

The Mapmaker

Neil Gaiman

One describes a tale best by telling the tale. You see? The way one describes a story, to oneself or to the world, is by telling the story. It is a balancing act and it is a dream. The more accurate the map, the more it resembles the territory. The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless.

The tale is the map which is the territory.

You must remember this.

There was an emperor of China almost two thousand years ago who became obsessed by the notion of mapping the land that he ruled. He had China re-created in miniature on an island which he had constructed, at great expense and incidentally a certain amount of loss of life (for the waters were deep and cold) in a lake in the imperial estates. On this island each mountain was become a molehill, and each river the smallest rivulet. It took fully half an hour for the emperor to walk around the perimeter of his island.

Every morning, in the pale light before dawn, a hundred men would wade and swim out to the island and would carefully repair and reconstruct any feature of the landscape that had been damaged by the weather or by wild birds, or taken by the lake; and they would remove and remodel any of the imperial lands that had been damaged in actuality by floods or earthquakes or landslides, to better reflect the world as it was.

The emperor was contented by this, for the better part of a year, and then he noticed within himself a growing dissatisfaction with his island, and he began, in the time before he slept, to plan another map, fully one one-hundredth the size of his dominions. Every hut and house and hall, every tree and hill and beast would be reproduced at one one-hundredth of its height.

It was a grand plan, which would have taxed the imperial treasury to its limits to accomplish it; and it would have needed more men than the mind can encompass, men to map and men to measure, surveyors, census-takers, painters; it would have taken model-makers, potters, builders and craftsmen. Six hundred professional dreamers would have been needed, to reveal the nature of things hidden beneath the roots of trees, and in the deepest mountain caverns, and in the depths of the sea, for the map, to be worth anything, needed to contain both the visible empire and the invisible.

This was the emperor's plan.

His minister of the right hand remonstrated with him one night, as they walked in the palace gardens, under a huge, golden moon.

'You must know, Imperial Majesty,' said the minister of the right hand, 'that what you intend is . . .'

And then, courage failing him, he paused. A pale carp broke the surface of the water,

shattering the reflection of the golden moon into a hundred dancing fragments, each a tiny moon in its own right, and then the moons coalesced into one unbroken circle of reflected light, golden in water the colour of the night sky, which was so rich a purple that it could never have been mistaken for black.

‘. . . Impossible?’ asked the emperor, mildly. It is when emperors and kings are at their mildest that they are at their most dangerous.

‘Nothing that the emperor wishes could ever conceivably be impossible,’ said the minister of the right hand. ‘It will, however, be costly. You will drain the imperial treasury to produce this map. You will empty cities and farms to make the land to place your map upon. You will leave behind you a country that your heirs will be too poor to govern. As your adviser, I would be failing in my duties if I did not advise you of this.’

‘Perhaps you are right,’ said the emperor. ‘Perhaps. But if I were to listen to you and to forget my map-world, to leave it unconsummated, it would haunt my world and my mind and it would spoil the taste of the food on my tongue and of the wine in my mouth.’

And then he paused. Far away in the gardens they could hear the sound of a nightingale. ‘But this map-land,’ confided the emperor, ‘is still only the beginning. For even as it is being constructed, I shall already be pining for and planning my masterpiece.’

‘And what would that be?’ asked the minister of the right hand, mildly.

‘A map,’ said the emperor, ‘of the imperial dominions, in which each house shall be represented by a life-sized house, every mountain shall be depicted by a mountain, every tree by a tree of the same size and type, every river by a river, and every man by a man.’

The minister of the right hand bowed low in the moonlight, and he walked back to the imperial palace several respectful paces behind the emperor, deep in thought.

It is recorded that the emperor died in his sleep, and that is true, as far as it goes – although it could be remarked that his death was not entirely unassisted; and his oldest son, who became emperor in his turn, had little interest in maps or mapmaking.

The island in the lake became a haven for wild birds and all kind of water-fowl, with no man to drive them away, and they pecked down the tiny mud mountains to build their nests, and the lake eroded the shore of the island, and in time it was forgotten entirely, and only the lake remained.

The map was gone, and the mapmaker, but the land lived on.

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From the Introduction of “Fragile Things”, a collection of short stories

(ISBN-10: 0-7553-3413-2)