

Mappa Mundi

by Jennifer Falkner

Ana leaned over to the leather satchel she had tossed on the passenger seat this morning and rummaged through its disorder for her notepad and a pencil. The satchel had been her father's when he was at university and she often wondered how he managed; to her it never seemed quite large enough. Still, she couldn't give up its vintage chic. She liked to imagine him, thirty years ago, stalking across Queens' campus in the hard sunlight reflecting off limestone walls. The bag slung over his shoulder filled with his sketchbook and charcoals. Her braless and bell-bottomed mother on his arm. Ana ran her fingers across the deep red-brown leather, supple after so many years of use, wrinkled and curling up at the corners. The temperature dropped more rapidly now, keeping pace with the afternoon, and her fingers had started to shake a little. But she had to find something to do. All this sitting and waiting while the snow kept on falling and falling, trying to obliterate her car in its ditch, and no sounds of plows on their way, was going to do her head in. Not for the first time she wished for her phone, which was still sitting uselessly on its charger at home.

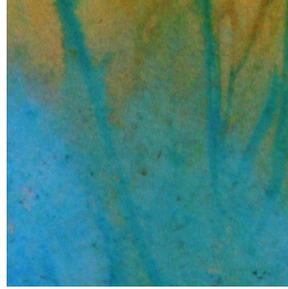
The snow fell more softly now, like a forgiving hand on a cheek. At least she didn't have to go out there as often to clear snow from the car. It had become difficult to warm up again after each trip. The car also had stopped trembling as the buffeting wind fell away. Ana checked her watch, turned the key in the ignition and allowed it to run for precisely ten minutes. This much she remembered from the driving course her mother insisted she take before she was allowed to use the family car, even after she had gone out and gotten her license on her own. Her mother jolted herself out of her depression occasionally to insist on her parental rights over things like these lessons. Ana wished she had a candle. That was the thing to have in a situation like this, she remembered, heating the car quite nicely until help should arrive. The car had warmed a bit, her fingers had thawed a little, just enough to feel thousands of tiny pinpricks as if the nerve endings were trying escape. She picked up the pad and pencil.

She thought about writing a letter, a note to someone, but as soon as her mind landed on a possible recipient—her mother, her aunt, Matthew—it emptied of words. The only things she could think of to say right now were

to herself. Her false starts landed at her feet like another layer of snow. Ana began blocking out the rough shape of a house with thick, heavy strokes following closely the limits of the page, as if to block out the cold and panic trying seep in. Then she drew a large circle inside the gable shape, as large a circle as would fit. She knew whatever she drew would be lustreless compared to her father's work, with the cycle of paintings that won him the Sobey award the year before she was born. Childish, even. She tried not to care. It was only a time-filler, after all. Just until the plows came.

It had been easy to keep the incessant hysteria from the radio and TV on the periphery. *Mega-storm*, they cried. *Storm of the century*. But there had been so many storms already this winter, so many dumps of snow but little in the way of actual crisis; the packaged hysteria became easy to ignore. Ana had flown into the car after seeing Matthew, deciding suddenly to come to her aunt's birthday after all, without any other consideration. She hadn't called ahead. She hadn't checked the road conditions. She didn't think of her father's accident or her mother's insistence on careful driving. She just went.

Last week, in her medieval art class, her professor had pulled down the large screen and treated his students to a section-by-section analysis of the thirteenth century map of the world stored at Hereford Cathedral. As the lecture progressed, and the short professor, whose bald spot resembled nothing so much as the tonsured head of a monk, paced excitedly along the length of the first row, Ana was infected by his enthusiasm. She mentally added Hereford to the list of places she must visit on her great European tour when she would finally see in person all the masterpieces she had studied. The Uffizi, the Louvre, the Tate and now Hereford Cathedral. The map was an enchanting cacophony of topography and legend, images and words. Her professor began by describing the very first action the monk-cartographers would have taken in creating this map. Spreading out the clean, white expanse of calfskin, bending their tonsured heads over it, mumbling in Latin, pricking the centre with a compass. Drawing the circle in the centre of the map, the centre of the world. Her professor quoted, "Thus says the Lord: This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the centre of the nations, with countries around her." Ana liked her monkish professor even more for this. She copied it down into her notes, as well as the co-ordinates for finding it again. Ezekiel 5:5. She was not in the least religious. The first and only time she entered a church had been for her father's funeral six years ago. Ana didn't even know if she had been christened. Knowing her mother, she



rather doubted it. But there was something regal in these words, simple as they were. Something that could swell the heart, strengthen it and carry it forward.

Her fingertips were numb again. Her knuckles had stiffened and swelled; it was difficult to bend them all the way. She dropped down the pencil to blow on them. At the beginning of winter, Ana had bought three pairs of gloves from the dollar store, the kind that look like they would only fit a child, until they stretched to cover an adult hand. Good enough as hand-coverings for the few minutes she spent outside in the winter as she hopped from building to car, car to building. She hadn't needed more. But they would inevitably snag or the fingertips would split if she let her nails grow too long. She was on her last pair and her thumbs were almost completely exposed from the knuckle up. They throbbed painfully, feeling too large for their casing of skin. As long as she could still grasp the pencil, Ana thought, she would be fine.

The map was oriented eastward, so she turned the pad sideways to trace the shorelines, the outlines of continents, the shape of the Mediterranean. Medieval cartographers had only a hazy sense of proportion, so she didn't worry too much about it. She had been left with an impression of a slightly skewed-looking Europe, with Sicily seeming almost as large as Britain, which sat compressed into the lower left hand edge. But all the towns and regions were there, crowding Europe and spreading out more sparsely through North Africa and Asia, labelled in black or red gothic lettering. Rivers stemmed from the Mediterranean, wriggling through the landscape like tadpole's tails. Hills and mountain ranges were represented by billowing, cloud-like lumps, making a puffy, dream-like world. Canada wasn't on the map. She thought of it as part of a secret continent, withheld, not yet part of the world. Its Great Lakes, its fields plumped with snow, its dark forests, as yet undreamed of. Its sudden blizzards that could ice the roads and disorient drivers, causing them to skid blindly into snow banks in a normally familiar section of Highway 15, were unimagined.

Radiating outward, Ana's pencil filled in what she could remember of cities and towns, each one represented by a round tower, like the Martello towers around Kingston. She dotted her map with these towers, varying their sizes and only filling in names like the first cartographers had, sporadically, where she could remember them.

The Hereford map was more than a map of the world, she could hear her professor saying, trying to wheedle interest from the bored faces slumped in the seats around her. It was a history, a bestiary, a theology.

People didn't just use it to plan their holidays, he joked. It was a representation of a cosmos and humanity's place in it. A lesson in wonder and humility. Ana, always methodical, filled in the history first. Of course, it was a Christian history, beginning with the Garden of Eden at the very top of the map, the most eastward position. Noah's ark was there, she plunked it down somewhere in Germany, a childishly simple sketch with the faces of Noah and the animals peering curiously out of the portholes. She added the story of the Passion, as it made its sombre way from Bethlehem to Gehenna and the crucifixion, just above Jerusalem. She sketched this lightly, uncertainly. On the original, the figure on the cross had been damaged, wrinkled out of its detail by the creases of an ancient fold running down the centre, and she wasn't sure yet if she was copying the map as it was now, yellowed and damaged, or the map as it was drawn seven hundred years ago.

She could feel her expression of worry and concentration—eyebrows pulled together, lips pursed—draw all the muscles in her face into one tight knot. She ran her fingers over the line between her eyebrows, a line she had lately noticed didn't completely disappear when she relaxed. She rubbed circles into it with two fingers, like she did at home with cold cream every night before bed, rubbing faster and faster—difficult to do without the lubricating effects of the cream—until it was red and hot from the friction and Ana couldn't even feel the muscle to frown.

The bestiary next. Ana had been anticipating this part since she began sketching. Animals were always her favourite subject. Tropical-looking birds, singly or in pairs. She regretted having only dull graphite when, in her mind, she saw feathers as bright as millefiori beads. Giant lizards here and there. She saw their green scales shining like newly polished silverware, before they darted beneath pungent undergrowth. An elephant sat astride India, its humped back crowned with a wicker box draped with elaborate silks, for some king or emperor to ride in. Then, the further out she moved from Jerusalem, away from the centre of the known world, stranger and more fantastical creatures emerged out of the vellum. Unicorns, with bodies like small cattle and corkscrew horns almost as long as their bodies sticking straight out in front of them, ready to impale any man who got too close. She did three or four of those; they were fun. There was a dangerous, long-

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taloned gryphon, too, part eagle, part lion, regal and savage. The picture was really starting to snap now, as her father would say.

She wasn't sure if Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guarded the entrance to the underworld was on the original—surely it was too pagan—but she drew it anyway. She enjoyed detailing three slobbering mouths appended to one wagging tail, imagining she was drawing her father's old mutt, Eddie. It helped keep her from thinking about the fading light outside the car, the cement-hard sky and the snow uniting in an unremitting grey. The silence.

Then there were the human monstrosities, living in the furthest reaches of the map. The dog-headed men; the men with feet so large they used them as parasols, shading them from the burning sun; the men who made horse blankets from the skins of their enemies, arms and legs dangling lifelessly beneath the saddles. Men with no heads at all, whose faces erupted from their chests and whose eyes were fastened on their shoulders like buttons. Men who ate the corpses of their parents. Hermaphrodites. It was difficult to draw a hermaphrodite, her pencil kept wanting to draw a man or a woman, not both at the same time. An image from the morning flashed before her, as she frustratedly erased another purely male figure who had no room for curves. She was standing in the open doorway to Matthew's apartment. The door had been opened by a tall, impossibly cool grad student, thinner and more serious than Ana, with trendy glasses and waist-length blond hair. Imposing, to say the least, and wearing nothing but a small, faded blue towel. She wore it like it was embroidered silk from an exotic bazaar. Ana had come to patch up her quarrel with Matthew from the night before—he had called her immature and she had called him an arrogant, pretentious prick—but now she felt wrong-footed. She stuttered, blushed, embarrassed because she felt confusedly that somebody should be and no one else was volunteering. Matthew stood behind the blond creature. Ana saw his expression, gaping like a goldfish and vaguely apologetic, tinged with furtive anticipation over what might happen next. This was what she drew now, her confused impression of the blond Amazon intellectual and the infellectual curly-haired boy behind her, twisted into one monstrous figure.

The circle was filling up now. It was time to move outside the map, to fill in those events that the medieval monks considered took place outside of history completely. For the circle was pinned to another world by four letters in gold, studded along its ring, like abbreviations for the four directions. M-O-R-S. Filling in the triangular space at the top of the gable shape, God himself, in the form of the Majestic Christ. She remembered this bit

was quite damaged, darkened so Christ's features were difficult to make out. She filled them in herself, no longer bothering with the kind of uncertainty that had troubled her earlier. The light was disappearing and she didn't have time for ambiguity. She sketched in his features, his beard and long nose, familiar and comforting. A line of the blessed on his right, making for heaven's gates. A slower, more mournful procession on his left; the damned entering the jaws of hell. Hell was entered through jaws of a ravaging serpent.

Finally, running the car engine for its last ten-minute stint and providing herself briefly with light from the overhead bulb, she worked on the empty lower right hand corner, outside the circle. A traveller on horseback, his head turned back to look at the world behind him, one hand raised. Without the context of action, it was impossible to tell if the hand was raised in a kind of benediction or in farewell. If it was reaching out to hold onto the contents of the circle for a moment longer. A deep red-brown leather satchel hung about his body. The smaller hunter behind him, with a lean greyhound eagerly nipping at his heels, urged the rider on. "Passe avant," he said. Go forward.

She turned the engine off again. The ten minutes had ended and she didn't want to waste any of the battery; there was a long night ahead. The darkness was thick on her face and she wanted to push it away, clear it from her eyes, from where it trickled in her ears, flew up her nostrils and into her lungs but felt helpless. It was too pervasive. Ana thought this was something akin to her mother's worst days after her father's death, when she sat at the kitchen table with vacant eyes, lacking the necessary strength to move. To begin the herculean task of enduring another day. The refracted winter sunlight had shot across the table onto the linoleum, like shards of glass, sharp and glittering. Ana remembered thinking that her mother sat so still because she was afraid to cut herself on them. This was before her aunt urged her mother out of her mourning and on to anti-depressants.

The present is a viscous thing; it manages to run into the cracks and gaps to fill out the conceivable past, the conceivable future. Ana felt that she had been in this car forever, she had been born here, born exhausted from the involuntary contraction of muscles tense against the cold, from hardening her jaw because she was afraid the force of her chattering might chip her teeth. She always would be alone in this car. She had created the world outside like she had created the world of the map. The dark and the cold folded themselves around her as she clung to her gable-shaped vision of another world and whispered to herself. Go forward.