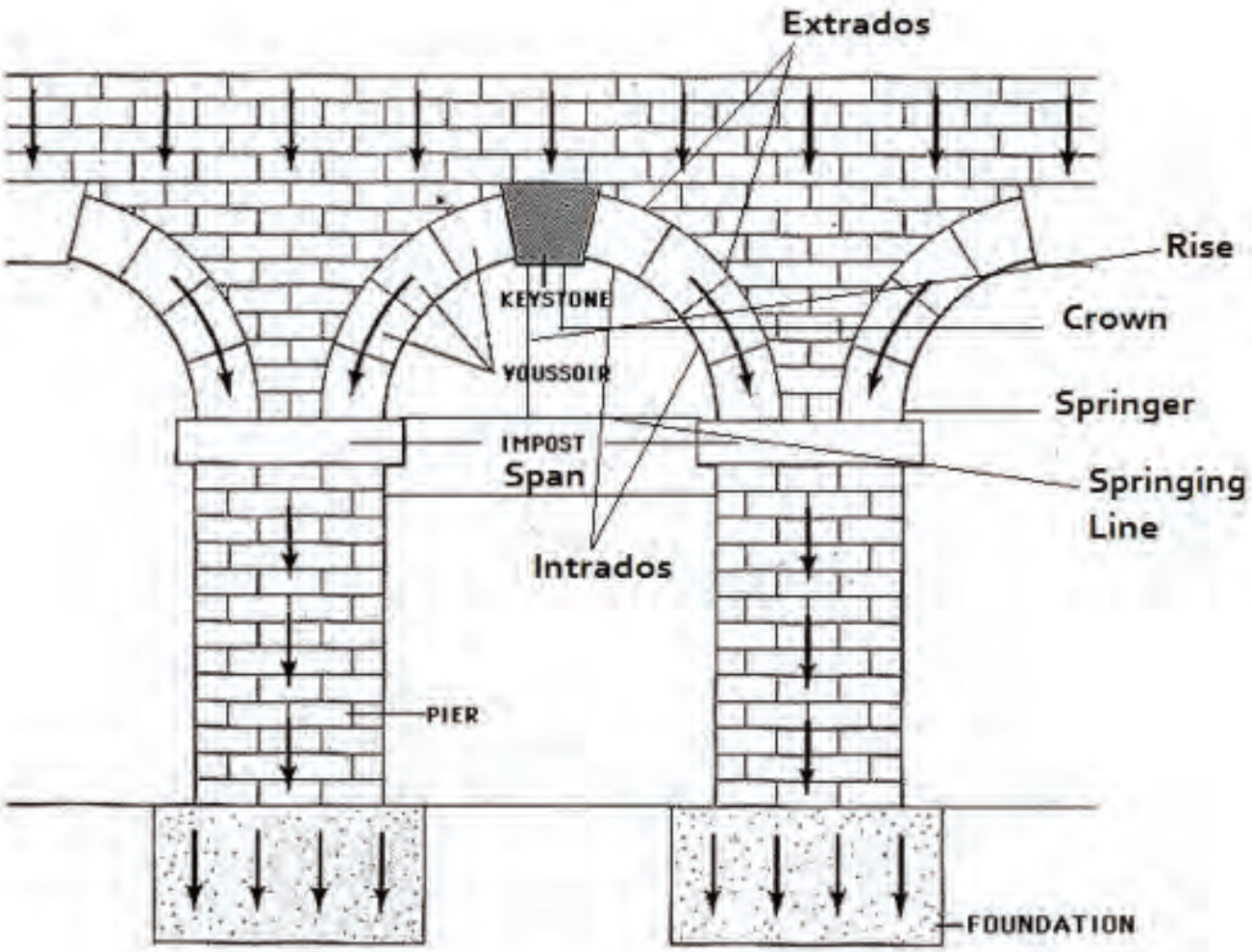
c. I hated how blatantly the architect was forcing me to embody his values every time I walked in that building, but there was something magic about the way it made me move. I think it was the escalators. You have to take these zig-zagging escalators to move between floors in that building, and when I stood stationary on them, making sure to keep my head still, I could just feel myself rising from one floor to the next. Each floor in its marble and brass, would slowly appear in front of me as my body ascended. It felt sublime.

i. I had this class that I didn't like. The professor made us read Greenberg and would ask me where the party was on Saturday night. It was like the last 40 years hadn't happened for him.

1. And so when it was my turn to have my work critiqued in that class, I made everyone walk over to the Harold Washington Library to look at the marble and ride the escalators with their heads perfectly still and read this thing I had written about having to physically participate in the architect's values.

a. I thought forcing that professor to participate in the architect's vision, which I was leveraging into my own vision, would be satisfying. And it was, but he also liked the piece, which I found more infuriating.

ii. What shape is ascension?

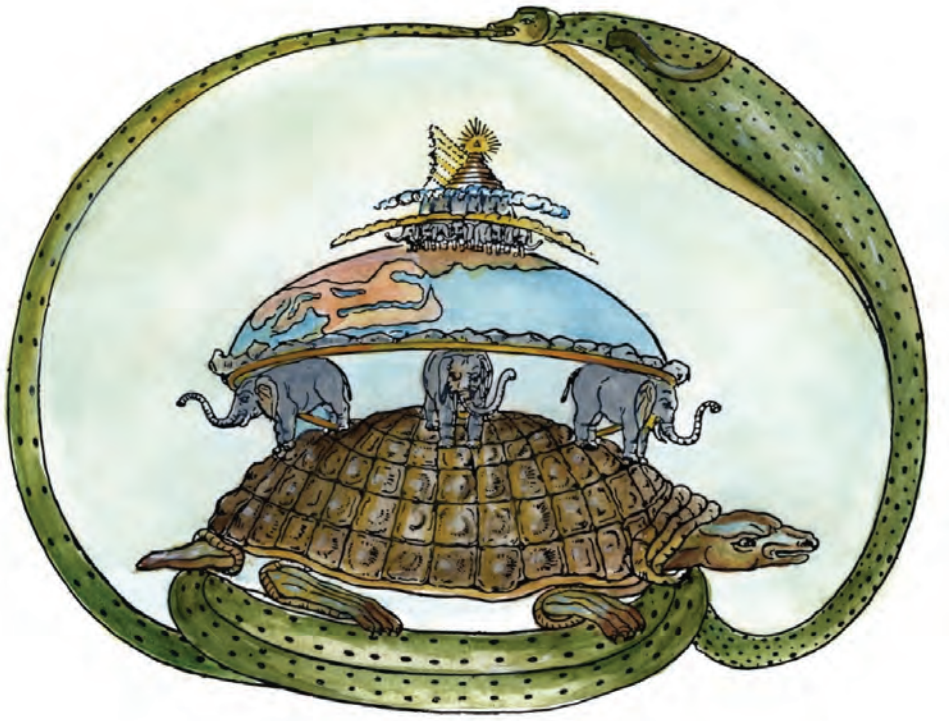


Parts Of Arch

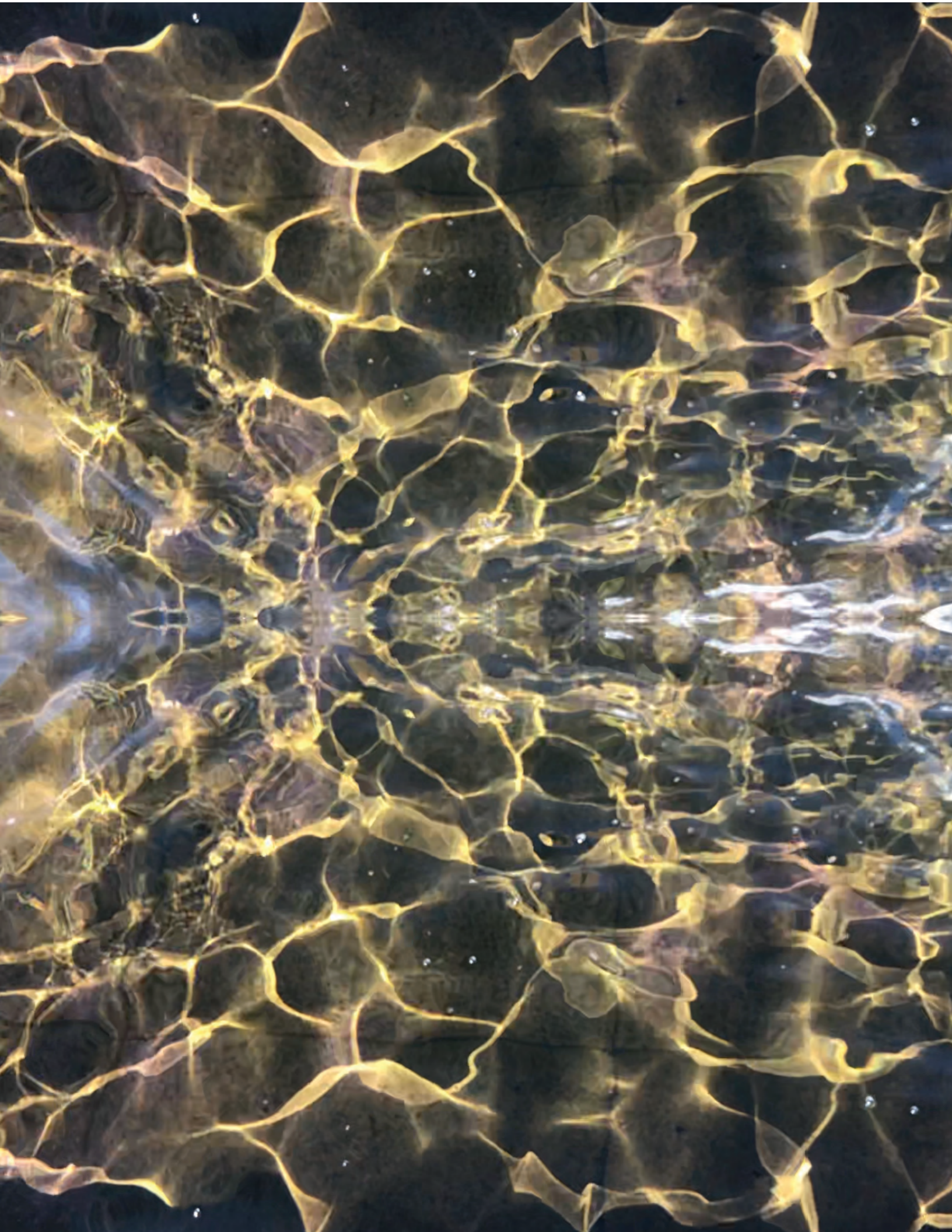
d. In 1972 Robert Smithson gave a talk at the University of Utah in which he spent his entire time describing Hotel Palenque, a ramshackle hotel he stayed in while visiting the town of Palenque in Mexico.

i. He began the talk by telling his audience that Palenque was once called “the city of the snake.” This is the set-up for him to begin to characterize the hotel as a kind of architectural ouroboros.

1. *It’s hard to tell the difference between a motel and a hotel when you come to a structure like this. They seem to intertwine with each other, and lose each other, and cancel each other out, so that there is no possibility of knowing where you are.*



1. So is this library a loop or is it a deep, deep lake?



b. Borges resolved this issue by making his library periodic. So large that no one could prove its periodic structure, but periodic all the same.

c. I begin spending a lot of time thinking about waves. I find out that the waves we see at the beach have often travelled thousands of miles from the center of the ocean. This is quantifiable, but I can't perceive it. The *Functionally Infinite* is a new category I'm defining for myself.

i. I speak with a friend of mine who studies fluid dynamics. I'm trying to describe this show to him. He tells me a story about when he was a student and MIT and was studying what happens when a wave traveling through the ocean hits an obstacle underwater.

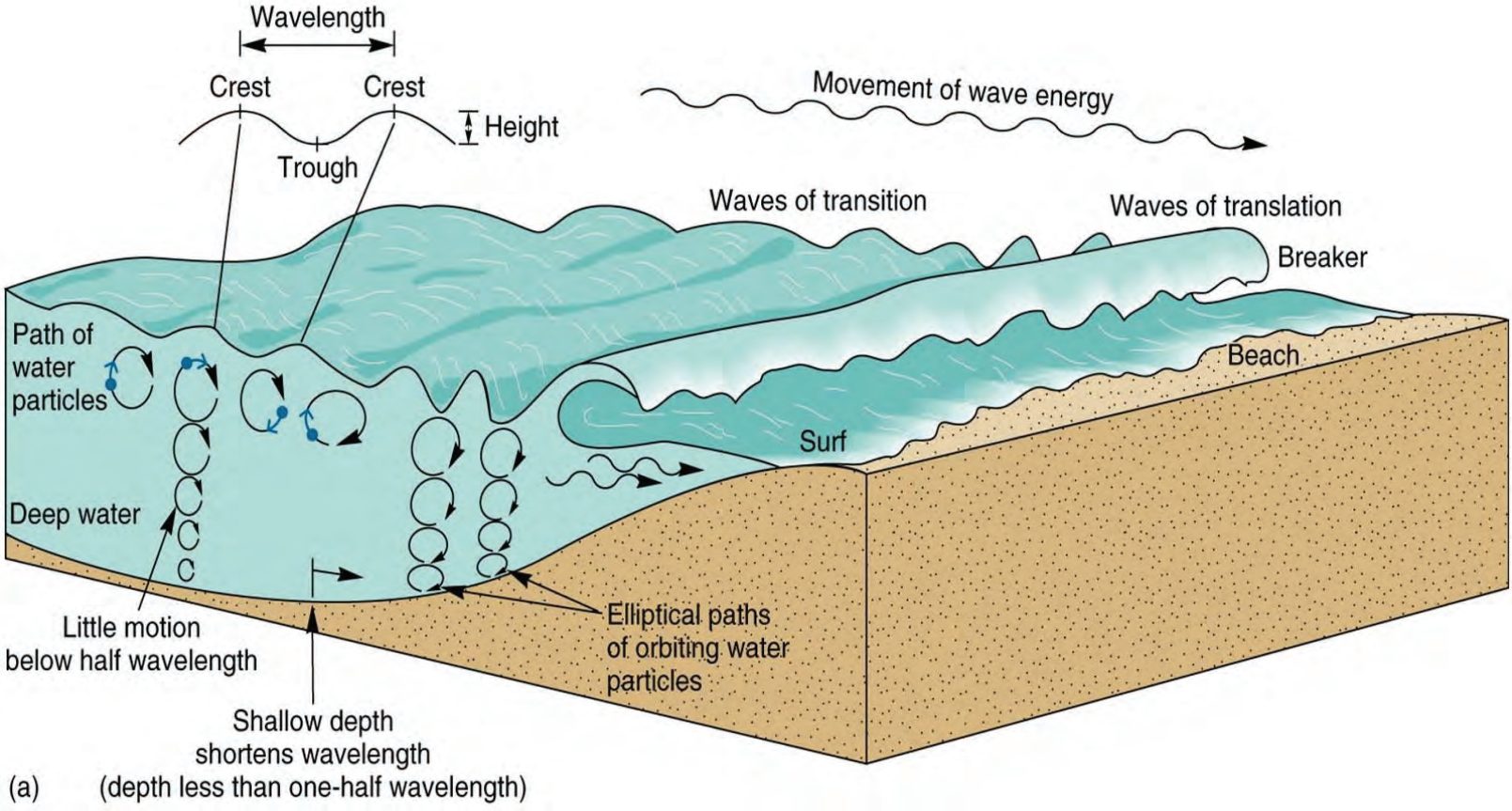
1. The wave breaks into an enormous number of smaller waves.

a. The number of these smaller component waves is knowable (they have an equation for it), but it is so large that it's practically impossible to calculate.

i. The computers he used at MIT were incapable of even processing the calculation, so ultimately he just had this equation and the knowledge that this countable number of little waves existed, but he'll never know what they were.

2. This campus has a real thing for fountains. I can think of six off the top of my head. I'm sure there's more. The one just outside the library is pleasantly unremarkable. It's small and burbley, and most of the time there are leaves floating in it.

a. I was looking at it the other day, just watching it recirculate its water, and I thought about how much it is and isn't like the ocean.


Wavelength
Crest
Crest
Height
Trough
Movement of wave energy
Waves of transition
Waves of translation
Breaker
Path of water particles
Beach
Surf
Deep water
Little motion below half wavelength
Elliptical paths of orbiting water particles
Shallow depth shortens wavelength (depth less than one-half wavelength)

(a)

1. When you’re trying to explain the concept of the sublime to someone, you show them images of some enormous singular thing.

b. You are made to feel small and I like that feeling.

i. I wonder about the possibilities of exchanging multitude for magnitude and achieving the same results.

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Working list for the *Library Library* 12/19

(A collection of books that reference *The Library of Babel*)

Il Nome Della Rosa by Umberto Eco

"The Net of Babel" Interzone #92, February 1995 ***(This is a short story in a sci-fi magazine… I had trouble locating a copy of the magazine for purchase, but I'll keep trying)***

Theory of Nothing by Russel Standish

Temple of a Thousand Doors from The Neverending Story by Michael Ende

Discworld series by Terry Pratchett

The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges' Library of Babel by William Goldbloom Bloch

City at the End of Time by Greg Bear

A Short Stay in Hell by Steven L. Peck

The Shadow of the Torturer by Gene Wolfe

Quiddites by W. V. Quine

Database Design for Smarties: Using UML for Data Modeling (The Morgan Kaufmann Series in Data Management Systems) By Robert J. Muller

Atomic Light (Shadow Optics) by Akira Mizuta Lippit

Recoding World Literature: Libraries, Print Culture, and Germany's Pact with Books by BV Mani

The imaginary library: an essay on literature and society by AB Kernan

All images and text artist's own unless otherwise noted:

Page 7: "Iran Cargo Plane Crashes Near Residential Neighborhood." *Asharq Al-Awsat,* January 14, 2019, https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1545276/iran-cargo-plane-crashes-near-residential-neighborhood

Page 17: Schultink, Jan. "How to Create an Infinity Shape in PowerPoint." *Slide Magic,* February 6, 2018, https://blog.slidemagic.com/blog/2018/2/6/infinity-symbol-powerpoint

Page 25 (italicized words): "The Library of Babel." *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, by Jorge Luis Borges et al., New Directions, 2007.

Page 26 (image): "Winter Garden Atrium in the Harold Washington Library." *Gee-Em,* October 16, 2012, https://gee-em.com/post/33722858917/winter-garden-atrium-in-the-harold-washington

Page 29: "Parts of Arch." *Daily Civil,* 2020, https://dailycivil.com/components-arch-parts-arch/arch11/

Page 30: "Silicon Medial Arch Insole." *IndiaMART*, 1996-2020, https://www.indiamart.com/proddetail/medial-arch-insole-21436920255.html

Page 31 (italicized words): Smithson, Robert. "Hotel Palenque." Lecture at The University of Utah, January 24, 1972, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Page 31 (image): Bekhrad, Joobin. "The Ancient Symbol That Spanned Millenia." *BBC.com,* December 4, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20171204-the-ancient-symbol-that-spanned-millennia

Page 35: Mesa, Eric. "Recursion." *Flickr*, September 9, 2005, https://www.flickr.com/photos/ericsbinary-world/43905565

Page 36: "Coastal Diagram—Wave Action on Coasts." *3D Geography*, 2013-2019, https://www.3dgeography.co.uk/coast-diagram

Page 37: Turner, J.M.W. *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps.* 1812. Tate Gallery, London. *John D'Agostino's The Treachery of Images*. https://treacherousimage.com/blog/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/snow-storm-copy-isplay_image.php_4.jpg. Accessed January 16, 2020.

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Page 38 (right): Turner, J.M.W. *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*. 1812. Tate Gallery, London. *Institut de Mathématiques de Bordeaux.* https://www.math.u-bordeaux.fr/~imortaza/hannibal.jpg. Accessed January 16, 2020.