

## Maps That Shine

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Although not given to travel, I like looking at maps, the roads snaking here and there, twisting this way and that, filled with bends and arcs that we barely notice as we drive. Often I think: How are we to know if the bends drawn on a map actually occur on the road? Or: Is every twist in a road indicated somewhere on a map? That little dogleg curve between New Blakelock and Millerton on Route 261—does it show up on any map? Who checks these things?

I'm certain such people exist, although I've never met one. In my mind's eye I see them as government officials driving around in smooth blocky gray cars, wearing shirts that are too tight across their kidneys, chewing gum and scratching, grumbling about their pregnant daughters and aches and pains, peering out their windows with scopes and meters that gauge a curve in the road as it can be reckoned against the stars, one flat fingertip pressed against a map attached to a clipboard mounted on the dash, occasionally giving a soft cry of pleasure as they discover a sharp hairpin bend that's indicated on the map, but more often shaking their heads sadly as they careen around a turn marked only as a straight blue line.

And does it matter? What if maps showed roads simply as straight lines heading west, or north, or east, leading from one town to the next through forests and farms, where cows chew absent-mindedly amidst drying mounds of their own flop, and the sun moves across the sky while the air warms, and then cools, accordingly? In this way, maps would only give basic information, all that many people care to know: Where this road leads, and how long it will be until we get there. It's unambiguous, and some people feel that it's good to avoid ambiguity.

Personally, I disagree. Let's be honest: Most people don't know if the details of a map are on target or off. Why not seize this opportunity and make maps that are meaningful? Imagine a map that is genuinely expressive rather than merely factual, with lakes drawn as zigzags, or rivers as whirlwinds, or roads as faces with jagged smiles, depending on the mapmaker's fancy. Such a map could tell us what one person believes about a place, and that seems more useful than a traditional map, with lines drawn who-knows-where in relation to the actual road, or the bare-to-the-bone straight-line map preferred by those who only need expediency.

Think of the power of such a map. It could change the way you feel about a place, or about the people who live there, or about what once happened there. In the process a part of history might change, because history is only memory, and memory is shaped by our feelings. But to hold this power we need a mapmaker of a new breed, a person able to spend years learning to look deep and far, a person who would rather understand than eat, a person who knows that anger, and hope, and sweetness, and hate, and despair each leave a residue that can be seen for a long time, a person who doesn't need talk or a good view or bright warm sunny weather to feel that life is worth the effort. If mapmaking were to become expressive in this way, we might each find mapmakers whose work we admire, just as we have certain writers whose work holds meaning for us. We might reach for the work of a favorite mapmaker as we reach for a much-loved novel, a book that we've read again and again through the years, anticipating all that it has offered in the past, and not caring to know if we'll reach Congden's Bluffs or Upper Falls before daybreak.

You say: Such a mapmaker can't possibly exist, and a map can't be asked to do so much.

I say: What I am describing is not extreme, because it grows from a tradition as old as mapmaking itself. After all, maps

are already both selective and expressive, omitting much that we know to be true, and adding details that either cannot be proven, or that exist only as a reflection of the history of a place.

For instance, forty miles from my house is a quiet part of the state hidden behind low mountains, with a single road leading in and out. It's a place called Elam's Widow, and it isn't on any maps, even though people have lived there for centuries, farming, tending stores, marrying, drilling wells, and rarely venturing into the larger world.

Why is Elam's Widow missing from the map while other places, places vague and fading, routinely appear? Years ago, the little town where I grew up absorbed an even smaller town, a place called Warwick. Warwick hasn't existed, in any real sense, for a hundred years, but it can still be seen on most maps as a tiny dot some distance across the page from the slightly larger dot marking the town where my parents and most of my brothers still live. An outsider, seeing Warwick on the map, would imagine *something* there, maybe a downtown with a mayor and a police car, or a factory surrounded by shanties. But, in truth, there's nothing in Warwick except a handful of leaning wooden houses and barns down a sandy road through scrub, past the high school where I cheated through two years of Latin, peering over the shoulder of a classmate, a nice bright kid who died a few years later.

Our Latin teacher was ancient, having been middle-aged when she taught our parents thirty years before. Allegedly she had once been pretty, but by our day had become ghastly, prone to wearing gauzy sleeveless flowered dresses in all weather, with bra straps dropping out of the armholes on either side, falling as far as her elbows before she would notice and, languidly, slide them back into place. I searched for signs of the prettiness my parents spoke of, but could find no more evidence of beauty in her than of sense in the language she taught. She had spent her life in Warwick, and it seemed proper that a woman

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who lived in a non-existent town would spend her life teaching a language that hadn't been spoken for a thousand years.

Remembering her, I think also of my Latin class neighbor, the boy who would shift in his chair slightly to allow me to see his paper. He was good-humored and friendly, laughing easily at my jokes, with a mind that absorbed any subject quickly. He seemed to understand mathematics, and history, and languages, and the sciences all with equal ease. Despite his talent he studied diligently, and was never flippant about his gifts. With his help I passed Latin. A year later we left for different colleges, and I didn't hear of him again until I learned of his death.

The manner of his end surprised me. After an argument with a girlfriend followed by a bout of heavy drinking, he smashed his fist through a window, cutting a deep gash in his forearm. Then, as the hours passed, he wandered alone through his house, blood draining from the cut, leaving a trail as his life faded.

Sometimes I think the lives we lead can be read like maps, as if we leave a line while we move through our days, my line crossing yours, yours tangling others, an endless filigree stretching through time, now glowing bright, then becoming faint as the years stretch away. I could use help reading the life of my Latin class friend, not from a government official, helpless without his meter and charts, but from someone like the ideal mapmaker I dream of, a person able to look deep and far, one who understands these things, one who might hazard a guess as to why a person of graceful intelligence would find such a foolish way to die.

I've considered hanging a sign in front of my house. The sign would read: Wanted: A person who would rather understand than eat. Then I'll sit on my porch and wait. On my good days, I imagine myself on the porch for only a few hours. A couple of cars might pass unheeding, while one or two kids whiz by on bicycles. Soon a car, or possibly a bicycle, slows and stops, and a person walks up the hill toward me.

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On other days, when nagging doubts shroud my judgment, when I'm feeling what pessimists call "grown up," I see myself on the porch forever, as the seasons change, and while the sign in my yard weathers and falls away.

But I'm an optimist by nature.

Perhaps I know my ideal mapmaker already.

I work with a person whose eyes are clear and gray in the light. He thinks before he speaks, and often passes me quietly, gently ignoring my chatter. Once we shared a meal. While I ate hungrily, his food went uneaten as our talk deepened. I sense that he's not fond of theories, but I might tell him my ideas about the shining line each of us leaves as our days move by.