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FATHOMS: the cartography of ghosts

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FATHOMS: the cartography of ghosts

Abstract

Poem

Gerry Turcotte

FATHOMS:
the cartography of ghosts

Maps unfold beneath
my cartographic palms

I touch Vancouver like an afterthought
leaving death behind, fleeing continents

now there is no one else
there is no forwarding address

*are letters without destinations
still letters?
are journeys without goals
still voyages?*

let me press against the silence of returns

* * *

The map, after all, has not changed
the streets still sparkle
languidly

as though space had not shifted
as though my grief had not imploded
sucking all coordinates towards me

planes turn my way now
explorers seek me out
following their compass needles

yesterday Captain Cook
pencilled me in between his islands —
'I will delete this entry here,'
he said, 'make room for you,'

rubbing until the resin in the map was gone
 until his ink scarred — until the vellum tore
 and there beneath the skin my pale face
 ruptured forth, pleading

* * *

the piper marched behind my mother's grave
 — a military tattoo.

She was laid to rest beside her parents
 where the piper had played so often —
 where 'Scotland the Brave' met 'Ave Maria'
 till I wept

* * *

The ground was so thickly frozen
 the year before
 that my father was left behind
 to be buried in the spring

I never visited his grave
 when I tried he eluded me
 the stones stared back blankly with unwritten histories

'The unmarked graves,' my uncle later said,
 'are hangings — deserters, criminals —
 an absence now'.

I couldn't find his place...
 did I make the same of him?

* * *

my mother led me to the cemetery
 where we wound our way, reading all the names but his
 She held her side, her eyes just lipped with white:

'One more minute. How far's the car?

I should remember...

Not so fast'.

I sighed in silent fury as we waited in the grass.
 Impatient with departures. Angry at her loss.
 She was dying on this consecrated ground,
 and I didn't even know.

Would it please my God, in retrospect,
 to let me claw the harshness from my words?

* * *

Columbus clears his blind eyes
 and asks me what has happened
 My father's passing has brought
 explorers to my door
 The tall resplendent masts
 weave in my front yard
 The music groans, out of place

He spreads the scroll —
 smooths the skin and points:
 'Here, we were here.
 And then ... nothing'.

He is speaking Spanish or Portuguese — but I understand every word.
 'Nada. Aca nada.' Canada. 'There is nothing there.'

I know how he feels. This emptiness.
 This desert that was once so green.

He has lost his way.
 I hurry him along — there are others waiting
 some torn, encrusted with the sea,
 their faces drawn and barnacled.

Others are burnt and fractured
 with the desert rain
 The sand is plastered to their overcoats
 I resist the temptation to brush their sleeves
 dust their bent shoulders
 I want to protect them
 against their age, their weariness
 I want to hold them close against me

tell them 'You've done well'.
Sometimes I think I've spoken.
More often I forget.
It's hard to be eloquent here
where words are so plentiful. They bring
me labels: 'This is what the island's called
— this is what the landscape means —
but it escapes me...'

I am weary of these journeymen
asking me the time — as if it mattered.

We are speaking of the age. We are making nations
through elisions. We are swallowed by the absences
that we label and secure
with gestures in a darkened room

The landscape is hardly real,
after all. It is all invented
space

Columbus bristles guiltily.
There are others waiting. But he will not be moved.
He tells me: 'There was nothing here before
the compass pricked the page —
until we sought to conquer it with words.
We spoke it into being
— and our fables fell like rain.
Building layer by layer,
they formed a reef, an atoll, an island.
Then we crashed into it with our ships,
our own imaginings ripped our hulls to shreds:
it is a terrible thing to dream beyond ourselves'.

His body turns away,
even though he scarcely moves. He knows my thoughts.
He answers before I have a chance to speak.

'Most dreams are built on other people's land.
Most dreams are constantly undone.
They already scratch my works,
uncovering what I find,

rewriting what I name.
 When everything's discovered you wipe away the chalk,
 begin again — this palimpsest amnesia —
 but it is always there'.

He pauses.
 Sees the ghostlike stirrings from the shadows.
 They are getting restless in the wings.
 What can I possibly tell them that is worth more than an island?
 These sailors who spent years at sea, praying for a slice of land
 Why are they pressing in on me
 as though I were a harbour
 — a dock for ships whose timber is so swelled
 with rain they could be sponges?
 I push my finger through a hull
 that comes too close ...
 I feel it suck me in.
 I dodge the figurehead and pull away.
 My seaming palm emerges glistening and wet.

The desert travellers eye
 me thirstily.

I have no time for them. They've had their day.

* * *

Were my father here he'd shrug his shoulders and repair the hole.
 He'd lift his restless hammer and position the first nail.
 'This,' he'd say, 'is Cedar'. He'd name it,
 but would tame the substance
 through the act.
 I'd hold my hand like his, poised to do the same.
 We'd move in unison.

* * *

My mother would hover like a chimera
 unwritten in our explorations
 holding out a hand, including herself through
 unacknowledged gestures

How could I turn from her so thoroughly?
Why did I not accept her sere geographies
the heritage she proudly offered up?

Why did I speak to her in tongues
pretending not to be of her?

* * *

And what of the legacy of wives and guides
who bore explorers
through uncharted worlds?
How can I know their stories when my mother's
stays unread — unrecognised.

Is there a door nearby that stands ajar?
A room whose musty lace and fine embroideries
aren't even tinted yellow from the sun
because the curtains have stayed closed so long?
Have I walked past it daily in my search for him?

If I crane my neck and tear myself away from influence
will Florence Baker meet my glance?
Will Sacajawea stare me down,
her newborn child reproachful in her arms?
Will Mrs Parks or Lady Franklin fight my cause?

Why do I leave that space untouched?

* * *

The darkened room, the day I packed my bags,
echoed with the hollow clock
muffled in the box that held it.

Outside the snow was scratching patterns in the glass.
We sat on dusty steps rehearsing our goodbyes.

All I could do was shout
although I never said a word.
She shook her head despairingly
reading every thought.

* * *

Here is the silver touch of evening,
Where memory is the pressure of a hand

the leather creaks like tin
when I lift the suitcase from the icy porch

'Goodbye,' I breathe.

In winter, weather mocks uncertainty
freezing syllables in the air

I leave all my unspoken rage in that one dark breath
between us
and find it again, ten years later,
hovering, still, over her deathbed

At night, when the lights go down, and morphine
runs its fiery course through the lakes and rivers
of her veins,

and when she has stopped suffocating
and pressing drunkenly at the bars that hold her in
and when she has stopped trying to mouth the words
she has always generously said
and when I have won my battle with the intern
who will not kill her pain —
and when the ward is silent with relief
and even footsteps have long since stilled

And when at last I have my chance to rub away the resin
of that long dark breath
and show her what I really meant to say

the darkness presses down on me
and I run from the room,
out into the gothic shadows of the Sacred Heart
fleeing, as always, fleeing

Most explorations are escape not search

When I return, at last, prepared to conquer shadows,
prepared at last to wrestle ghosts,

her face has pierced the darkness that I feared.
I never said farewell.

* * *

And so they both have sailed
while I wandered inland and apart.

I make my way blindly through the bodies
that are pressed against me in the church
whispering their fondness for the dear departed
pressing paper prayers at me as though
I'll one day trade them in for cash

* * *

I hold this compass firmly in my hand.
It points to every corner of the globe.
This perfect compass rose that fails to bloom.

How could I know that the magnetic north pole
was not at the true north pole at all?
Where was I heading when I wandered off?

How could I know the needle could be swayed
by filings on the ship,
by iron or steel,
by rivets and the like?

That alcohol was used to float the compass card,
that fathoms were another way to tell the time.

* * *

There are stories that Franklin visited my home
though he refused to queue.
He saw the sodden carpet,
the fractured hulls,
he studied the animology of ships:
the fox, the rabbits. An ark of shiply pieces.

He rejected its domestic space:
its bonnet, apron, shoe and cap.

He held the prayer-book open at regret —
the holystone for scrubbing decks —
inspected all the sails
— the worming, the parceling of cloth —

sprinkled sand across the planks for me to wash them down.

'A fiddlehead turns inward', he might have said,
his fingers lingering on battened ribs,
planked skin too battered to resist.

When I probe the room I notice he has gone.
How can such absences be made so easily?

* * *

They carried him away.
My mother, in her own time,
watched the ambulance disappearing like a ship,
believing my father would return. I shared her hope.

But the Northwest passage was never found.
It never can be found.
Don't believe them if they tell you otherwise.

Maps are just fictions that articulate our grief
and grief a map of where we've failed to anchor
a record of the journeys undertaken
the shoals we've foundered on
the nights we've crossed
ever silent, ever painful,
ever dark.