





HITCH-HIKING NORTH THROUGH the islands of Shetland a Land Rover stopped for me. The driver was a man of about forty; he wore a gas-blue boiler suit and his beard was flecked with white. *Where are you bound?* he asked, with a voice like rust and sea-spray, an accent more Norse than Scots.

*Unst*, I said.

He told me that off the island of Unst, the northernmost of the Shetland Islands, a black-browed albatross had been seen – a species accustomed to the skerries of the sub-Antarctic. *It must have crossed the equator in a storm*, he said, *and got disorientated. Took one look at Unst and thought, 'That looks like home.'*

I was in search of distant islands, in love with the idea that, on a patch of land, protected by a circumference of sea, the obligations and irritations of life would dissolve and a singular clarity of mind would descend. It proved more complicated than that.

Thinking of islands often returns me in memory to the municipal library I visited as a child. The library was one of



the grandest buildings in town – entered directly from the street through heavy brass doors, each one tessellated in panes of glass thick as lenses. By age eight or nine I'd exhausted the children's library and been given an adult borrower's ticket. But as my mother browsed the shelves, often as not I'd sit down on the scratchy carpet tiles and open an immense atlas, running my fingers over distant and unreachable archipelagos as if reading Braille. I hardly dared hope I'd reach any of them; that I have reached a few is something of a relief. And so the love of islands has always, for me, been inextricable from the love of maps.

Cartographers know that to isolate and distil the features of a portion of the earth's surface, in all its inexpressible complexity, is to exert power over it. To transfer that distillation onto paper is in some way to *encompass* it. But it could be said that maps offer only the illusion of understanding a landscape.

*Encompass*, from Latin *en*, meaning to make or put in, and *compass*, to surround, contain, envelop, enclose with steps (*com-passare*). Perhaps island maps, reined in by their coasts, offer a special case. They invite the viewer to indulge the imagination, pace a dreamed perimeter.

I've always found old maps intoxicating. In their wavering outlines, archaic scripts and obsolete navigational marks, they are palimpsests of the ways islands have been imagined over the centuries. In the famous world map in his atlas of 1570 Ortelius injected vast tracts of pure imagination, including a *river of islands* draining a mysterious southern continent.



By their omissions, all maps leave room





for the imagination, and for dreams.



*However beautiful, with their ships and dragons, those old maps were tools of empire and capital. Science is how capitalism knows the world, a friend remarks to me, and the distinctions and details these maps marked out were first of all for merchants and military expeditions. What was marked 'Terra Incognita' was also what remained unvanquished.*

REBECCA SOLNIT

The twelfth-century Chinese scholar Zheng Qiao wrote of the benefits of mingling textual and pictorial descriptions of landscape: *Images (tu) are the warp threads and the written words (shu) are the weft . . . To see the writing without the image is like hearing the voice without seeing the form; to see the image without the writing is like seeing a person but not hearing his words.*

*Lewis*

A few months after my voyage to Shetland, while hitchhiking across the Hebridean island of Lewis, I met a French woman, nineteen years old, who'd received a government grant to travel around Scotland looking for fairies. She had pale blond hair like wisps of cirrostratus; archipelagos of freckles were dotted across her cheeks and nose. She told me she had little money left and often slept rough, painting pictures in exchange for meals – for paint she snapped open biro pens and mingled their contents with coffee.



