A Field Guide to Getting Lost

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VIKING

The first time I got drunk was on Elijah's wine. I was eight or so. It was Passover, the feast that celebrates the flight from Egypt and invites the prophet into the house. I was sitting at the grown-ups' table, because when my parents and this other couple joined forces there were five boys altogether, and the adults had decided that I was better off being ignored by their generation than mine. The tablecloth was red and orange, cluttered with glasses, plates, serving dishes, silver, and candles. I confused the stemmed goblet set out for the prophet with my own adjoining shot glass of sweet ruby wine and drank it up. When my mother eventually noticed, I lurched and grinned a little, but when she looked upset, I imitated sobriety instead of tipsiness.

She was a lapsed Catholic, and the other woman a former Protestant, but their husbands were Jews, and the women thought it good to keep up the custom for the kids. So the Passover glass of wine was set out for Elijah. In some versions, he will come back to earth at the end of time and answer all the unanswerable questions. In others, he wanders the earth in rags, answering difficult questions for scholars. I don't know if the rest of the tradition was followed and a door left open

for him to enter by, but I can picture the orange front door or one of the sliding glass doors into the backyard of this ranch-style house in a small valley open to the cool night air of spring. Ordinarily, we locked doors, though nothing unexpected came down our street in this northernmost subdivision in the county but wildlife, deer tap-tapping on the asphalt in the early hours, raccoons and skunks hiding in the shrubbery. This opening the door to night, prophecy, and the end of time would have been a thrilling violation of ordinary practice. Nor can I recall what the wine opened up for me—perhaps a happier detachment from the conversation going on above me, a sense of limpidness in the suddenly tangible gravity of a small body on this middle-sized planet.

Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go. Three years ago I was giving a workshop in the Rockies. A student came in bearing a quote from what she said was the pre-Socratic philosopher Meno. It read, "How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?" I copied it down, and it has stayed with me since. The student made big transparent photographs of swimmers underwater and hung them from the ceiling with the light shining through them, so that to walk among them was to have the shadows of swimmers travel across your body in a space that itself came to seem aquatic and mysterious. The question she carried struck

me as the basic tactical question in life. The things we want are transformative, and we don't know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation. Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration—how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?

Certainly for artists of all stripes, the unknown, the idea or the form or the tale that has not yet arrived, is what must be found. It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophesies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; it's where their work comes from, although its arrival signals the beginning of the long disciplined process of making it their own. Scientists too, as J. Robert Oppenheimer once remarked, "live always at the 'edge of mystery'—the boundary of the unknown." But they transform the unknown into the known, haul it in like fishermen; artists get you out into that dark sea.

Edgar Allan Poe declared, "All experience, in matters of philosophical discovery, teaches us that, in such discovery, it is the unforeseen upon which we must calculate most largely." Poe is consciously juxtaposing the word "calculate," which implies a cold counting up of the facts or measurements, with "the unforeseen," that which cannot be measured or counted, only anticipated. How do you calculate upon the unforeseen? It seems to be an art of recognizing the role of the unforeseen, of keeping your balance amid surprises, of collaborating with chance, of recognizing that there are some essential mysteries in the world and thereby a limit to

calculation, to plan, to control. To calculate on the unforeseen is perhaps exactly the paradoxical operation that life most requires of us.

On a celebrated midwinter's night in 1817 the poet John Keats walked home talking with some friends "and several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature. . . . I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." One way or another this notion occurs over and over again, like the spots labeled "terra incognita" on old maps.

"Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more," says the twentieth-century philosopher-essayist Walter Benjamin. "But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for quite a different schooling." To lose yourself: a voluptuous surrender, lost in your arms, lost to the world, utterly immersed in what is present so that its surroundings fade away. In Benjamin's terms, to be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography.

That thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost. The word "lost" comes from

the Old Norse *los,* meaning the disbanding of an army, and this origin suggests soldiers falling out of formation to go home, a truce with the wide world. I worry now that many people never disband their armies, never go beyond what they know. Advertising, alarmist news, technology, incessant busyness, and the design of public and private space conspire to make it so. A recent article about the return of wildlife to suburbia described snow-covered yards in which the footprints of animals are abundant and those of children are entirely absent. As far as the animals are concerned, the suburbs are an abandoned landscape, and so they roam with confidence. Children seldom roam, even in the safest places. Because of their parents' fear of the monstrous things that might happen (and do happen, but rarely), the wonderful things that happen as a matter of course are stripped away from them. For me, childhood roaming was what developed self-reliance, a sense of direction and adventure, imagination, a will to explore, to be able to get a little lost and then figure out the way back. I wonder what will come of placing this generation under house arrest.

That summer in the Rockies when I heard Meno's question, I went on a walk with the students into a landscape I'd never seen before. Between the white columns of aspens, delicate green plants grew knee-deep, sporting leaves like green fans and lozenges and scallops, and the stems waved white and violet flowers in the breeze. The path led down to a river dear to bears. When we got back, a strong brown-skinned

woman was waiting at the trailhead, a woman I'd met briefly a decade earlier. That she recognized me and I recalled her was surprising; that we became friends after this second meeting was my good fortune. Sallie had long been a member of the Mountain Search and Rescue team, and that day at the trailhead she was on a routine mission—one of those quests for lost hikers in which, she said, they usually reappear somewhere near where they vanished. She was monitoring her radio and watching to see who came up that trail, one of the trails the straying party was likely to appear on, and so she found me. The Rockies thereabouts are like crumpled fabric, a steep landscape of ridges and valleys running in all directions, easy to get lost in and not so hard to walk out of, down to the roads that run through the bottom of a lot of the valleys. For the search-and-rescue volunteers themselves, every rescue is a trip into the unknown. They may find a grateful person or a corpse, may find quickly or after weeks of intensive fieldwork, or never find the missing or solve their mystery at all.

Three years later I went back to visit Sallie and her mountains and ask her about getting lost. One day of that visit we walked along the Continental Divide on a path that rose from twelve thousand feet along ridgelines, across the alpine tundra carpeting the landscape above tree line. As we proceeded uphill, the view opened up in all directions until our trail seemed like the center seam of a world hemmed all around the horizon in rows of jagged blue mountains. Calling this place the Continental Divide made you picture water

flowing toward both oceans, the spine of mountains running most of the length of the continent, made you imagine the cardinal directions radiating from it, gave you a sense of where you were in the most metaphysical if not the most practical sense. I would have walked forever into those heights, but thunder in the massed clouds and a long bolt of lightning made Sallie turn around. On the way down, I asked her about the rescues that stood out for her. One was about rescuing a man killed by lightning, not an uncommon way to die up there, which is why we were heading downhill from that glorious crest.

Then, she told me about a lost eleven-year-old, a deaf boy who was also losing his eyesight as part of a degenerative disease that would eventually cut short his life. He had been at a camp where the counselors took the kids on an excursion and then led them in a game of hide-and-seek. He must have hidden too well, for they could not find him when the day was done, and he did not find his way back. Search and Rescue was called out in the dark, and Sallie went into the swampy area with dread, expecting that in that nearly freezing night they could find nothing but a body. They blanketed the area, and just as the sun came over the horizon, she heard a whistle and ran toward it. It was the boy, shivering and blowing a whistle, and she hugged him and then stripped off most of her clothing to put it on him. He had done everything right—his whistle had not been loud enough for the counselors to hear above the running water, but he had whistled un-

til nightfall, then curled up between two fallen trees, and begun whistling again as soon as it was light. He was radiant at being found, and she was in tears at finding him.

Search-and-rescue teams have made an art of finding and a science of how people get lost, though as many or more of their forays are rescues for people who are injured or stranded. The simplest answer nowadays for literal getting lost is that a lot of the people who get lost aren't paying attention when they do so, don't know what to do when they realize they don't know how to return, or don't admit they don't know. There's an art of attending to weather, to the route you take, to the landmarks along the way, to how if you turn around you can see how different the journey back looks from the journey out, to reading the sun and moon and stars to orient yourself, to the direction of running water, to the thousand things that make the wild a text that can be read by the literate. The lost are often illiterate in this language that is the language of the earth itself, or don't stop to read it. And there's another art of being at home in the unknown, so that being in its midst isn't cause for panic or suffering, of being at home with being lost. That ability may not be so far astray from Keats's capability "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts." (Cell phones and GPS have become substitutes for this ability as more and more people use them to order their own rescues like pizza, though there are still many places without phone signals.)

Hunters get lost a lot in this stretch of the Rockies, Sallie's friend Landon told me, sitting at her desk surrounded by photographs of family and animals on the ranch she ran with her husband, because they routinely go off trail in pursuit of game. She told me about a deer hunter who glanced around on a plateau where the peaks in opposite directions look identical. Where he stood, one of those sets of peaks was obscured by trees, so he later traveled in exactly the wrong direction. Convinced that arrival was just over the next ridge or the next, he walked all day and night, exhausting himself and getting chilled and then, with the delusion of severe hypothermia, he began to feel hot and to shed his clothes, leaving a trail of garments they tracked him by for the last few miles. Children, Landon said, are good at getting lost, because "the key in survival is knowing you're lost": they don't stray far, they curl up in some sheltered place at night, they know they need help.

Landon talked about the old skills and instincts that people need in the wild and about her husband's uncanny intuition, which she saw as much one of those abilities as all the concrete arts of navigating, tracking, and surviving she studied. He had driven a snowmobile right up to the feet of a doctor lost when a warm winter walk turned into a whiteout, knowing by some unnameable instinct where the freezing man was, off the trail and across a snowed-over meadow. A ranch hand had commented on how strange another rescue had been because they had gone out into the snowy

night silently, instead of calling. The rancher didn't call because he knew where he was headed, and he stopped on the brink of the ledge below which the skier was stuck. The lost skier had tried to follow the stream out, usually a good technique for navigating, but this stream narrowed and deepened until it was a series of waterfalls and precipitous drops. The skier had gotten stranded down a drop, huddled up with his sweater over his knees. The wet sweater was so frozen they'd almost had to chip him out of it.

I was trained by an outdoorsman who insisted you should always carry rain gear, water, and other supplies on the least excursion, that you should be prepared to be out for any amount of time, since plans go astray and the one certain thing about weather is that it changes. My skills are not notable, but I never seem to do more than flirt with getting lost on streets and trails and highways and sometimes cross-country, touching the edge of the unknown that sharpens the senses. I love going out of my way, beyond what I know, and finding my way back a few extra miles, by another trail, with a compass that argues with a map, with strangers' contrary anecdotal directions. Nights alone in motels in remote western towns where I know no one and no one I know knows where I am, nights with the strange paintings and floral spreads and cable television that furnish a reprieve from my own biography, when in Benjamin's terms I have lost myself though I know where I am. Moments when I say to myself as feet or car clear a crest or round a bend, I have never seen this

place before. Times when some architectural detail or vista that has escaped me these many years says to me that I never did know where I was, even when I was home. Stories that make the familiar strange again, like those that revealed the lost landscapes, lost cemeteries, lost species around my home. Conversations that make everything around them disappear. Dreams that I forget until I realize they have colored everything I felt and did that day. Getting lost like that seems like the beginning of finding your way or finding another way, though there are other ways of being lost.

Nineteenth-century Americans seldom seem to have gotten lost as disastrously as the strays and corpses picked up by search-and-rescue teams. I went looking for their tales of being lost and found that being off course for a day or a week wasn't a disaster for those who didn't keep a tight schedule, knew how to live off the land, how to track, how to navigate by heavenly bodies, waterways, and word-of-mouth in those places before they were mapped. "I never was lost in the woods in my whole life," said Daniel Boone, "though once I was confused for three days." For Boone the distinction is a legitimate one, since he could eventually get himself back to where he knew where he was and knew what to do betweentimes. Sacajawea's celebrated role on the Lewis and Clark expedition wasn't primarily that of a navigator; she made their being lost more viable by her knowledge of useful plants, of languages, by the way she and her infant signified to the tribes they encountered that this was not a war party, and

perhaps by her sense that all this was home, or somebody's home. Like her, a lot of the white scouts, trappers, and explorers were at home in the unknown, for though the particular place might be unfamiliar to them, the wild was in many cases their chosen residence. Explorers, the historian Aaron Sachs wrote me in answer to a question, "were always lost, because they'd never been to these places before. They never expected to know exactly where they were. Yet, at the same time, many of them knew their instruments pretty well and understood their trajectories within a reasonable degree of accuracy. In my opinion, their most important skill was simply a sense of optimism about surviving and finding their way." Lost, these people I talked to helped me understand, was mostly a state of mind, and this applies as much to all the metaphysical and metaphorical states of being lost as to blundering around in the backcountry.

The question then is how to get lost. Never to get lost is not to live, not to know how to get lost brings you to destruction, and somewhere in the terra incognita in between lies a life of discovery. Along with his own words, Sachs sent me a chunk of Thoreau, for whom navigating life and wilderness and meaning are the same art, and who slips subtly from one to the other in the course of a sentence. "It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable, experience to be lost in the woods any time," he wrote in *Walden*. "Not till we are completely lost, or turned round,—for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this

world to be lost,—do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations." Thoreau is playing with the biblical question about what it profits a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul. Lose the whole world, he asserts, get lost in it, and find your soul.

"How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?" I carried Meno's question around with me for years and then, when everything was going wrong, friends came bearing stories, one after another, and they seemed to provide, if not answers, at least milestones and signposts. Out of the blue, May sent me a long passage by Virginia Woolf she'd copied in round black letters on thick unlined paper. It was about a mother and wife alone at the end of the day: "For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the

range of experience seemed limitless. . . . Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless."

That passage from *To the Lighthouse* echoed something of Woolf's I already knew, her essay about walking that declared, "As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's room. . . . Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give one the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others." For Woolf, getting lost was not a matter of geography so much as identity, a passionate desire, even an urgent need, to become no one and anyone, to shake off the shackles that remind you who you are, who others think you are. This dissolution of identity is familiar to travelers in foreign places and remote fastnesses, but Woolf, with her acute perception of the nuances of consciousness, could find it in a stroll down the street, a moment's solitude in an armchair. Woolf was not a romantic, not a celebrant of that getting lost that is erotic love, in which the beloved becomes an invitation to become who you secretly, dormantly, like a locust underground waiting for the seventeen-year call, already are in hiding, that love for the other that is also a desire to reside in your

own mystery in the mystery of others. Her getting lost was solitary, like Thoreau's.

Malcolm, apropos of nothing at all, brought up the Wintu in north-central California, who don't use the words *left* and *right* to describe their own bodies but use the cardinal directions. I was enraptured by this description of a language and behind it a cultural imagination in which the self only exists in reference to the rest of the world, no you without mountains, without sun, without sky. As Dorothy Lee wrote, "When the Wintu goes up the river, the hills are to the west, the river to the east; and a mosquito bites him on the west arm. When he returns, the hills are still to the west, but, when he scratches his mosquito bite, he scratches his east arm." In that language, the self is never lost the way so many contemporary people who get lost in the wild are lost, without knowing the directions, without tracking their relationship not just to the trail but to the horizon and the light and the stars, but such a speaker would be lost without a world to connect to, lost in the modern limbos of subways and department stores. In Wintu, it's the world that's stable, yourself that's contingent, that's nothing apart from its surroundings.

I never heard of a stronger sense of place and direction, but that directional consciousness is embedded in a language almost lost. A decade ago there were six to ten speakers of Wintu, six people fluent in a language in which the self was not the autonomous entity we think we are when we carry our rights and lefts with

us. The last fluent speaker of northern Wintu, Flora Jones, died in 2003, but the man who e-mailed me that information, Matt Root, mentioned that three Wintu people and one Pit River neighbor "retain fractions of the old Wintu slang and pronunciation system." He himself studied the language and hoped that it would be revived, so that his people would "begin to make connections with their past through our language. The Wintu world view is indeed unique, it is our intimacy with our habitat that complements this uniqueness, and it is thru the eventual reintroduction of people, place, culture, and history that will begin to heal the long held scars of removal and outright genocide. The precursors to the loss of language today." Or as a recent article about the hundred rapidly vanishing indigenous languages of California put it, "Such language differentiation may be tied to ecological differentiation. In this view, people adapted their words to the ecological niches they occupied, and California's highly varied ecology encouraged its lingustic diversity. The theory is supported by maps indicating that areas with greater numbers of animal and plant species also have greater numbers of languages."

It would be nice to imagine that the Wintu were once so perfectly situated in a world of known boundaries that they had no experience of being lost, but their neighbors to the north, the Pit River or Achumawi people, suggest that this was probably not so. One day I went to meet friends at a performance in a city park, but when I could not find them in the crowd, I wandered into a used bookstore and found an old book. In it, Jaime de Angulo, the wild Spanish storyteller-anthropologist who eighty years ago spent considerable time among these people, wrote, "I want to speak now of a certain curious phenomenon found among the Pit River Indians. The Indians refer to it in English as 'wandering.' They say of a certain man, 'He is wandering,' or 'He has started to wander.' It would seem that under certain conditions of mental stress an individual finds life in his accustomed surroundings too hard to bear. Such a man starts to wander. He goes about the country, traveling aimlessly. He will stop here and there at the camps of friends or relations, moving on, never stopping at any place longer than a few days. He will not make any outward show of grief, sorrow or worry. . . . The Wanderer, man or woman, shuns camps and villages, remains in wild, lonely places, on the tops of mountains, in the bottoms of canyons." This wanderer isn't so far from Woolf, and she too knew despair and the desire for what Buddhists call unbeing, the desire that finally led her to walk into a river with pockets full of rocks. It's not about being lost but about trying to lose yourself.

De Angulo goes on to say that wandering can lead to death, to hopelessness, to madness, to various froms of despair, or that it may lead to encounters with other powers in the remoter places a wanderer may go. He concludes, "When you have become quite wild, then perhaps some of the wild things will come to take a look at you, and one of them may perhaps take a fancy to

you, not because you are suffering and cold, but simply because he happens to like your looks. When this happens, the wandering is over, and the Indian becomes a shaman." You get lost out of a desire to be lost. But in the place called lost strange things are found, De Angulo's editor notes, "All white men are wanderers, the old people say."

During this long spell when stories rained down, I gave a reading at a bar on a street that faced water before the shoreline was filled in to squeeze a few more blocks of city out of the north face of the San Francisco peninsula. I read a short piece that ended in a downpour and another one about the sea and then went to collect my drink. Carol, the wife of the man who'd invited me to read, waved me over to the bar stool next to her and wound up telling me about the tattoo artist who'd been their neighbor for many years. The tattoo artist was a junkie for decades, and then a scab on his hand from shooting up got infected. He ended up in the hospital with a near-fatal systemic infection, and they had to amputate his arm, his right arm, his working arm. But, to his amazement, at the end of that long period of going to the edge of death and coming back, the doctor told him he was cured of his addiction. He was thrown out of the hospital without his craft, but clean, starting from scratch, as abrupt and overwhelming an emergence into the world as birth. A dragon had been tattooed up that arm, and all but the head of the dragon was gone.

My friend Suzie told me while I was driving her home from that bar about the real meaning of the blindfolded figure of Justice holding the scales. Suzie was drawing her own tarot cards and rethinking each card as she went. Justice, a book on classical lore asserted, stood at the gates of Hades deciding who would go in, and to go in was to be chosen for refinement through suffering, adventure, transformation, a punishing route to the reward that is the transformed self. It made going to hell seem different. And it suggested that justice is a far more complicated and incalculable thing than we often imagine, that if everything is to come out even in the end, then the end is farther away than anticipated and far harder to estimate. It suggests too that to reside in comfort can be to have fallen by the wayside. Go to hell, but keep moving once you get there, come out the other side. Finally she drew a group around a campfire as her picture of justice, saying that justice is helping each other on the journey. Another night, Suzie's partner David told told me about a Hawaiian biologist he met who discovers new species by getting intentionally lost in the rainforest. The density of foliage and overcast skies there make the task easier than in the plateau country of the Wintu.

David had been photographing endangered species in the Hawaiian rainforest and elsewhere for years, and his collections of photographs and Suzie's tarot cards seemed somehow related. Because species disappear when their habitat does, he photographed them against the nowhere of a black backdrop (which some-

times meant propping up a black velvet cloth in the most unlikely places and discouraging climates), and so each creature, each plant, stood as though for a formal portrait alone against the darkness. The photographs looked like cards too, cards from the deck of the world in which each creature describes a history, a way of being in the world, a set of possibilities, a deck from which cards are being thrown away, one after another. Plants and animals are also a language, even in our reduced, domesticated English, where children grow like weeds or come out smelling like roses, the market is made up of bulls and bears, politics of hawks and doves. Like cards, flora and fauna could be read again and again, not only alone but in combination, in the endlessly shifting combinations of a nature that tells its own stories and colors ours, a nature we are losing without knowing even the extent of that loss.

Lost really has two disparate meanings. Losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing. There are objects and people that disappear from your sight or knowledge or possession; you lose a bracelet, a friend, the key. You still know where you are. Everything is familiar except that there is one item less, one missing element. Or you get lost, in which case the world has become larger than your knowledge of it. Either way, there is a loss of control. Imagine yourself streaming through time shedding gloves, umbrellas, wrenches, books, friends, homes, names. This is what the view looks like if you take a

rear-facing seat on the train. Looking forward you constantly acquire moments of arrival, moments of realization, moments of discovery. The wind blows your hair back and you are greeted by what you have never seen before. The material falls away in onrushing experience. It peels off like skin from a molting snake. Of course to forget the past is to lose the sense of loss that is also memory of an absent richness and a set of clues to navigate the present by; the art is not one of forgetting but letting go. And when everything else is gone, you can be rich in loss.

Finally I set out to look for Meno. I had thought that his question would be part of a collection of aphorisms or fragments, like the fragments of Heraclitus. I had a clear picture of a book that doesn't exist. If I'd ever known, I'd forgotten that Meno is the title of one of Plato's dialogues. Socrates faces off with the sophist Meno, and as always in Plato's rigged boxing contests, demolishes his opponent. Sometimes while walking I catch sight of what at a little distance looks like a jewel or flower and turns out a few steps later to be trash. Yet before it is fully revealed, it looks beautiful. So does Meno's question, though it might only be so in the flowery translation I first encountered, out of context. Socrates answers that question, "I know, Meno, what you mean; but just see what a tiresome dispute you are introducing. You argue that man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to en-

quire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire."

The important thing is not that Elijah might show up someday. The important thing is that the doors are left open to the dark every year. Jewish tradition holds that some questions are more significant than their answers, and such is the case with this one. The question as the water-photographer had presented it was like a bell whose reverberations hang on the air for a long time, becoming quieter and quieter but never seeming to do something as simple as stop. Socrates, or Plato, seems determined to stop it. The question arises that arises with many works of art: does the work mean what the artist intended it to mean, does Meno's argument mean what he or Plato intended it to mean? Or is it larger than they intended? For it is not, after all, really a question about whether you can know the unknown, arrive in it, but how to go about looking for it, how to travel.

For most of the dialogue, Socrates rebuts and attacks Meno with logic and argument and even mathematics. But for this question he shifts into mysticism—that is, into unsubstantiatable and poetic assertion. After his first dismissive reply, he adds, "And they say—mark, now, and see whether their words are true—they say that the soul of man is immortal, and at one time has an end, which is termed dying, and at another time is born again, but is never destroyed. And the moral is, that a man ought to live always in perfect holiness. 'For in the ninth year Persephone sends the souls of those from whom she has received the penalty of ancient crime back again from beneath into the light of the sun above, and these are they who become noble kings and mighty men and great in wisdom and are called saintly heroes in after ages.' The soul, then, as being immortal, and having been born again many times, and having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all . . . all enquiry and all learning is but recollection." Socrates says you can know the unknown because you remember it. You already know what seems unknown; you have been here before, but only when you were someone else. This only shifts the location of the unknown from unknown other to unknown self. Meno says, Mystery. Socrates says, On the contrary, Mystery. That much is certain. It can be a kind of compass.

What follows are a few of my own maps.