

Ann Fisher-Wirth

From “The Coming of Winter,” Part II of *Carta Marina*

November 15

Friskis & Svettis the billboard blazed
as we passed the gym’s murky windows
where crowds of Swedish legs
flung out in leg-lifts, and disco music

blared through frozen soccer fields.
Frisky and sweaty, likewise, the twenty little girls
who giggle over football-sized calzones

in Mama Mu, the restaurant the Turks run
with free milk for children, black and white
stuffed cows on a piano, where we’ve dropped in,
freezing, on our way back from the woods.

But in the booth facing me the twenty-first child
chews stolidly, gazing...
lost in whatever dream, as her duckling-colored

braids bob and her jaws revolve.
Above her pale blue jacket her eyes meet mine;
I look away, look back, she is watching me.
In this season of coming winter she is my daughter.

Angel with the stubborn underjaw,
fragile as snow,
persistent as dandelion roots,

she looks up at me
from lavender blankets tucked to her chin,
and my soul is weighed in her silence.

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(Streaka / melankoli—

the words I saw at random
in the Swedish refrigerator poetry kit.

At Mama Mu I will have the streak of melancholy.)

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And in the woods, in Hogadalen Nästen,
we came to Röd mossen,
“red mosses,”
where the sun slanted across granite boulders;
through bog, along boardwalks,
we arrived where once I picked
the last lingonberries

that clustered like drops of blood in late September.
As we stood in the new snow among scrub bushes,
completely circled by birch trees,
I thought: I wish we could die here,

before I fuck it up—

while the sun slants into the cup of the clearing.

November 18

We walked in late September beneath the lindens
to Sunnersta where the lake opened out that first day,
dazzling. Two little girls, coltish, ten years old,

sat with their backs to us
on a rock they'd reached by climbing a plank

laid down from shore; they bent toward each other
giggling, murmuring, beneath willow leaves
that arched down, framing them. I have three girls,

two grown— But how far away they are—
like those children in that season where the light

strobed between red apples yellow apples
red apples on the trees yellow apples on the ground
quick strobe back and forth, in the kingdom

of autumn. Now dawn breaks with a light
dusting of snow over the rooftops

of Uppsala. A crane, motionless,
its long arm horizontal above the buildings
like a ladder, is lit every few rungs,

all night the crane like a ladder of stars.
Heat pours out like sand in this apartment.

I have become one of those people
I swore I'd never be, shuffling duffers
in slippers, cold cream slathered

on my cracking skin, up at dawn to cope
with my arthritis. I gaze at myself

in the window as the sky now mottles,
slate, then a tenderer blue, and jackdaws
flying faster as the sun still, somewhere—

December 1

In the Gustavianum, the science museum,
there's an etching of a man, flayed.
His sad, bad face sags from one hand,
and the rest of his skin suit hangs like sleeper pajamas.
He's standing there wearing his muscles and blood veins.

—Correlative object for a wife

One day the waters have their skin on.

The next day, after thirty-seven years,
a voice, a stone falls through.
And all the way down to the place
where currents cease
and the black light thickens, it enters you.

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In love with me again—or, he says, still—
he sends me pictures of his family.
He's not that gawky boy anymore
who smoked Chesterfields, drove a Peugeot,
not the one I lay with on his sister's daybed.
He's at the beach in Birkenstocks and khakis,
an arm thrown round the shoulder
of one of his grinning blond sons,
who's now the age of that moody boy.
I remember the extra-long tibia, though, the wide
wide chest, the slab of hipbone. Oh the heart
wants it all, every lover forever in me,
every lick of the setting sun wetting the wintry birch trees.

Ann Fisher-Wirth began Carta Marina after a phone conversation with her daughter, Jessica Fisher, who is also a poet. As the author describes it:

I was telling her about this wonderful map I had discovered at the Carolina Museum in Uppsala, and she said, "Write poems about the map." "Oh," I replied, "I might write a poem about it," and she said, "I said write poems about the map." The next day, I went to the museum, sat on the floor in front of the wall-sized glass case that held the map, and began to write. The poem bears all the traces of its coming into existence. It unfolds as the year unfolded; it weaves together the various strands of which the year, with its descent into winter and gradual ascent into an agonized spring, was made. When I began to write Carta Marina, I had no idea of the events that would soon shake my life, when what Shakespeare calls the "dim backward and dark abysm of time," came alive once more. During the past few years, I have heard of many people who have reconnected with long-lost friends or lovers through the phenomenon of email. In part, Carta Marina is about such a reconnection and the ways in which it can or cannot coexist with a happy marriage, a reconnection made especially powerful by the fact that it reawakens grief for a long-ago stillborn child. It is about the ways in which the heart can open, and open, and open and can, with great difficulty, negotiate various forms of love, creating a path that honors both what is lost and what remains.

The first largely accurate map of the Northern Countries, completed by the Swedish historian Olaus Magnus in 1539, the map called "Carta Marina" explodes with phantasmagoria. Trolls, sea serpents, reindeer, lions, warriors, monsters all coexist in the map; and in the poem they become metaphors for the wildness, the realm of dream and terror, that constantly haunts our constructions of order. Carta Marina the book is as intense, beautiful, and strange as the map that inspired it.