

THE MAPPIST

A Short Story by Barry Lopez from *Light Action in the Caribbean* (2000)

When I was an undergraduate at Brown I came across a book called *The City of Ascensions*, about Bogotá. I knew nothing of Bogotá, but I felt the author had captured its essence. My view was that Onesimo Peña had not written a travel book but a work about the soul of Bogotá. Even if I were to read it later in life, I thought, I would not be able to get all Peña meant in a single reading. I looked him up at the library but he had apparently written no other books, at least not any in English.

In my senior year I discovered a somewhat better known book, *The City of Trembling Leaves*, by Walter Van Tilburg Clark, about Reno, Nevada. I liked it, but it did not have the superior depth, the integration of Peña's work. Peña, you had the feeling, could walk you through the warrens of Bogotá without a map and put your hands directly on the vitality of any modern century---the baptismal registries of a particular cathedral, a cornerstone that had been taken from one building to be used in another, a London plane tree planted by Bolívar. He had such a command of the idiom of this city, and the book itself demonstrated such complex linkages, it was easy to believe Peña had no other subject, that he could have written nothing else. I believed this was so until I read *The City of Floating Sand* a year later, a book about Cape Town, and then a book about Djakarta, called *The City of Frangipani*. Though the former was by one Frans Haartman and the latter by a Jemboia Tran, each had the distinctive organic layering of the Peña book, and I'd felt certain they'd been written by the same man.

A national library search through the University of Michigan, where I had gone to work on a master's degree in geography, produced hundreds of books with titles similar to these. I had to know whether Peña had written any others and so read or skimmed perhaps thirty of those I got through interlibrary loan. Some, though wretched, were strange enough to be engaging; others were brilliant but not in the way of Peña. I ended up ordering copies of five I believed Peña had written, books about Perth, Lagos, Tokyo, Venice, and Boston, the last a volume by William Smith Everett called *The City of Cod*.

Who Peña actually was I could not determine. Letters to publishers eventually led me to a literary agency in New York where I was told that the author did not wish to be known. I pressed for information about what else he might have written, inquired whether he was still alive (the book about Venice had been published fifty years before), but got nowhere.

As a doctoral student at Duke I made the seven Peña books the basis of a dissertation. I wanted to show in a series of city maps, based on all the detail in Peña's descriptions, what a brilliant exegesis of the social dynamics of these cities he had achieved. My maps showed, for example, how water moved through Djakarta, not just municipal water but also trucked water and, street by street, the flow of rainwater. And how road building in Cape Town reflected the policy of apartheid.

I received quite a few compliments on the work, but I knew the maps did not make apparent the hard, translucent jewel of integration that was each Peña book. I had only created some illustrations, however well done. But had I known whether he was alive or where he lived, I would still have sent him a copy out of a sense of collegiality and respect.

After I finished the dissertation I moved my wife and three young children to Brookline, a suburb of Boston, and set up a practice as a restoration geographer. Fifteen years later I embarked on my fourth or fifth trip to Tokyo as a consultant to a planning firm there, and one evening I took a train out to Chiyodaku to visit bookstores in an area called Jimbocho. Just down the street from a bridge over the Kanda River is the Sanseido Book Store, a regular haunt by then for me. Up on the fifth floor I bought two translations of books by Japanese writers on the Asian architecture response to topography in mountain cities. I was exiting the store on the ground floor, a level given over entirely to maps, closing my coat against the spring night, when I happened to spot the kanji for "Tokyo" on a tier of drawers. I opened one of them to browse. Toward the bottom of a second drawer, I came upon a set of maps that seemed vaguely familiar, though the entries were all in kanji. After a few minutes of leafing through, it dawned on me that

they bore a resemblance to the maps I had done as a student at Duke. I was considering buying one of them as a memento when I caught a name in English in the corner---Corlis Benefideo. It appeared there on every map.

I stared at that name a long while, and I began to consider what you also may be thinking. I bought all thirteen maps. Even without language to identify information in the keys, even without titles, I could decipher what a mapmaker was up to. One designated areas prone to flooding as water from the Sumida River backed up through the city's storm drains. Another showed the location of all the shops dealing in Edo Period manuscripts and artwork. Another, using small pink arrows, showed the point of view of each of Hiroshige's famous One Hundred Views. Yet another showed, in six time-sequenced panels, the rise and decline of horse barns in the city.

My office in Boston was fourteen hours behind me, so I had to leave a message for my assistant, asking him to look up Corlis Benefideo's name. I gave him some contacts at map libraries I used regularly, and asked him to call me back as soon as he had anything, no matter the hour. He called at three a.m. to say that Corlis Benefideo had worked as a mapmaker for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic survey in Washington from 1932 until 1958, and that he was going to fax me some more information.

I dressed and went down to the hotel lobby to wait for the faxes and read them while I stood there. Benefideo was born in Fargo, North Dakota, in 1912. He went to work for the federal government straight out of Grinnell College during the Depression and by 1940 was traveling to various places---Venice, Bogotá, Lagos---in an exchange program. In 1958 he went into private practice as a cartographer in Chicago. His main source of income at the time appeared to be from the production of individualized site maps for large estate homes being built along the North Shore of Lake Michigan. The maps were bound in oversized books, twenty by thirty inches, and showed the vegetation, geology, hydrology, biology, and even archeology of each site. They were subcontracted for under several architects.

Benefideo's Chicago practice closed in 1975. The fax said nothing more was known of his work history, and that he was not listed in any Chicago area phone books, nor with any professional organizations. I faxed back to my office, asking them to check the phone books in Fargo, in Washington, D.C., and around Grinnell, Iowa---Des Moines and those towns. And asking them to try and find someone at what was now the National Geodetic Survey who might have known Benefideo or who could provide some detail.

When I came back to the hotel the following afternoon, there was another fax. No luck with the phone books, I read, but I could call a Maxwell Abert at the National Survey who'd worked with Benefideo. I waited the necessary few hours for the time change and called.

Abert said he had overlapped with Benefideo for one year, 1958, and though Benefideo had left voluntarily, it wasn't his idea.

"What you had to understand about Corlis," he said, "was that he was a patriot. Now, that word today, I don't know, means maybe nothing, but Corlis felt this very strong commitment to his country, and to a certain kind of mapmaking, and he and the Survey just ended up on a collision course. The way Corlis worked, you see, the way he approached things, slowed down the production of maps. That wasn't any good from a bureaucratic point of view. He couldn't give up being comprehensive, you understand, and they just didn't know what to do with him,"

"What happened to him?"

"Well, the man spoke five or six languages, and he had both the drafting ability and the conceptual skill of first-rate-cartographer, so the government should have done something to keep the guy---and he was also very loyal---but they didn't. Oh, his last year they created a project for him, but it was only temporary. He saw they didn't want him. He moved to Chicago---but you said you knew that."

"Mmm. Do you know where he went after Chicago?"

"I do. He went to Fargo. And that's the last I know. I wrote him there until 1985---he'd have been in his seventies---and then the last letter came back 'no forwarding address.' So that's the last I heard. I believe he must have died. He'd be, what, eighty-eight now."

"What was the special project?"

"Well Corlis, you know, he was like something out of a WPA project, like Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and James Agee and them, people that had this sense of America as a country under siege, undergoing a trial during the Depression, a society that needed its dignity back. Corlis believed that in order to effect any political or social change, you had to know exactly what you were talking about. You had to know what the country itself--the ground, the real thing, not some political abstraction---was all about. So he proposed this series of forty-eight sets of maps---this was just before Alaska and Hawaii came in---a series for each state that would show the geology and hydrology, where the water was, you know, and the botany and biology, and the history of the place from Native American times.

"Well, a hundred people working hundred-hour weeks for a decade might get it all down, you know---it was monumental, what he was proposing. But to keep him around, to have him in the office, the Survey created this pilot project so he could come up with an approach that might get it done in a reasonable amount of time---why, I don't know; the government works on most things forever---but that's what he did. I never saw the results, but if you ever wanted to see disillusionment in a man, you should have seen Corlis in those last months. He tried congressmen, he tried senators, he tried other people in Commerce, he tried everybody, but I think they all had the same sense of him, that he was an obstructionist. They'd eat a guy like that alive on the Hill today, the same way. He just wasn't very practical. But he was a good man."

I got the address in Fargo and thanked Mr. Abert. It turned out to be where Benefideo's parents had lived until they died. The house was sold in 1985. And that was that.

When I returned to Boston I reread *The City of Ascensions*. It's a beautiful book, so tender toward the city, and proceeding on the assumption that Bogotá was the living idea of its inhabitants. I thought Benefideo's books would make an exceptional subject for a senior project in history or geography, and wanted to suggest it to my older daughter, Stephanie. How, I might ask her, do we cultivate people like Corlis Benefideo? Do they all finally return to the rural districts from which they come, unable or unwilling to fully adapt to the goals, the tone, of a progressive society? Was Corlis familiar with the work of Lewis Mumford? Would you call him a populist?

Stephanie, about to finish her junior year at Bryn Mawr, had an interest in cities and geography, but I didn't know how to follow up on this with her. Her interests were there in spite of my promotions.

One morning, several months after I got back from Tokyo, I walked into the office and saw a note in the center of my desk, a few words from my diligent assistant. It was Benefideo's address---Box 117, Garrison, North Dakota 58540. I got out the office atlas. Garrison is halfway between Minot and Bismarck, just north of Lake Sakakawea. No phone.

I wrote him a brief letter, saying I'd recently bought a set of his maps in Tokyo, asking if he was indeed the author of the books, and telling him how much I admired them and that I had based my Ph. D. dissertation on them. I praised the integrity of the work he had done, and said I was intrigued by his last survey project, and would also like to see one of the Chicago publications sometimes.

A week later I got a note. "Dear Mr. Trevino," it read, "I appreciate your kind words about my work. I am still at it. Come for a visit if you wish. I will be back from a trip in late September, so the first week of October would be fine. Sincerely, Corlis Benefideo."

I located a motel in Garrison, got plane tickets to Bismarck, arranged a rental car, and then wrote Mr. Benefideo and told him I was coming, and that if he would send me his street address I would be at his door at nine a.m. on October second. The address he sent, 15088 State Highway 37, was a few miles east of Garrison. A hand-rendered map in colored pencil, which made tears well up in my eyes, showed how to get to the house, which lay a ways off the road in a grove of ash trees he had sketched.

The days of waiting made me anxious and aware of my vulnerability. I asked both my daughters and my son if they wanted to go. No, school was starting, they wanted to be with their friends. My wife debated, then said no. She thought that this was something that would go best if I went alone.

Corlis was straddling the sill of his door as I drove in to his yard. He wore a pair of khaki trousers, a khaki shirt, and a khaki ball cap. He was about five foot six and lean. Though spry, he showed evidence of arthritis and the other infirmities of age in his walk and handshake.

During breakfast I noticed a set of *The City of* books on his shelves. There were eight, which meant I'd missed one. After breakfast he asked if I had brought any binoculars, and whether I'd be interested in visiting a wildlife refuge a few miles away off the Bismarck highway, to watch ducks and geese coming in from Canada. He made a picnic lunch and we drove over and had a fine time. I had no binoculars with me and little interest in the birds to start with, but with his guidance and animation I came to appreciate the place. We saw more than a million birds that day, he said.

When we got back to the house I asked if I could scan his bookshelves while he fixed dinner. He had thousands of books, a significant number of them in Spanish and French and some in Japanese. (The eighth book was called *The City of Geraniums*, about Lima.) On the walls of a large room that incorporated the kitchen and dining area was perhaps the most astonishing collection of hand-drawn maps I had ever seen outside of a library. Among them were two of McKenzie's map sketches from his exploration of northern Canada; four of FitzRoy's coastal elevations from Chile, made during the voyage with Darwin; one of Humbolt's maps of the Orinoco; and a half dozen sketches of the Thames docks by Samuel Pepys.

Mr. Benefideo made us a dinner of canned soup, canned meat, and canned vegetables. For dessert he served fresh fruit, some store-bought cookies, and instant coffee. I studied him at the table. His forehead was high, and a prominent jaw and large nose further elongated his face. His eyes were pale blue, his skin burnished and dark, like a Palermo fisherman's. His ears flared slightly. His hair, still black on top, was close cropped. There was little in the face but the alertness of the eyes to give you a sense of the importance of his work.

After dinner our conversation took a more satisfying turn. He had discouraged conversation while we were watching the birds, and he had seemed disinclined to talk while he was riding in the car. Our exchanges around dinner--- which was quick---were broken up by its preparation and by clearing the table. A little to my surprise, he offered me Mexican tequila after the meal. I declined, noticing the bottle had no label, but sat with him on the porch while he drank.

Yes, he said, he'd used the pen names to keep the government from finding out what else he'd been up to in those cities. And yes, the experience with the Survey had made him a little bitter, but it had also opened the way to other things. His work in Chicago had satisfied him---the map sets for the estate architects and their wealthy clients, he made clear, were a minor thing; his real business in those years was in other countries, where hand-drawn and hand-colored maps still were welcome and enthused over. The estate map books, however, had allowed him to keep his hand in on the kind of work he wanted to pursue more fully one day. In 1975 he came back to Fargo to take care of his parents. When they died he sold the house and moved to Garrison. He had a government pension---when he said this he flicked his eyebrows, as though in the end he had gotten the best of the government. He had a small income from his books, he told me, mostly the foreign editions. And he had put some money away, so he'd been able to buy this place.

"What are you doing now?"

"The North Dakota series, the work I proposed in Washington in fifty-seven."

"The hydrological maps, the biological maps?"

"Yes. I subdivided the state into different sections, the actual number depending on whatever scale I needed for that subject. I've been doing them for fifteen years now, a thousand six hundred and fifty-one maps. I want to finish them, you know, so that if anyone ever wants to duplicate the work, they'll have a good idea of how to go about it."

He gazed at me in a slightly disturbing, almost accusatory way.

"Are you going to donate the maps, then, to a place where they can be studied?"

"North Dakota Museum of Art, in Grand Forks."

"Did you never marry, never have children?"

"I'm not sure, you know. No, I never married---I asked a few times, but was turned down. I didn't have the features, I think, and, early on, no money. Afterward, I developed a way of life that was really too much my own on a day-to-day basis. But, you know, I've been the beneficiary of great kindness in my life, and some of it has come from women who were, or are, very dear to me. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I do."

"As for children, I think maybe there are one or two. In Bogotá. Venice. Does it shock you?"

"People are not shocked by things like this anymore, Mister Benefideo."

"That's too bad. I am. I have made my peace with it, though. Would you like to see the maps?"

"The Dakota series?"

Mr. Benefideo took me to a second large room with more stunning maps on the walls, six or eight tiers of large map drawers, and a worktable the perimeter of which was stained with hundreds of shades of watercolors surrounding a gleaming white area about three feet square. He turned on some track lighting which made the room very bright and pointed me to a swivel stool in front of an empty table, a smooth, broad surface of some waxed and dark wood.

From an adjacent drawer he pulled out a set of large maps, which he laid in front of me.

"As you go through, swing them to the side there. I'll restack them."

The first map was of ephemeral streams in the northeast quadrant of the state.

"These streams," he pointed out, "run only during wet periods, some but once in twenty years. Some don't have any names."

The information was strikingly presented and beautifully drawn. The instruction you needed to get oriented---where the Red River was, where the county lines were---was just enough, so it barely impinged on the actual subject matter of the map. The balance was perfect.

The next map showed fence lines, along the Missouri River in a central part of the state.

"These are done at twenty-year intervals, going back to eighteen forty. Fences are like roads, they proliferate. They're never completely removed."

The following map was a geological rendering of McIntosh County's bedrock geology. As I took in the shape and colors, the subdivided shades of purple and green and blue, Mr. Benefideo slid a large hand-colored transparency across the sheet, a soil map of the same area. You could imagine looking down through a variety of soil types to the bedrock below.

"Or," he said, and slid an opaque map with the same information across in front of me, the yellows and browns of a dozen silts, clays, and sands.

The next sheet was of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century foot trails in the western half of the state.

"But how did you compile this information?"

"Inspection and interviews. Close personal observation and talking with long term residents. It's a hard thing, really, to erase a trail. A lot of information can be recovered if you stay at it."

When he placed the next map in front of me, the summer distribution of Swainson's hawks, and then slid in next to it a map showing the overlapping summer distribution of its main prey species, the Richardson's ground squirrel, the precision and revelation were too much for me.

I turned to face him. "I've never seen anything that approaches this, this"---my gesture across the surface of the table included everything. "It's not just the information, or the execution---I mean, the technique is flawless, the water-coloring, your choices of scale---but it's like the books, there's so much more."

"That's the idea, don't you think, Mister Trevino?"

"Of course, but nobody has the time for this kind of field work anymore."

"That's unfortunate, because this information is what we need, you know. This shows history and how people fit the places they occupy. It's about what gets erased and what comes to replace it. The maps reveal the foundations beneath the ephemera."

"What about us, though?" I blurted, resisting his pronouncement. "In the books, in *City of Aspic* in particular, there is such a palpable love of human life in the cities, and here---"

"I do not have to live up to the history of Venice, Mister Trevino," he interrupted, "but I am obliged to shoulder the history of my own country. I could show you here the whole coming and going of the Mandan nation, wiped out in eighteen thirty-seven by a smallpox epidemic. I could show you the arrival of German and Scandinavian farmers changed the composition of the topsoil, and the places where Charles Bodmer painted, and the evolution of red-light districts in Fargo---all that with pleasure. I've nothing against human passion, human longing. What I oppose is blind devotion to progress, and the venality of material wealth. If we're going to trade the priceless for the common, I want to know exactly what the terms are."

I had no response. His position was as difficult to assail as it would be to promote.

"You mean," I finally ventured, "that someone else will have to do the maps that show the spread of the Wal-Mart empire in North Dakota?"

"I won't be doing those things."

His tone was assertive but not testy. He wasn't even seeking my agreement.

"My daughter," I said, changing the subject, "wants to be an environmental historian. She has a good head for it, and I know she's interested---she wants to discover the kind of information you need to have to build a stable society. I'm sure it comes partly from looking at what's already there, as you suggest, like the birds this morning, how that movement, those movements, might determine the architecture of a society. I'm wondering---could I ever send her out? Maybe to help? Would you spend a few days with her?"

"I'd be glad to speak with her," he said, after considering the question. "I'd train her, if it came to that. "

"Thank you."

He began squaring the maps up to place them back in the drawer.

"You know, Mister Trevino---Phillip, if I may, and you may call me Corlis---the question is about you, really." He shut the drawer and gestured me toward the door of the room, which he closed behind us.

"You represent a questing but lost generation of people. I think you know what I mean. You made it clear this morning, talking nostalgically about my books, that you think an elegant order has disappeared, something that shows the way." We were standing at the corner of the dining table with our hands on the chair backs. "It's wonderful, of course, that you brought your daughter into the conversation tonight, and certainly we're both going to have to depend on her, on her thinking. But the real question, now, is what will *you* do? Because you can't expect her to take up something you wish for yourself, a way of seeing the world. You send her here, if it turns out to be what she wants, but don't make the mistake of thinking you, or I or anyone, knows how the world is meant to work. The world is a miracle, unfolding in the pitch dark. We're lighting candles. Those maps---they are my candles. And I can't extinguish them for anyone."

He crossed to his shelves and took down his copy of *The City of Geraniums*. He handed it to me and we went to the door.

"If you want to come back in the morning for breakfast, please do. Or, there is a cafe, the Dogwood, next to the motel. It's good. However you wish."

We said good night and I moved out through pools of dark beneath the ash trees to where I'd parked the car. I set the book on the seat opposite and started the engine. The headlights swept the front of the house as I turned past it, catching the salute of his hand, and then he was gone.

I inverted the image of the map from his letter in my mind and began driving south to the highway. After a few moments I turned off the headlights and rolled down the window. I listened to the tires crushing gravel in the roadbed. The sound of it helped me hold the road, together with instinct and the memory of earlier having driven it. I felt the volume of space beneath the clear, star-ridden sky, and moved over the dark prairie like a barn-bound horse.