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Disorienting

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Disorienting

MOST OF OUR MAPS are personal. They are on an intimate, useful scale. My friend Clara, who doesn't have a car and whose urban instincts don't let her walk alone at night, imagines herself on a grid of bus lines and bus stops. She calculates how close she is to safety and how many rumbling bus rides she is away from home. My boyfriend's landscape is emotional. He locates himself in relation to the house of an ex-lover, the first place he applied for a job, the state where his parents live. Audrey, who grew up on the Oregon Coast and now lives in Seattle, envisions herself in relation to bodies of water. In Seattle, she sits perched on the land bridge between Lake Washington and Puget Sound, too far away to feel the tug of the ocean.

In the East Bay, where I grew up, locating myself was simple. Geography was a process of linking known objects to imagined ones, until I had a picture of my neighborhood, my city, the world. To start, I looked up, found the water, knew that was west. Beyond the bay was San Francisco, the Pacific Ocean, Japan. In the other direction were the Berkeley Hills, Tilden Park, my grandparent's house, and New York City. I fit snugly in between, in what seemed like the center of things.

Later, when I moved to Seattle, I had a harder time. The city sloped east to west and urban planners were so confident in people's sense of direction that street signs warned "No parking south of here." Since the water defined the west as it had in California, I could at times garner a similar sense of security, but in November, when the clouds were so low you felt you had to duck when you went outside, and then in April when the sun would break through and wash the city with an eerie blue light, I would remember how far north I was. When I imagined myself on the map, teetering at the northwest edge of the United States, I had doubts about the cheery round ball of the earth and began to wonder if it had edges after all, if I should watch my step.

As we came over the ridge, my stomach dropped. The hill, which I had hoped would descend to some landmark once we'd crested

it, plunged thickly forested to a frozen lake that didn't appear on the map. Then the ground rose again, and green hills bucked all the way to the horizon. Boulders covered the slope behind us—arrested, it seemed, in mid-tumble. The sky was a blank gray. Roots poked through the soil. And we were lost. Anchored only by a topographical map of the Indian Heaven Wilderness in the South Cascades and a compass that I understood more in theory than in practice, I wondered how far we could walk without becoming found.

Staring at the anonymous hills, I felt unmoored. All the ways I used to locate myself had fallen away. No familiar peak or rock formation told me that I was facing north. No sign directed me to go left or right. I couldn't envision myself standing firmly on a specific point on the map because we'd left the Pacific Crest Trail and now were weaving among the topo lines. In some part of my mind, I held a tether that led me back to the house on Hopkins Street where I grew up in Berkeley, California. With no road or marked path to follow home, that tether was severed too, as surely as if the golden thread had snapped when Theseus wandered his way through the maze toward the Minotaur. I didn't know how to imagine where I was.

Beside me, clinging to a fistful of grass so she wouldn't slide down the hill, was my friend Karen, whom I called Karenina, because she had a flair for the dramatic. She experimented with her image the way some people experiment with drugs, trying to find the one that offered the best worldview. One summer I picked her up from a Buddhist meditation retreat in Orinda and was greeted by a woman I hardly knew, her round face glowing with inner peace, a long cotton skirt flapping around her bare ankles. Another time I met her at the airport. One of the last passengers off the plane, she ran up to greet me, looking like a movie star. Her California-blonde hair had gone raw honey brown in the eastern climate, and she was wearing a leopard skin coat that hit her mid-thigh. But through all these permutations, one thing remained constant: I could call her and suggest almost any adventure and she would say "yes." When I told her I planned to hike 500 miles on the Pacific Crest Trail through Washington State and asked if she wanted to join me for a while, she bought a rain suit at Target and got on the plane.

The first three days of hiking were miserable. The moment we left the Oregon border and started hiking north, rain poured down from a low-slung sky, pausing every hour or so as if to take a breath, only to continue with renewed force. Our packs were bulky and too heavy, resembling small walruses swathed in nylon. They cut into our shoulders, gaining weight as the water seeped into our clothes and food. Summer was coming slowly after a stormy winter washed out roads and bridges throughout southwest Washington. Though it was late June, buds were still knotted tight as fists. As the path ran along the mountainside it was easy to follow, but then it moved off the crest into a broad, snow-filled bowl. Trees poked through the white expanse, and we wove around them, making deep footprints so we could find our way back. Finally, it came to this: the trail was gone.

We camped at the spot where the trail disappeared. After a plateful of spaghetti, Karen pinned me into a conversation about what we would do if the rain continued and the snow obscured the trail for miles ahead. She wanted to retrace our steps to the last road we'd crossed, 12 miles back. But I insisted we go on, reluctant to abandon our plans, confident that we would find the trail tomorrow. In two days my friend Audrey was going to drop off more supplies and have lunch with us where the trail crossed Road 65. We could discuss the future of the trip then, I argued, if we could find the trail to that point. If we couldn't, the map showed that Road 65 was three or four miles west of us, on the other side of a ridge. We could just bushwhack to the top, see the road below us, and make our way down to it. It would be easy.

My confidence sprung from the notion that if we climbed higher than the land around us, we could place ourselves within the view. Vision dominates the human senses and most people construct their mental maps from what they see. But other animals locate themselves by sound, smell, vibrations, or senses we don't fully understand. I once heard a story about a boy who collected migrating birds injured during a storm. The high winds blew the birds into a power line, and they fell to the ground, stunned. The boy put them in the back of his car and drove them to a nearby animal shelter. By the time he arrived, most of the birds had

recovered, and when he opened the trunk, they were all facing, not the back of the car, not each other, but due south. The healthy birds flew off as soon as they were free, and even the ones that couldn't fly hopped out of the car and started walking south. The boy grew up to be an ornithologist, specializing in navigation.

Some say birds follow the stars as they migrate thousands of miles each year. One group of scientists put indigo buntings in a star chamber, then revolved the stars, so south was no longer south, west no longer west. The birds shifted accordingly, reading the false stars rather than true north. Others say birds use the sun or the topography of mountain ranges and coast lines to find their way. Scientists have sought to prove pigeons navigate by gauging the earth's tilt and the resulting geomagnetic forces. Pigeons wearing magnets (which disrupted their internal compass) had difficulty returning to their loft on cloudy days when they couldn't navigate by the sun. Birds with brass bars instead of magnets managed to find their way home, even under overcast skies. Photopigment in the pigeons' eyes may translate magnetic fields as well as light, telling birds whether they are flying toward a pole or toward the equator.

Anyone who has watched Canada Geese "V"ing overhead or heard their distant calls in the dark knows that there is a confidence in these strong, sure, wing beats that we seem to lack.

The next morning I left Karen at the tent, reading the passage on hypothermia in my first aid book. As I put on my boots, I saw, not 100 yards from our tent, a Pacific Crest Trail marker. And then another, on the inside of a tree. Soon I was strolling through the snow, barely breaking stride to look for markers or melted-out patches of trail. I found Blue Lake, cold water lapping at the base of Gifford Peak, and ran back to tell Karen. But when we returned with our packs and pressed beyond the lakeshore, the trail vanished again into ice and twigs and confusion. If we needed to hunt for the trail every 100 yards, we would average three miles a day and miss Audrey completely. After trying three times to cross an ice-clogged stream, we agreed to bushwhack.

When I suggested cutting away from the trail, I didn't think it necessary to plot a compass point. But for form's sake I placed the edge of the compass on the map so it ran a straight line from Blue Lake to the road, then turned the dial so the direction lines on its face were parallel with our chosen path. When I lifted the compass off the map and held it so the needle pointed north, an arrow on the dial pointed us the way we should walk. But it wasn't the direction that I sensed was west.

We started to walk against my instincts, and I adjusted the compass, holding it flat and noting a landmark near where it pointed. We would then walk to that landmark and adjust the compass again. Our progress was slow and methodical. Tree to tree to tree. Big Douglas Fir to small clump of cedar to twisted stump, split by lightning. Moving sometimes five feet, sometimes 25, we inched the direction we hoped was west.

When the compass directed us over a frozen lake, I stayed on one shore with the bearing, while Karen went around, heading for the marked spot on the opposite bank. As I sat on my pack, feet in the snow, holding the compass which I pointed over the lake to a clump of trees, I heard a yelp. Then Karen's shaky voice.

"I'm all right."

She had fallen through the ice covering the water and sunk in up to her hip. Then another scream. Then a pause.

"I'm okay." The words quavered over the ice.

Fortunately, the day remained warm, though not sunny, and Karen's waterproof pants dried as we walked. Past evergreen trees tipped with tender new needles. Past quick streams connecting a small chain of lakes. I felt a flush of privilege at seeing sights not on the trail, not on the designated tour, and I remembered a man I knew who scorned hiking trails in favor of walking a compass line. Hiking for him was plotting a course and plunging forward down hills and over stumps until he grew tired, then turning 180 degrees and heading back. He returned from these jaunts full of stories of coyote pups squealing in their dens and moose knee-deep in muddy ponds. But I declined his invitations, favoring the trail and gathering a quiet joy from stumbling across a mileage sign. And now that I had veered from the path, the thrill of off-route exploring was blotted out by my persistent fantasizing about

the road. Over and over in my mind I crested the mountain, saw the blacktop, felt the flood of relief.

Finally, after we had walked out of the snow, across a slick rock field, past dozens of melting ponds, we crossed over the ridge. Instead of the anticipated view down to the pavement, we saw the boulders at our feet, the hills that went nowhere. To our right the ridge curved, and when I checked the compass, it pointed us across the steep slope and back to the other side. That couldn't be right. Completely discouraged, I sat down for a break. What were we supposed to do? A new plan? I was out of plans. My hands shook, rustling the plastic bag with our food in it as I tried five times to undo the knot. Blood beat in my ears, making it hard to hear my thoughts over the static. All decisions seemed equally wrong, all directions seemed equally fruitless. I ate the last of my graham crackers and peanut butter and wished I could cry to loosen, if only slightly, the bands of anxiety that had wound themselves around my chest. Karen had already cried twice, saying, "I'm going to cry now, but it's okay, Kim, I just do this sometimes. I don't want you to think that I'm not having a good time." And she would sob and the rain would drip off the tree branches and run down the Ziploc bags, and I would try to think of comforting things to say, and fail.

My problem was a crisis of faith. Deep down, I didn't believe in the compass, this small circle that claimed to describe our world. It was plastic. It cost 15 dollars. How was it going to save us? We were far from the trail, I knew that, and the likelihood of anyone finding us was slim. But Karen trusted the compass. And I think she trusted me. I trusted neither and could only avoid panic by never stopping long enough to think. We stood up and prepared to go back over the ridge. Tree to tree to tree.

When I imagine a landscape more disorienting than rows of hills, I think of the ocean. Undulating planes of blue reflecting the blue or gray or black of the sky. Before compasses and Geographical Information Systems and satellite photography, sailors would set out with knowledge of the wind and stars to help them home. At sea, Greek mariners knew where they were by the smell and feel of the wind that blew behind them or in their faces. Boreas, the north wind, was the coldest, while Notus came from

the south and blew warm weather. The heavy wet breeze from the west was termed Zephyr. Apeliotes raged from the east. The stars also acted as a map, and if the rolling waves looked monotonous and the night was clear, sailors could look up and key on Polaris, the anchor of the sky.

When someone noticed that a needle rubbed with a magnet stone would point north, early mariners made their first progress toward the compass. They secured the needle to a piece of wood, floated it in a bowl of water, and followed its lead. It seemed more magical than scientific, but it cast a reliable spell. Sailors thought the needle pointed to the North Star rather than the North Pole, but either way, it guided them into port. As time passed, inventors refined the needle, enclosing it in a case inscribed with 64 directional points.

With all these refinements, the instrument was still only as good as the hand that held it, and sometimes sailors didn't find the shore they wanted. Sometimes they never found land at all.

A "compass" is more than a navigational instrument. The mathematical compass has two legs hinged at the top. While one stays in place, the other moves around it, allowing the mathematician to draw a perfect circle. The term "compassing" or "encompassing" describes enclosing, defining, circumscribing. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Jesus creates the earth using a mathematic compass "forged in God's store." The poem describes the process:

One foot he centered, and the other turned
Round through the vast profundity obscure,
And said, 'Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds,
This be thy just circumference, O world.'

Similarly, The Silva-brand piece of plastic I wore around my neck on a piece of red string claimed to map the globe, relating every object to its simple system of labels and directions. At the same time it made us the center of the world.

These tools make up for our flaws, our dependence on vision, our optimism. Psychological experiments show that when most people walk through a neighborhood then map it, they draw an idealized picture. They make acute angles right and straighten twisted streets. Without help from an objective source, they amend the landscape to their specifications. When the fictional scene intersects the actual, people become disoriented.

Even the word "orient" varies between the directional and the personal. Originally, it named the direction where the sun rises, the east. The word worked itself from a Latin verb "to rise," to a noun naming a spot in the sky, back to a verb as worshippers built their churches with the altar in the east and buried their dead with the feet facing east. "Orient" eventually started to describe the placement of people, not just temples and tombs. To orient yourself was not only to know where you were in relation to the four cardinal points, but to know which way to point your prayers, to understand your position in society.

After pushing through underbrush that snagged our packs and scratched our arms, Karen and I followed our bearing into a grove of tall Douglas Fir. Though the ground had appeared level for the past hour, we must have been gradually descending, because we started walking through spring rather than winter. While our eyes stayed trained on the thick ribbed bark, we couldn't help but notice the flowers on the ground and the rich smell of green. Then I looked up and saw that the trees ended. Instead of more hills, they were backed by a wall of sky. Karen thought we must be at a cliff. I had a brief image of a steep concrete drop-off bordering the interstate. But what we were seeing was simply distance. After focusing so closely for hours, our eyes couldn't make sense of the miles of unobstructed view that opened up as we came to the end of the trees. We were almost in the clearing before I could see that the hazy planes of white and brown and green composed a mountain so large that it defined the landscape around it. The snow-covered cone whose shoulders ranged in all directions. The crater full of clouds. The pebbles on the ground, light as popcorn and blasted with holes. All the signs told us this was Mount St. Helens. A landmark.

We stood at the boundary of a wilderness area, at the point where the shady understory of the tall trees was replaced by a sun-raked clearcut, dotted with saplings only knee- and shoulder-high. And at the base of the clearcut, separating it from another logged area by 20-odd feet, a stripe of gravel coursed from north to south. Road 65.

After not trusting the compass, now I didn't trust my eyes, and we followed the bearing all the way out to the road. Though

it was smaller than the highway of my imagination, bordered by horsetail and yellowed grass, it lead to bigger roads and an entire network of known streets and neighborhoods. With Mount St. Helens towering to the west and the gravel under our feet, we stood firmly on the map. I put down my pack and ran up a slight hill where the road curved to see if I could find the corresponding curve on the map and pinpoint our location exactly. Karen scooped up a handful of gravel and ran it through her fingers as though it were the bread crumbs set down by Hansel and Gretel.

We were not home yet. That was several adventures away. But for a moment, as the compass pointed placidly to the road, I glimpsed a world beyond what my senses could paint for me; my mental map stretched to a different scale, and I believed briefly and fervently in an earth with magnetic poles, scored by longitude and latitude lines. Then the valley closed in, the wind picked up, and we started north to set up camp for the night.