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THE MERCATOR PROJECTION



WRITER IN RESIDENCE

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Viking, North Utsire; southwesterly 5 to 7; occasionally gale 8; rain or showers; moderate or good, occasionally poor.

I had never drawn the land on which we lived; this was my first thought when we found out my wife was pregnant. Despite my job, I had never done it. I might sketch a cartoon version of a city centre for a children's treasure hunt, more illustration than anything else, or stretch my cartography muscles, spending a year detailing a continent - the way it really is, not the way you see on the classic maps, where things are distorted, the global powers given more weight, the undeveloped countries made small. I had drawn so much of the planet, but not our home; not the place in which I now had to build a safe harbour for a child. Cartography, and the abuse of it, had long taught me that the world could be amended, that the very material of it could be altered to fit our desires. But I never thought that I might control this. I never thought it was mine to control.

Slow moving, declining.

I listened to the Shipping Forecast a lot when my wife was pregnant, when we both woke on the crest of her nausea waves at five in the morning, and she found herself seasick on the bathroom floor, and I stayed beside her. She would wave at me to go to bed, but I knew we just needed to right this one room. If the bathroom could hold her gently, her stomach might calm. I brought the radio in from my office, in from amongst the rolled up semi-maps, my works in progress, and plugged it in to the hallway socket. At first it was sheer coincidence, finding it when I was looking for something without beat, something to act as background noise. The voice had a soothing quality; the words were so incomprehensible as to be almost hypnotising. My wife was asleep with her head on the cold tiles within ten minutes. I wrapped myself around her and found a video on YouTube: *5 Hours of the Shipping Forecast, Uninterrupted*. On the bathroom floor, we slept.

*There are warnings of gales in Rockall, Hebrides, Bailey, Fairisle, Faroes and South-East Iceland.
The general synopsis: low.*

The first time, it was just a doodle really, a child's sketch of the house, done while I sat on the edge of the bath listening to the conditions around Fisher and the German Bight, and I drew the bathroom enormous, so expansive that it was easier to breathe inside it, with room for two baths, one for me and one for my wife, and a swimming pool between them, so my beloved could paddle lengths, could be part of the water, and there find a stillness she could not find on land. And when I looked up, the bathroom was bigger. Our tiny shower room was suddenly enormous, and when I looked out I saw that the rest of the house had shrunk until there was almost none of it left. I quickly rubbed out the pencil sketch and everything was normal. My wife had never looked up, never noticed a thing.

Southeasterly at first in northeast Forties, otherwise southwesterly, 5 to 7. Moderate or rough in Forties, otherwise moderate, occasionally rough later. Showers. Good, occasionally poor.

We knew so few other parents, through nothing more than circumstance; we were the oldest of our friend set, both only children from tiny families, and our town was a small one, where young people often left and returned when they were old, their own children, if they had any, grown and gone. We had family support and all the books, but we felt like we were drawing ourselves on blank terrain, carrying all the theory but seeing no other footsteps. There was no one to tell us that the term 'morning sickness' is a misleading one, and that sometimes, despite what the books say, the pregnant vessel can feel itself on choppy waters not just in the first trimester, but through all the long months of the journey too. So I drew, to make my universe smaller, more easy to manage. While my wife grew a whole life, an entire world within her, I thought the least I could do was make the outside one trivial.

Low northwest Malin, one thousand and two, losing its identity by one eight double O Tuesday.

I can only do it, now, when my wife is distracted; when The Shipping Forecast is hypnotising both her and our baby, informing them in impenetrable code of the fate of sailors off all of our coasts. Then, I sit down at my desk and redraw the world, restricting myself to a house no longer; now I sketch the country, and am working on a map of the planet, our home in the middle, only a little bigger than you might truly imagine it is, but the rest of reality so much smaller; everything else just in the margins, shrunk down as to barely exist. My wife and child will never know that I do this, that I remake the map so that they and I are magnetic north, that everything else orients itself to us. When the Forecast ends I erase the drawing, and the world goes back to how it was, and I wait til the next time. But in those brief moments, the world is small, and only we three truly exist in it, and I can keep my seasick family close, and tight, and with nothing but ourselves to trouble us.

South Utsire; gale now ceased. Thank you for your company this evening. Wishing you a safe and peaceful night.