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The Oldest Map with the Name America

1

In Martin Waldseemuller's woodblock, circa 1507,
the New World is not all there.

We are a coastline

without substance, a thin strip

like a movie set of a frontier town.

So the land is wrong and it is empty,

but for one small black bird facing west,

the whole continent outlined with a hard black edge

too strictly geometric, every convolution squared.

In the margin, in a beret, Amerigo Vespucci

pulls apart the sharp legs of his compass—

though it should be noted that instead of a circle

in the Oldest Map With the Name America

the world approximates that shape we call a heart.

2

The known world once stretched from my house

to the scrim of trees at the street's dead end,

back when streets dead-ended instead of cleaving

into labyrinths of other streets. I was not

one of those who'd go sailing blithely

past the neighborhood's bright rim:

Saturdays I spent down in the basement

with my Thingmaker and Plastigoop . . .

Sunday was church, the rest was school,

this was a life, it was enough. Then one day

a weird kid from down the block pushed back

the sidewall of that edge, spooling me

like a fish on the line of his backward walking

fifty yards deep into the woodlot. Which

was barely wild, its trees bearing names

like sugar maple, its snakes being only

garter snakes. Soon the trail funneled

to a single log spanning some unremarkable

dry creek that the kid got on top of,

pointed at and said: You fall down there,

you fall forever. And his saying this

worked a peculiar magic over me: suddenly

the world lay flat and without measure.

→

So that when I looked down at the dead leaves
covering the ravine they might have
just as well been paint, as depth
became the living juice squeezed out
of space: how far
could you fall? Then the leaves shifted,
their missing third dimension reconfigured
into sound: a murmuring snap
like the breakage of tiny bones that sent me
running back to the world I knew.

3

Unlike other cartographers of his day,
Waldseemuller wasn't given to ornamenting his maps
with any of Pliny's pseudohuman freaks
like the race of men having one big foot
that also functions as a parasol.
Most likely he felt such illustrations
would have demeaned the science of his art,
being unverifiable, like the rumored continents
Australia, Antarctica, which he judiciously leaves out.
Thus graced by its absence, the unknown world
floats beyond the reach of being named,
and the cannibals there
don't have to find out yet they're cannibals:
they can just think they're having lunch.

4

My point is, he could have been any of us:
with discount jeans and a haircut made
with clippers that his mother ordered
from an ad in a women's magazine.
Nothing odd about him except for maybe
how tumultuously the engines that would run
his adult body started up, expressing
their juice in weals that blistered
his jaw's skin as its new bristles
began telescoping out. Stunned
by the warped ukelele that yesterday had been

→

his predictable voice, the kid
one day on the short-cut home from practice
with the junior varsity wrestling squad
came upon a little girl in the woods,
knocked her down and then did something . . .
and then wrote something on her stomach.
Bic pen, blonde girl: the details ran
through us like fire, with a gap
like the eye of the flame where you could
stick your finger and not get burnt.
By sundown the whole family slipped—
and the kid's yellow house hulked
empty and dark, with a real estate sign
canted foolishly in its front yard.
Then for weeks our parents went round
making the noise of baby cats
stuck up in trees: who knew? who knew?
We thought they were asking each other
what the kid wrote with the Bic—
what word, what map—and of course
once they learned the answer
they weren't going to say.

5

In 1516, Martin Waldseemuller
draws another map in which the King of Portugal
rides saddled on a terrifying fish.
Also, the name "America"
has been replaced by "Terra Cannibalar,"
with the black bird changed to a little scene
of human limbs strung up in trees
as if they had been put up there by shrikes.
Instead of a skinny strip, we're now
a continent so large we have no back edge,
no westward coast—you could walk left
and wind up off the map. As the weird kid did,
though the world being round, I always half-expect
someday to intersect the final leg of his return.

6

Here the story rides over its natural edge
with one last ornament to enter in the margin
of its telling. That is, the toolshed
that stood behind the yellow house,
an ordinary house that was cursed
forever by its being fled. On the shed
a padlock bulged like a diamond,
its combination gone with all the other
scrambled numbers in the weird kid's head
so that finally a policeman had to come
and very theatrically kick the door in
after parking one of our town's two squad cars
with its beacon spinning at the curb.
He took his time to allow us to gather
like witnesses at a pharaoh's tomb,
eager to reconstitute a life
from the relics of its leaving.
And when, on the third kick, the door flopped back
I remember for a moment being blinded
by dust that woofed from the jamb in one
translucent, golden puff. Then
when it settled, amidst the garden hose
and rusty tools we saw what all
he'd hidden there, his cache
of stolen library books. Derelict,
lying long unread in piles that sparked
a second generation of anger . . .
from the public brain that began to rant
about the public trust. While we
its children balled our fists
around the knot of our betrayal:
no book in the world had an adequate tongue
to name the name of what he did.

7

Dying, Tamburlaine said: Give me a map
then let me see how much is left to conquer.
Most were commissioned by wealthy lords,
the study of maps being often prescribed
as a palliative for melancholy.

→

In the library of a castle of a prince
named Wolfegg, the two Waldseemuller maps
lay brittle for centuries—"lost"
the way I think of the weird kid as lost
somewhere in America's back forty, where
he could be floating under many names.
One thing for sure, he would be old now.
And here I am charting him: no doubt
I have got him wrong but still he will be my conquest.

8

Sometimes when I'm home we'll go by the house
and I'll say to my folks: come on,
after all these years it's safe
just to say what really happened.
But my mother's mouth will thin exactly
as it did back then, and my father
will tug on his earlobe and call the weird kid
one mysterious piece of work.
In the old days, naturally I assumed
they thought they were protecting me
by holding back some crucial
devastating piece. But I too am grown
and now if they knew what it was
they'd tell me, I should think.