

ZAZEN

Ch 24 Hazard Maps

I started with FEMA maps.

“This is how they cost out earthquake damage.”

I laid one on the drafting table so Jules could see.

“Sometimes people call them Ground Failure Maps or Hazard Maps. They show you where the land is unstable and prone to liquefaction.”

He leaned over. I traced a river gorge.

“Check that out.”

Jules brought the arm light closer.

“And if you think that’s bad, look at this.”

I unfolded a second map.

“That’s the city.”

Jules shook his head.

“I can’t believe you can just get these.”

“Everybody has them. It’s how they sell insurance.”

But it’s not like we were going to blow up a volcano or anything.

Toppling a transmission tower was really a civil engineering problem. My job was just to figure out whether soil improvement techniques could be crudely adapted to destabilize land on a slope.

The transmission line inter-tie between where we were and all states south was only a few hours from Breaker’s Rise. I began to map the lines running into it because they would be the ones to take out.

My initial research had to be done online so we needed to find a computer. There was an old desktop with dial-up at the Farm, which Tamara kept for guests “Weather reports and porn,” she said. It was her idea of hospitality. Not that I would have used it anyway. If I looked up charge density specs on something like that Grace would have disowned me. And she was everywhere in my thoughts.

We settled on the library computer in Breaker’s Rise. Mostly I would be looking at civil engineering websites and links off the Geological Society of America homepage, which was all pretty tame. As a precaution on my first day

there I spent 45 minutes at the circulation desk talking to Librarian about sedimentary structures and grain size. After that she immediately went to shelve books when she saw me coming.

The library itself was an early Sixties box of tan brick with a flag that specialized in books-on-tape and citizenship classes. Hey Juan, when you're done with those apples, remember to brush up on the Monroe Doctrine. It was also the turnaround spot for seniors on their daily walk and when I was working I'd take breaks and watch them make painstaking U-turns in the parking lot. I almost never saw anyone there that was under fifty who wasn't an immigrant or a visitor. They kept the computer in an alcove near an unused conference room and when I told them I was doing my thesis on a local radiation of paleo-bivalves, they practically wrote my name on the desk.

"The triangles are where they set the first round of charges and the circles are the second. The squares are the settlement platforms," I pointed the blast patterns on the aerial map out to Jules, "We can't do that but that's the idea. The points are about 60 feet from the center. This one caused liquefaction down to 40 meters "

I ate cheese sandwiches for lunch, usually in the car with Jules in the parking lot. Between bites I gave him a tour of the regional seismic record, mostly because I like reminding people that they live on the cusp of a geological catastrophe capable of changing worldwide weather patterns.

Jules reminded me of Credence in some ways, so convinced he was smarter than everyone that whatever he said came out like he was teaching you how to tie your shoes. Watching that habit slip, I saw how similar we really were. Only I had stopped trying to communicate with anyone at all, patronizingly or otherwise. My attitude was fuck you and your myopic mental laziness, tie your own fucking shoes. Under examination it wasn't a more enlightened stance.

Twice I used the payphone at the gas station. The first call I made was to Annette. She was worried about the air quality with the fires. Grace and Miro wanted them to go out there when the babies were born, just in case. Credence said he didn't want to take advantage of a privilege that other

people didn't have, including anyone in Annette's family. Annette agreed, but not really. I could hear it her voice. She changed the subject.

"There's a postcard from Jimmy."

"What's on it?"

"Some hippy woodcut of dandelions and a gay girl on a bicycle," she said.

"You can tell she's gay from the drawing?"

"Kidding."

"Does the girl have a wrench in her back pocket?"

"Yes. Like I said, gay girl on bike."

"I've seen that one."

It was a local artist who sold recycled stationary at the Saturday Market by the Co-op on Colony of the Elect. Jimmy's choice of that as a card presented two possibilities.

Possibility 1: Jimmy had been planning to write me all along and things really were okay between us.

Possibility 2: What happens in New Honduras stays in New Honduras. There would be no images from other places connecting our past and the future. No airports or jungles or Indian women making tortillas. You get what you got, a closed circle.

"You want me to read it to you?" asked Annette, "I'll just read it. She says...She can't believe she really going. It's all like a dream. She'll write you when she's settled, but that that may be a while and you shouldn't take it personally."

Possibility 2.

After Annette, I called Rise Up Singing to get Mirror to deposit my paycheck. I made sure to call during lunchtime so she would answer because she likes having relaxed, non-essential conversations when the restaurant is packed.

"Franklin says if you are on vacation, he needs to know. I told him since he doesn't really own the place after tomorrow it's none of his business. The new owners asked about you and I said you broke your foot at work and they should expect an L&I claim. I told them you tripped on the barrista bar

they're building. I thought that was pretty genius. They turned totally white dude. Not that they could really be any whiter. What else..."

I heard the din of the restaurant in the background. Someone was saying "Excuse me" over and over.

"Do you need to go?" I asked.

"No. It's just some fucking neon spandex biker who wants a medal for not driving his Porsche on the weekend. I hate those stupid helmets. Completely phallic. Hey! I'm a dick, get me a sandwich."

I could hear the kitchen bell dinging but she kept on talking.

"By the way, some Russian named Sasha stopped by and left your Zippo. Didn't you hang out with him some at the party?"

Some glass broke behind her.

"Well, I should probably go," she said.

I reminded her to deposit the check and she said she would. It all seemed very normal, talking to a coworker about bank hours and schedules, catching up on people we knew in common, but as I hung up the receiver it hit me, there would soon come a time when I could no longer call anyone at all, for any reason.

The New Land Trust action in the city was still a week away and every few hours some new group came through picked up friends or supplies and left. I bought a lot of stuff for it—chain, PVC pipes, long underwear, wheat paste and groceries—I put it all on my GSA Grand Canyon credit card. It wasn't like I was going to pay it off anyway. I thought of it as my contribution to the collapse of corporate serfdom.

Most of the time I was too busy to be part of the preparation because there are always two levels to any organization, the one you see and the one you don't. I was now in the latter. Everything went on as before—people worked, cooked, loaded cars, but now there was a pane of glass between most of the guests and me. I knew there were other people involved too but I didn't know who they were. Every now and then I thought I did and would get confused. Sometime it was as simple as a look. Or the way someone was suddenly interested in all my thoughts. But nobody ever said anything

outright. Half the time it was like being on acid and talking to someone not knowing what level the conversation was really operating on. Are we actually talking about this stupid band? Or that dumb girl? Or are we having the real conversation? The one that never stops in the Subterranea.

I didn't see much of Tamara that week. Somebody had to maintain the public face of the host collective and Jules was with me. So she got stuck packing Paper Mache hands and bibles into cars, which she loved. Fucking waste of time and energy, she said. On her knees in the cold by a tarp helping to label and dismantle the ten-foot spine that was to be ceremoniously given to the mayor by the Puppet of Abused Labor.

“Hey Salome! You got anything you want to put in this run?”

I saw her across the muddy driveway, her lavender hair violet against the white sky, and her expression reminded me of something I couldn't quite place but whenever I saw it I felt like anything could happen. A surprise victory? A terrible defeat? I didn't know what it would be but it was going to be different and that was enough.

“You sure you don't have anything?” she yelled.

It was like a homecoming.

Jules and I drove the countryside in the afternoons looking at towers. There was an airbase just over the state border and it turned out what they really wanted was a power outage at the base. Jules said there was an affinity group willing to sabotage a plane if given a chance.

He thought that even trashing one would dramatically change things.

“We have to change what people think they're capable of,” he said.

And I knew too, that movements could catch spontaneously, like Cuba, Elvis, the Velvet Revolution, or Tiananmen Square, without an observable precursor. My own training showed me this. Punctuated Equilibrium. Or even more so, the flipping of poles when compasses suddenly spin off from the demagnetized north and point somewhere else entirely. The rock record is full of it and it happens all the time. A threshold is reached and they flip. I could see that we were at a threshold too, or close, and after all, what had I come out hoping to find but a brilliant insurgency?

Tamara said we needed to do it before the planes were mobilized.

“You know it’s coming,” she said, “Do you have a problem with that?”

Those ugly fucking birds that sound like the end of the world? Let’s see...nope. The idea that I could stop one was thrilling. Way better than Wal-Mart or KGOD or talking to rats.

But it quickly became clear that we weren’t going to be able to use the soil improvement methods the way they were intended. We couldn’t drill to the water table or set charges deep enough with a camera or guard around—Excuse me, wage slave I have to core the earth where you’re standing. Whatever we did was going to be a hack job.

Britta wanted to try to turn a guard. Tamara thought it was idiotic.

“What are you going to do? Buy him beer and tell him about Kropotkin?”

I envisioned the conversation:

Vanguard: Wage Slave, are you aware that you are but a wire nail in the toolbox of capitalism?

Wage Slave: I thought I was chisel.

Vanguard: No, the petite bourgeois are the chisels.

Wage Slave: What about a washer set? Can I be a washer set?

Vanguard: No, my ferret, run free! For I have unlocked your collar with knowledge!

Wage Slave: I want to be a chisel.

Vanguard pushes screaming ferret through hole in fence cut by the clippers of noblesse oblige.

“Well maybe we could bribe him,” said Britta.

Tamara laughed, “With what? Health insurance?”

My scientific opinion was that it was going to come down to finding the right target on the right kind of land and blasting the shit out of it.

“It’s going to have to be a tower with a camera.” I said “not a guard.”

“We’re going to have to work with what we’ve got,” Tamara said.

She poured a pot of boiling water into the sink for the dishes, the little Ulrike. I stood, which I do when I want to get a point across. In high school I had more technical fouls than anyone else on the basketball team.

Tamara stared up at me and retied a little purple braid.

“What?” she said, “You want an ends or means death match? Pick a side. I can argue both.”

And so could I. I let it drop.

Tamara never talked directly about what happened in town with the bombs and fires. But several times in public she mentioned that the search for MANIFESTATION was getting more comprehensive. I said it’s always like that. She laughed.

“Well, I’m just saying, whoever made those calls should be careful.”

When the SWAT teams come over the hill I’ll throw deer teeth at them. What did she expect me to do with that information? She certainly didn’t want me to stop surveying transmission lines.

“Causes and conditions are the near enemy of capitalism,” I told her.

“Right, let’s just hope that last phone doesn’t show up.”

I heard the Rat Queen squeal, trapped as she was by the mountain range, penned by at the great river.

“How close are you?”

Her children scurrying through the brambles.

“Very close.”

Burning monks and art students line the path to the sea but I didn’t feel the same way about it. Working on something tangible was a relief after all those years watching Grace and Miro leave rice on the altar...Oh Great Movement Icons!—each grain a carefully constructed insoluble conflict—Look upon my works ye mighty and despair! No wait...Presente! But of course they’re not. Chavez, Debs, Huey and Bobby, the George Jackson naptime reading group. Compared with that, blowing up a plane, taking down a transmission line and having sex in a warehouse full of strangers was a fucking joy. A perfect expression of sentiment. Unmediated and sharp as a dart.

“That’s right. Fuck creating the crisis,” Tamara said.

She threw an orange peel into the compost.

“Take the opportunity and the crisis creates itself. All that shady bullshit about being ready to step in and lead when the time comes—we shouldn’t be stepping in at all.”

Her blue glitter fingernails on an orange wedge held before her mouth.

“Party politics is all about having the same three people on twenty committees. It doesn’t foster proletariat ‘ownership of the process,’ it’s elitist and self-defeating. Nobody should be protecting anyone from the results of their actions.”

I twitched at the hardness of the stance but deep down I agreed. Anyway, there weren’t enough feathers in the world to soften the landing we were all going to have. Steep curve? Nope. Sheer cliff.

I mapped every transmission line that crossed the river, how they were built and on what. I worked backwards. I studied everything I could about how to avoid harming ‘nearby structures during explosive compaction of saturated cohesionless soils,’ then planned the opposite. Pore water pressures, decks of horizontal blast dispersion, cyclic loading, and shock wave statistics by grain size... But after several hours of soil mechanics and I had to get out. Rolling through the backroads on two-lane highways cresting without vision and taking blind curves I could almost remember what it was like to feel like something good was coming. I fell asleep sometimes and dream of the war like a sea vine dragging me down then woke up and remember that we weren’t there yet, not quite.

Jules and I killed time driving around talking about ex-boyfriends and girlfriends and what kind of music we were into in high school. We agreed on collegiate communists and disagreed on the Squatters movement. He said it was a proto-revolutionary act and I said it was shock troops for real estate speculation. Scouts for the New Honduran army. Regarding food politics, we both thought that you should only eat meat if you thought you could kill it yourself and that the argument over honey was monastic and not organizational. When we talked about our families we both tended to get a little shakier in our opinions and didn’t stay on the subject for too long.

Jules’ parents were back-to-the-land hippies and his grandparents were Slovenian anarchists that escaped to Hungary after the first World War. I told him I knew a Hungarian Prince.

“Great. I’m sure my family probably worked for his.”

“I think they’ve been out of power for a while. He spends all his time listening to the Beach Boys and playing guitar through effects pedals.”

“That’s useful.”

“Maybe not. But it’s beautiful.”

I could see him on an unlit stage one arm raised the other resting on a laptop. Dark blue light around him.

Jules didn’t say anything for a while. We drove along a ridge of short dried grass. I could see the wildfire line where it had come down the mountain and crossed the valley all the way up to the road. On the other side the land ran, tea-green, towards a wide and braided stream that sunk like a handprint into the reeds. I lay my head back on the seat. The towers passed, silver lattices casting shadows on the half-burnt fields.

We found three potential sites, two by the river and one running along a cliff above it. The one on the cliff had a guard shack so we took it off the list. Tamara put it back on.

“We’ll just get him out of there,” she said, “Tell him there’s a sale on elk whistles down the street.”

I didn’t bother to argue. Further surveying showed it to be untenable.

“Now how did I know that was going to be the case?” Tamara said, smiling.

Cause you’re a psychic who should do road shows?

That left two towers, one on a mud cliff and another on a debris flow that had been converted into a ramshackle jetty. At first I liked the mud cliff because it seemed like it would take so little to cause a collapse and the cameras couldn’t see over the edge so there was lots of cover, but the points where we would need to set charges were too high up and I couldn’t figure out a way to get to them, which meant we were going to go after the tower on the jetty. It was a more critical line but carrying almost too much energy. I didn’t want the high voltage fuses to close too quickly. I wanted the load carried as far as it could be and there was a substation across the river not far from the airbase that fed into the larger southbound lines.

Jules was very excited about it.

“It’s like a sand trap surrounded by water. There’s an eight-foot cement wall and three cameras but it looks like they can’t see anything at the water level that’s within 20 yards of the jetty wall.”

The idea was to come up to the jetty by boat, drill whatever holes we could with small equipment, jam a ton of explosives into the rock and hope we could just blow enough chunks out of it to matter.

“Della, what do you think?”

Tamara and Astrid both looked at me. I noticed each of them had yellow plastic barrettes shaped like ears of corn in their hair and I wondered if they coordinated or it was just synchronicity. It made Tamara look like the Goddess of the Underworld and Astrid like a sullen three year old. I remember thinking then, as now, that it’s funny how symbols work. They’re just empty vessels. Swastikas and Sun Wheels. Broken up bits of thought.

“I think it will go in.”

Later that night I looked at a Mercator map I’d printed it out at the library. It was fuzzy where the ink saturated the thin paper. I remember as an undergrad reading that what Mercator was after was a “new and augmented description of Earth corrected for the use of navigation.” I was after that too.

I told Tamara I was glad I hadn’t left with Jimmy, or gone into seclusion with Grace and Miro, and that for the first time my education made sense and I was grateful because it hadn’t for so long, except as an excuse, well, whole populations have died before, and that I wanted her to know how much it meant to be there. Halfway through my speech she started to cry. I was totally unprepared for that. Do terrorists give each other friendship rings? Whatever remaining distance there was closed.

On my way to bed that night everything I touched was cold: the faucet, the ceramic sink, the bedpost, all like ice. To keep warm, I slept with my head under the covers and it seemed like there were three of us there, whispering about the net of possible futures that spanned between us.