

6 STONES TO GET LOST WITH

1. THE UNITED NATIONS MEDITATION STONE

Conspiracy theorists, glimpsing the dark side of the New World Order, call it “Satan’s Altar.” But Dag Hammarskjöld—Secretary-General from 1953 until that unresolved Congo plane crash eight years later—envisioned stillness in the eye of the storm, a space of peace to turn the mind inward. Enter via the Visitors’ Entrance, turn right at Information, step into the Meditation Room. There, lit by a single spotlight, stands a six-and-a-half-ton block of iron ore. “The iron ore has the weight and solidity of the everlasting,” said Hammarskjöld. “How are we to use it?”

2. THE BLACK STONE

One way to use stone can be glimpsed in the ritual of the hajj. There is the Kaaba, the immense granite cuboid, the first house of worship toward which practicing Muslims pray. There are the forty-nine chickpea-sized pebbles gathered by every pilgrim from the desert of Muzdalifah and cast at the walls of the *jamarat* in the Stoning of the Devil. And, there, in the eastern corner of the Kaaba, its shattered fragments bound in silver, is the Black Stone, according to *hadith* once purest white but now stained darkest dark by the sins of man. The pilgrims circle past, straining to kiss it or to simply point in its direction.

3. THE JADEITE CABBAGE

Another treasure, this one tiny, exquisite, and light as air, the most famous of all the treasures in the National Palace Museum

in Taipei. The unknown Chinese sculptor took the green and white jade with its flaws and veinings and ground out perfection in translucence: an almost unbearably lifelike head of bok choy, the cracks in the stone forming the edges of the leaves, an astonishingly delicate locust and katydid camouflaged at its tip, so simple, so disarming, and so always surrounded by murmuring crowds.

4. LONDON STONE

And this stone, too, is a treasure, though no one’s sure why. Trapped in a gilded cage in the wall of 111 Cannon Street, London Stone is a limestone remnant, tattered and unassuming. But a remnant of what? Was it taken from Troy by Aeneas and brought to Britain by Brutus? Was it the center of a Druid circle? Was it carted from the Cotswolds by the Romans? Was it the assembly point for Jack Cade and his rebels when they overran the city in 1450? And is it, as William Blake believed, the fulcrum of a force field holding the entire world on its axis?



5. BLUE-GREEN FUNGUS PEAK

Every stone has its story. The plaque says that Blue-Green Fungus Peak is the “home-wrecking stone.” The largest stone in China’s Summer Palace to which the imperial family once retreated from the heat of Beijing, it pours like a

boundless wave over its massive base. Mi Wanzhong, a Ming dynasty official, bankrupted himself to bring it to his garden. Or did he? Perhaps Mi’s home was wrecked not by the stone but by political foes. Exiled from court, he abandoned Blue-Green Fungus Peak outside the city gates, building a simple hut to protect it until his return. But then he died, and it was the Qianlong Emperor who claimed the prize, inscribed it with his own hand, and assured its safe passage to the palace.

6. MOUNT ST. HELENS

Six stones make a stone circle. Some years after Mount St. Helens blew on May 18,

1980, parts of the drama landed on my desk. A rectangular plastic column divided in three sections: 250 Miles, 22 Miles, 5 Miles. Light gray, medium gray, dark gray. I dream of it—unscientifically—as powdery space dust from the depths of our planet. I imagine a stony mixture of ash and pumice, earth and fire; wood, plant, and mineral; insect, bird, bacterium,

and mammal. Life’s stony essence caught up and remade in the stony maelstrom of the stony blast, a meditation, a treasure, and a journey. ✨

What would you add to this list? Tell us at www.orionmagazine.org/enumeration.

JADEITE CABBAGE, COURTESY OF NATIONAL PALACE MUSEUM, TAIPEI