Excerpts from “Mapping the Sacred Places” by Jan DeBlieu

I once drew a map to my home on the North Carolina Outer Banks for a friend who wanted to visit. I was new then on the Hatteras Island, new to the salt-scorched landscape and interlocking planes of earth, sea and sky. I felt newly awakened as well, as if I had spent the previous years with my eyes and thoughts half-lidded. Every day I set aside time to explore unfamiliar terrain and wonder at the great schools of fish, the falcons and sea birds that migrated past the islands with the tug of seasonal currents.

Since there was not much to show on my map, - just a single road beelining down a skinny arm of sand- I decorated it with my own favorite landmarks. On the north end I put three arches covered with a mane of vertical lines; these were the grassy, camel-hump dunes that fronted the ocean. Halfway to my house I drew a tuxedoed heron with hot-pink legs; this marked the marshy flats where I had stumbled on a group of black-necked stilts and the messy stacks of twigs they used as nests. Last I drew a stick figure crustacean waiving a flag on a nearby beach. I went to that beach often to watch ghost crabs skirmishing, shoving each other with round, pearly claws as if locked in mortal combat. Next to the figure I penciled in the words, “Ghost Crab Acres.”

I meant the map to be comical, but also to honor places on Hatteras where I had witnessed something important or particularly beautiful. I am not much of an illustrator, and at completion the map looked like something a first grader might have drawn. My friend called a few days after she received it. “Are these amusement parks or something?” she asked. I realized sheepishly that the connection I felt to each landmark was too personal, too powerful, to be explained by a simple drawing.

Now I wish I had drawn a new map with equally foolish figures for each of my nine years on these islands. Put together they would compose a running chronicle of the places I have held dear here, a mental history of my courtship with the land…

We map, each of us, mentally and physically, every day of our lives. We map to keep ourselves oriented, and to keep ourselves sane. “The very word ‘lost’ in our language means much more than simple geographical uncertainty;” the urban planner Kevin Lynch once wrote, “it carries overtones of utter disaster… Let the mishap of disorientation once occur, and the sense of anxiety and even terror that accompanies it reveals to us how closely it is linked to our sense of balance and well being.” …”The sweet sense of home is strongest, “ Lynch wrote, “{w}hen home is not only familiar but distinctive as well.”