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ESSAY ON PLACE

THE MAP AS BIG AS THE WORLD

THOMAS FOX AVERILL

We would get a map of our farm as big
as our farm . . . [and]
stick our heads through and sing, "Barn, be cleaned."
.
[But] here would come rumpling
along under the map Old Barney,
. . . —he couldn't even
read—going out to slop the hogs.

—William Stafford, "Fiction," *A Glass Face in the Rain*

I have spent a lot of time looking at Kansas maps. Once, I memorized the shapes and names of all 105 counties. On another map, I drew in red magic marker over each highway after I

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had traveled it, hoping, someday, to have traveled every mile in this 200-by-400-mile rectangle. A huge old school map of Kansas, published by A. J. Nystrom & Co., Chicago, hangs in my east study windows instead of curtains or shades. On sunny mornings, it glows, and since its color comes from elevation—the "3,000 to 4,000 Feet" in western Kansas, to the "Under 1,000 Feet" along the Kansas River valley and all through southeast Kansas—the map glows from its western orange, as warm as any sunset, to a salmon tan, to yellow, to bluish-green to dark green. My map is a rainbow, from a land that is not supposed to be over the rainbow. On these glowing colors, the map tells the usual things about Kansas: highways and rivers, railroad tracks

and trails, counties and county seats, cities and towns and stray post offices. Occasional red italic letters brag, *World's Largest Salt Mine* or *World's Largest Natural Gas Field*. The map designates Indian reservations and sites like Carrie Nation's home. Under this large map are three others: "Average Rainfall in Inches," "Density of Population," and in "Land Use and Mineral Resources."

I love maps. They represent a paradox, being, as they are, concrete abstractions. I have looked at as many maps of Kansas as I can get hold of. I remember a NASA space photograph of Earth, with the tiny rectangle of Kansas outlined in the middle, my small home on the earth a wash of green, as in a watercolor painting. I remember a map, all in black, that showed light as it is projected at night in Kansas—from the glow of cities, to the islands of light that are turnpike rest stops, to the streetlights of small towns, to the dots of lights, like constellations, made by farm lights hung from poles in the middle of barnyards. I have seen bridge maps, mineral maps, physiographic provinces maps. Maps that shade counties according to rural health statistics: population over 65, low-birth-weight babies, heart disease and cancer death rates. Maps that show water both above and below the surface of the earth. Vegetation maps and maps that chart the progress of railroad development. Maps that show ethnic settlement patterns and the density of hogs, chickens, cattle, and horses. All these maps, of course, try to describe, try to parallel, try to *be*, somehow, Kansas. Together, they exist in my mind, as Kansas exists in my mind, both a reality and a representation.

When I think about maps, I think about the opening of William Stafford's poem "Fiction": "We would get a map of our farm as big / as our farm. . . ." After all, that is the goal of any Kansas map: to make something representational that matches the reality that is Kansas. Once I tried to see Kansas as a map, and I flew over it in a small plane. I wanted to test my imagined map of Kansas, to see if it was as big as the real Kansas. And all through

those flights I kept having the strong sensation that the Kansas land—with its highways, rivers, towns, and cities—looked exactly like I thought it would from the air. It matched the map in my head.

Why? Well, I have spent hours traveling the state time and again, taking different highways, crossing rivers, coming to the tops of hills and looking miles in the distance, memorizing both the distance and litany of towns along highways. For example, I need no map to tell me, when I'm on my way to Dodge City, that the next grain elevator after Great Bend will say Pawnee Rock. I have climbed on the rock and looked for miles over the Arkansas River valley there, as have thousands of others: Native Americans searching for buffalo or enemy; travelers on the Santa Fe Trail, who used it as both landmark and visual enhancer; soldiers stationed at nearby Fort Larned, out scouting to the southeast; the early settlers, who quarried the rock, cutting it down to its current size; and travelers, like me, who go to the small sandstone building, constructed by the Work Projects Administration, to sit in the sun and see what they can see.

And after Pawnee Rock I need no map to remind me that the next town is Larned, that trim, well-kept place with its fine courthouse, its concerned schools, its active public library—I have spent weeks at a time there as writer-in-residence. No map to know Garfield is next—I've eaten in a cafe there and struck up conversations about nearby Macksville, the site of a Kansas novel, *Chaff in the Wind*, by Edna Walker Chandler. Next is Kinsley, with its sod house museum, its sign that announces, "Halfway and a Place to Stay," because it is exactly 1,526 miles to both New York and San Francisco (that might be disconcerting to the traveler who has that long, long way to go, but to this Kansan it's always heartening: it'll be a long time until they get *here*, I always think). In Kinsley, I've pulled over and marveled at the construction of a house of earth and I've surveyed the artifacts in the Edwards County Historical Museum. Then comes Offerle, then

Bellefont, Spearville (Home of Windmills), Wright, and then I'm there, Dodge City, with its brick streets, its feedlot smell, its re-creation of Front Street just off Wyatt Earp Boulevard. I suspect that anyone who has traveled any road over and over will have a complicated map, etched in the brain, with no need for anything else. Like Stafford's Old Barney, we rumple along, not caring about words, the maps in our heads entirely intuitive, reflecting both Kansas and ourselves.

And that intuitive map is, after all, a map as big as the world, with real things in it instead of words, with concrete details rather than letters, lines, artificial colors. (I used to think, when I was young and looked at those old United States maps, how odd that Kansas was pink, surrounded by a blue Missouri, a green Nebraska, a yellow Oklahoma, a salmon Colorado. It was very much like *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, in which each new land Dorothy travels to is literally of a different color—the blue of Munchkin Land, the permanent green of everything in the Emerald City. On a map, at least, Oz was as real as Kansas. For that matter, so was Candyland.) But maps become more real as they are traveled and imagined (imagined), thus made both concrete and intuitive.

And so, on my flyover, the Kansas that unfolded under me was like a map as big as Kansas. Part of that sensation came from perspective, too. After all, we look at maps from odd angles. We spread one out on the table or floor, or in our laps as we drive along. We put them on our desks to study them, and run our fingers along imagined journeys, with their stops and destinations. We hold them up or pin them on walls. But we never do what we do when we engage landscape: stand on it, unsure of what lies over the next hill, or past the stream, or on the other side of that bank of trees.

Midwesterners, those of us from the level lands, have, I think, a different perspective. Like map readers, we know how to see, imagine, calculate distance. Our literature has stories of outsiders, stranded in snow or ice, who

see a light or a shape on the horizon and, thinking rescue, begin to walk. They mire in distance, sadly underestimating how far apart everything really is on the Great Plains. As a boy, and a somewhat impatient traveler in Kansas, I learned that seeing something in the distance did *not* mean we were almost there. Later I would have the same realization during my first trip to Colorado, when I thought to hike up to a nearby peak. I could see my destination but could not reach it and return by dark. I had to turn around, even though I kept thinking the top was just beyond the next hill. So, just as mountain people learn to judge altitudes, we level-landers learn to judge the space between points we see on the relatively flat land.

Kansans are used to landmarks. In fact, many Kansas towns take their names from that which marks the land, making it different from anything around it. Kansans were not just being descriptive in these names: they were orienting the traveler. Along the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails, for example, only the unique places—the odd landforms, the certain curves of rivers, the one spring in an area—keep the traveler oriented. And so we name them Big Springs, Diamond Springs, Lost Springs, Wagon Bed Springs, Great Bend, Cimarron Crossing, and Pawnee Rock because that is, quite literally, what they are. These are *not* to be confused with names that are given out of hope or boosterism. C. Robert Haywood, a historian who writes about southwestern Kansas, once pointed out the discrepancy between reality and hope in the names given to towns on the Great Plains. Think about Sharon Springs, Richfield, Coldwater, Protection, Lake City, Crystalsprings, Garden Plain, Hopewell, Garden City, Shallow Water, Goodland, Glade, and Bellaire. What names! And how suggestive of water, good climate, good soil, temperateness. Now, these places may be wonderful to live in, with a true richness of natural resources and good people, but nobody would deny they are named to accentuate their appeal to the potential settler, who might be skeptical about settling in what had

once been named, on a map, the Great American Desert.

I noticed a couple of other exaggerations in mapping and naming when I flew over Kansas. I was eager to see the Arkansas River, because on my road map it was a thick blue ribbon, looking like it might be wider even than the Kansas River, with which I have a much greater familiarity. I've seen the river from the road, of course, even walked its dry bed near Dodge City, Cimarron, and Garden City. When I flew over, I was struck by its thinness between Great Bend and Wichita. A fine river, yes, but unmistakably exaggerated on this particular edition of the Kansas road map. I wanted also to see the Chalk Pyramids. I'd seen them, and Castle Rock, from the ground. But I was struck, as I flew over them, by how severely these landmarks were diminished from the air; I knew they'd look smaller from 5,000 feet, but distance rendered them almost miniature. I can only suppose that, as with town names, as with the Arkansas River, we exaggerate (both externally and internally) that which is scarce, that which provides relief, whether in landscape, water, weather, or wind. In western Kansas, these landmarks are significant. We've even named our highest point of elevation *Mount Sunflower*, though it is only an indistinguishable swell in the Great Plains in Wallace County, near the Colorado border. Some of my friends used to launch a mock expedition to climb the mount, with rhetoric as flamboyant as any used for journeys into the high places of the Himalayas.

Other sites, on the map or flown over, simply cannot be imagined from a distance. I think particularly of Lucas's Garden of Eden. I flew directly over it, and yet its rich detail, its funky charm, its cabin home, made from limestone cut into the shape and size of logs, its sculptures of Adam and Eve and "Labor Crucified," are all lost to the eye. But they are not lost to memory, which is part of sight. And having visited the site so many times, I allowed my imagination to supply the details

as I flew over, much as it does when I am looking at a small road map, spread across my desk, and imagining still another road trip to somewhere in Kansas.

So, maps work in multiple ways: they help us imagine what is there, but then memory helps us flesh out maps. Both imagination and memory take us into the future because the two of them are, in some way, maps. As a Midwesterner, I feel this interplay each time I travel the land. And I don't think I'm alone.

Kansans might have this deep map of the land, as William Least Heat-Moon called it in *PrairyErth*, because the land is so incredibly important to the well-being and livelihood of a people so specifically dependent upon it. The land is literally one's fate. And an *internal* map of the land, as well as all those external, physical maps, might give clue to that fate in the same way that fate is said to be read in the intestines of a bird, spread out on a rock, or in the lines on the palm of a hand. Poet Anita Skeen, who for years wrote from Wichita, has a poem that speaks to how the small map/hand shows something much larger, something that can only really be imagined: "each hand a map / a guide / some highway to follow" (from "The hands of the women," in *Each Hand a Map*). We Kansans live closely with nature. How we negotiate it is a big part of our future.

So we follow the highways in Kansas, and the rivers and railroads and trails—all those things on our maps. And we follow the maps of our land, how it is cut by water, or plow, or cattle path. How it is surrounded by road, fence, windbreak, treeline. All these followings—these paths, trails, and roads, these cuts, plowings, and plantings, these rocks, bluffs, and river valleys—take up a residence in our minds. We continue to map our place as we look into great distances, and note landmarks, and move over the same ground again and again. Finally, when we fly over it, we shouldn't be surprised to find how much of Kansas is already in our heads, the only place where a map as big as the world could possibly exist—except, of course, in the world itself.