

Antarctica

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I was four years old when the encyclopedia peddlers came to our house. They carried boxes of books into our living room, led by a lady with short hair and glasses. I remember these details about her because one, only old people were supposed to wear glasses or so I thought, and two, not many women around me wore their hair short.

As for the day she came, I remember it because they had a book that came with a special pencil, the most magical thing I had ever seen. The book had a big drawing on top of every page, and underneath every drawing were two words in big letters. When I pressed the tip of the pencil on the correct word, like “Duck” under the picture of the fluffy yellow thing, its eraser part would glow red. My mother tried to pry the book away from my fingers and so I ran off into the next room to play with the magical pencil a little longer.

I thought the book with the magic pencil was mine. My mother laughed when I refused to give it back to the guests, as she did not intend to buy it. The grown-ups talked for a long time—it was afternoon when they started talking, it was night when they took the book from me. What was left was everything else—the Childcraft Encyclopedia for us kids, and the World Book Encyclopedia for when we would grow up.

The problem was, at four, I didn’t know how to read. But the books were colorful. I would take them one at a time to the store—the part of the

bakery facing the street—and ask my father to read the stories to me. I was under the impression that they were all story books. Every single one of them. I specifically recall a picture with tiny people trying to sew a giant's trousers, and my father made up a story wherein the little fellows were attempting to fight off the giant, using their needles as weapons.

The story would end with me running back into the bakery, then past the garage, and back into the house through the kitchen door, my imagination pudgy and burping, the Childcraft pressed to my chest. By the time I entered kindergarten, I had figured my father was just fooling around with me, and there really were no stories to tell from, say, *Mathemagic* or *The Green Kingdom*, and I started moving on to the bigger books on the shelves.

Among them were the atlases. The one from the Childcraft collection had a terracotta-colored cover, a picture atlas for kids with all kinds of trivia and flags arranged by region. The other, heftier one from the World Book series was a dark garnet giant full of satellite images and had a lot more kinds of maps—from the topographical to the political, with many others coloring the world according to crops, or religion, or some other kind of demographic sorting. For some strange reason, I became bewitched by them, following the blue line of the Yangtze down to the sea, tracing the rugged white lines of northern Canada, pinching the forested isthmus of Panama between my fingers. What was the use of words when your mind could go island-hopping on the Marianas? What were stories in pictures compared to the thrill of looking down at Madagascar, pretending to be an angel floating in from space? But soon enough, there were stories in my maps, too.

Lying face down on the floor, my elbows sore against the cold tiles, I would spend hours just staring at them. The continents were masterpieces that demanded attention: North America shaped like a genie stretching its massive torso, tethered to the lamp that is South America (which, by the way, also looks like a crunchy fried chicken leg), Europe a scraggly and feisty little cloud with an Iberian head, a Scandinavian squirrel tail, and one dangling Italian boot, Africa a beast with its massive head of sand and a dangerous horn, Asia the overstretched, mountainous dough on the baking table, and Australia the big fish in the ocean trying to eat Tasmania.

The one continent whose real shape I could not make out was Antarctica. It was presented as a snake-like white shadow lurking underneath every single map of the world, but in some maps it was a round white swirl in the ocean—a shapeshifter—this land of ghost ships and blizzards and endless nights, made even weirder by the fact that the only people photographed in this place were scientists (understand that, at this point, the only “scientists” I knew were the evil ones on television, and that, as far I was concerned, their one job was to find and electrocute me).

When I encountered a globe for the first time in the elementary school library, I finally understood what Antarctica was supposed to be—a brain with a tail, a jellyfish in the sapphire sea, punctured by a southern screw that held the globe in place. Obsessed with this new perspective, I started drawing Antarctica. But as hard as it was to keep track of where the lines should go, it was harder to squat down just so I could look up from under the globe. It was like trying to peek inside the school principal’s veil from the back. No matter how much I turned the world, the jellyfish couldn’t wiggle itself from its impalement.

I gave up and drew my own version instead, on the cover of my pencil case. It was in the classroom of Grade One—St. Peregrine. My seatmate, who was most probably Michael at that time, thought it was a wilted flower. But to me it was an enchanted island. It was my first experience of drawing a map, and I’ve been doing it ever since, providing a home for the stories in my head.

One particular map, for example, is that of a kingdom which expanded from the delta in the middle, annexing lands left and right until they had conquered pretty much the entire bond paper. At one point a sibling rivalry between two princesses tore the kingdom apart into east and west, divided by the main river, with the metropolitan delta in the middle as a perennial point of contention. Decades later a tsunami forced the two sides to reunite. I made up all of these while watching an episode of the apocalyptic show *The Walking Dead* last year. Sometimes I populate my world with “normal” people, with faces stolen from celebrities or classmates. Sometimes these characters find their way into my poems.

For several summers in elementary and high school, I drew maps that expanded way beyond the 8.5 x 11 space of the paper—a feat I accomplished by taping papers together until the canvas became bigger

than the windows in the bedroom. I would use crayons to identify the extent of every district/region/province, and I would copy the atlases' use of legends like little white squares or big black dots to identify major towns from cities. Most of them had their own version of Antarctica—a desolate place mostly untouched by civilization, hiding within its borders the possibilities of discovery and further expeditions. And always beyond the canvas, of course, were uncharted territories.

Those vacations would end with my maps neatly folded and hidden within one of the cabinets under the bookshelves. I would forget about them and unfold them again when Christmas break came or during the next long summer vacation, adding islands, shading allied kingdoms in the same pattern, drawing additional islands in archipelagic chains, dotting new towns or cities, marking new boundaries for newly declared, breakaway provinces.

Coming home one weekend from college, I discovered that my mother had thrown away all the “scratch papers” under the bookshelf to make room for more stuff, and I never saw those old maps again. Sometimes I would find myself retracing the old shapes, the familiar curve at the end of a peninsula, the smooth coast of a teardrop island. And whenever another map completes itself as I absentmindedly doodle in between writing, or while watching *iflix* shows on my laptop, the old stories of the kingdoms retake shape in my head, and I am a child again, lost in a continent where no one can follow.