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Precessions

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Precessions

To begin, a map:

my mother with my father in St. Louis
my husband and I two hours west of St. Louis in Columbia,
my sister, her husband, her baby
467 miles east of Columbia in Cincinnati.
The road I drive to my sister's house the weekend I tell her what my
father did.
The cell towers connecting my sister to my mother,
the distance
my mother walked
to the next room
to my father,
the road my mother drove to see me, to tell me I was wrong.
The road my sister drove to me, to tell me, again,
I wasn't.

When I was a kid, my mom would spread maps across the dining room table, and we'd plan trips, studying roads and the names of towns. She'd leave Sunday afternoons, come back after dark with carryout and souvenirs. "I went to the flag store," she'd say, bringing out a bag of one hundred toothpick flags of the world. "The Winston Churchill Museum," in answer to the question, where have you been?

There is a man named Denis Wood theorizing a poetics of cartography. He is composing a novel from symbols, an atlas out of the maps he's made of his North Carolina neighborhood. The neighborhood as it is experienced through its sounds and smells, sunlight filtering through leaves in the summer. What don't appear are the streets themselves. With the city grid stripped away, Wood's maps appear in pure pattern. A black page marked only by the candlelit faces of jack-o'-lanterns on the porches of invisible houses. The arterial lines of electrical wires disappearing into the blank spaces of the rooms they light. Wind chimes and the radial distance of the sound they carry.

I drive Highway 70 East to visit my sister. It's sixty degrees in January, and we sit outside, prop our bare feet on the porch rails, and peel clementines. I've told her I can't see our father anymore, and I have told her why. Now, going over it all, with the worst of it spoken, finally, into the humid afternoon, I tell her, "This feels like the beginning of the end of it." She sends me home with a stack of books about sex abuse, a mug of coffee, a pair of ballet flats she doesn't wear.

On my way home, the temperature drops twenty degrees between Indiana and Illinois, and the rain I've been driving through turns to sleet. The speed limit is sixty-five, but I'm going ten over, passing semis and minivans, listening to a podcast about mapping, and I'm thinking about my mother. I am thinking about the lines of her face, the way my face is changing, almost imperceptibly, into hers.

I stop for lunch and notice it's cold but don't think about it again when I get back on the road. Going seventy-five with the radio loud so I can hear over the wind, I pull into the left lane to get around a truck and my wheels hit a patch of new ice. I'm holding the wheel straight, but my car is drifting left. I spin, crossing the white line of the shoulder, sail backward into the grassy median where I finally begin to slow in the frozen mud. The rain freezes on my windshield. The story about the cartographer plays on. Slowly, with effort, I let out a small scream, and then I start to cry.

Later my mother will drive two hours west to see me. I will lay out cups and saucers, a plate of cookies, like we're having high tea. She will sit across from me and say, "If only you had some proof it would be different. I would leave your dad today, but he's never lied to me before." And I, my neck and the underside of my chin covered in red splotches, will tell her I don't want to lose her, but I can't see him anymore. She will understand, and she will leave by three thirty, drive home to fix dinner.

For a long time I can't shake that glossy highway, my slow spin away in the rain. I feel the smooth glide of tires on ice, steering wheel slack in my hands as the road releases its pull, smooth as free fall.

I will remember suddenly that I have a mother whose face looks like mine. Late afternoons she is fixing dinner, hands wet and smelling like lemon verbena kitchen soap. Every morning she is reading the newspaper in the striped armchair by her living room window. She's drinking

coffee and setting her mug on the windowsill beside her, and she is not speaking to me, not for weeks, now months, now almost a year.

I am thinking about cartography as poetry of exclusion. The cartographer chooses which landmarks to map and which to erase by never drawing. My mother remembers my schoolteachers, my winter coats by year, my colds and flus, papers I wrote, boys I dated. She remembers the shape of my nose when I was born, the first thing she noticed. My mother tells me I always seemed fine. Our maps share a structure but their objects conflict.

Denis Wood believes there is no unmappable experience, but what of maps that are self-contradicting? If we put it all together on a single page, the coats and hats my mother dressed me in, the trips we took, the books she read me, the nights she stayed beside me until I fell asleep, the day she sits across from me and does not believe what I have to tell her, what would the conflation of our every map show me that I don't already know? I know my mother loves me. I know there is no way to reconcile that love with her driving home to make my father dinner.

My sister and I piece together our family history by pattern. The way stories happened. The way they were told. Our father's visions and mother's revisions. How changeable, our history, but we try to tell each other the truth. We do not say aloud: what if it's all the truth?

When I was fifteen, my mom and I drove from Miami to St. Louis, fifteen hours in my sister's red Chevrolet Corsica. The car couldn't get over sixty without rattling, and we only had one CD, the soundtrack to *Duets*. My favorite song that summer was Huey Lewis singing "Cruisin'" with Gwyneth Paltrow. *You're gonna fly away, glad you're goin' my way, I love it when we're cruisin' together*. I sang both parts in separate voices until we hit West Virginia and my mom said no more. We laid the atlas across hotel beds at night, planning strange detours for minor landmarks. We made terrible time.

My mother does not speak to me, but she e-mails my sister. She says she hasn't left the city in six months. She's started having panic attacks when she drives and is afraid of going too far from home. If she could drive past the city's limits without losing her breath, I wonder if she would drive to me.

Before the earth could be mapped, the sky. In Germany, 1979, the first star chart was found carved on a mammoth tusk, Orion mapped into the ivory. In 964, the Persian astronomer Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi wrote *The Book of Fixed Stars*, laid out by constellation, stars by position, brightness, color, each drawn once from outside the celestial globe, once from within.

I grew up in cities without stars. I recognize airplane lights tracing the night sky, but the constellations are mysteries. In rural Missouri I stumble home across my front yard in the middle of the night and look up, surprised to see the black sky thick with light. If I had to find my way by those stars, they would reveal nothing to me. I keep my face to the ground.

My mother did not stop speaking to me first. First she sent a letter written by my father telling me I was wrong. First she sent e-mails asking me to take it back. First she sent childhood drawings that proved I was fine, and first she suggested I was having a nervous breakdown. I became disoriented.

My sister and I drive back and forth from Ohio to Missouri, Missouri to Ohio. Text from Effingham, we say. At Effingham there's a Christian cross off the highway, made of aluminum siding, 198 feet tall with a 113-foot crossbar. I send her a picture when I pass it. It means: getting closer.

My sister and I send e-mails and texts, photos, videos; we call and FaceTime one another. She hashtags her text messages badly. We text:

How's your morning?

How's your day?

Feeling better?

Taco Bell

Do you have a totem animal?

A hare. You want one?

Have you ever tried knitting?

No fine motor skills.

#haveyouleftyourhouseyettoday

#thinkyoumightbemisunderstandinghashtags

Call later.

She gives my baby nephew the phone; he presses his face to the camera and the screen goes black. All I hear are his smacky mouth sounds, his breath through the speaker. I imagine our calls and texts and e-mails creating lines that cross the sky between our houses, almost five hundred miles apart, every new conversation picking up where the last left off, so the lines run smooth and fast, back and forth.

There's a line drawing on my bedroom wall, a pencil sketch of the artist's childhood neighborhood. I wonder, now that I don't speak to my parents, what of my history is still mine. I remember my childhood neighborhood. If I mapped it, I would draw the front porch we sat on to watch storms moving in, the gas streetlamps that flickered on after dark, my school bus stop on the corner under a helicopter tree, the gutters that filled with rainwater and we raced plastic cups in. Does the brightness disappear into darkness, now that the darkness is spoken and known? When my grandmother dies, I don't go to the funeral. My father would fill the whole space.

My sister comes to visit for a weekend and stops in St. Louis on her way home. Our mother had a bone graft put into her jaw the same morning, and her voice is muffled with cotton. My sister says when my mom talks about me it's like nothing went wrong between us; we just live a great distance from one another with no way to cross it.

I want to understand. A pair of antipodes is made of two locations diametrically opposite each other on the earth's surface. Less than four percent of the planet has land perfectly opposite land. It's 5:40 p.m. in Hilo, Hawaii, the middle of winter. The light is gray and slipping. You can't see the sky through the clouds, but the water is clear, the trees low and green. At the Madikwe Nature Preserve in South Africa, it's 5:40 a.m., the light there gray, too, land flat with a single peak in view, water filled with reflected clouds. Summer. The trees do not grow tall. What does opposite mean, and can it mean, sometimes, same?

My sister taught me how to shave, running the razor blade up my calf and thigh in careful, even strips. She is the force I followed out of childhood. This is how you hold a pencil. Tight-roll jeans. Kiss a boy and practice on your thumb. This is how you drive a car. This is how you leave. My sister lives in a separate time zone. I imagine her this way: up ahead, calling back to tell me what comes next.

Bill Rankin has a website called Radical Cartography with a map problematic, "Spatializing Time." The screen is blank except for a bar passing over the invisible globe. The bar is an hour of day crossing time zones, each sliver of the map appearing, disappearing, reappearing with the new hour. Time is a clean sweep, a series of flickering continent pieces, an even movement, motion. Time makes space, makes separation. I watch a year go by this way. The hour my mother came. The hour she left and every silent hour since. Each one appears for a moment, the barest split of a second, then passes on and disappears.

One more thing.

Did you know the stars are not fixed at all? Gravity is reorienting the earth's rotational axis so we revolve like a slow spinning top, not a circle. The planet moves by precession, completing a single cycle every 26,000 years, shifting imperceptibly, a single degree, every 72. And as the planet makes its long, imperfect rotation, the position of the stars, too, begins to shift.

What I've learned. There are no maps that aren't moving.