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The Flatness

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The Flatness · *Michael Martone*

THEY ARE THINKING about Northern Ohio, about Indiana, about the long stretch through Illinois and on into Iowa. It is flat. The geometry of the fields suggests a map as large as the thing it represents. The squared township roads score the axes of coordinates. The cusp of trees on the horizon, the water tower, the elevator are tokens slid there representing ground taken and held. The only dimension marked by z is the state of dreaming as they drive on the interstates meandering in tangents that seek what the railroads, who were here with rulers first, called a water-level route.

There are places in the Midwest that are not like this—the limestone hills, the loess bluffs, the forest lakes and sand dunes, the rills and knobs and kettles. But the people who only know the place by driving through it know the flatness. They skim along a grade of least resistance. The interstate defeats their best intentions. I see them starting out, big-hearted and romantic, from the density and the variety of the East to see just how big this country is. They are well read, and they have a vision as they come out of the green hills and the vista opens up, a true vision so vast that at night as they drive there are only the farm yard lights that demonstrate plane geometry by their rearranging patterns. And, in the dawn around Sandusky, they have had enough, and they hunker down and drive, looking for the mountains that they know are ahead somewhere. They cannot see what is all around them now. A kind of blindness afflicts them, a pathology of the path. The flatness.

It is flat. I grew up on a plain scoured by four or five glaciers, that once was the floor of a shallow inland sea. On the interstate, when I drove from Fort Wayne to Indianapolis the overpasses scaled above the county roads and railways. On either side of the ascending ramp little right triangle lakes glistened. The holes, now topped with water, provided the fill for the overpass ramps illustrating some law of conservation that you can only go as high as you go deep. From the artificial vantage of these overpasses I could see, yes, for miles to the islands of trees or yawing barn, a house on a reach. And way off in the distance, the land almost met the paralleling sky, the flat-bottomed clouds, and there between the land and clouds hung a strip of air without color that the sun set through.

It is flat for the people who drive through, but those who live here begin to sense a slight unevenness. As I drove down the perfectly straight highway, I waited for the gentle natural rise, no overpass, like taking off in a jet, before the steep climb, the moment the front wheels of the plane leave the ground. And then I'd drop back down and cross a bridge over a river, the Wabash, the Salamonie, or the Mississinewa. The bump had been the end moraine of a glacier. The river is still in place from the melting and washout. These ridges are scalloped together in the plain like tide lines on the beach, a few extra grains of sand. I know it isn't much, the highlight of a road trip, a slight elevation that could be missed if you were fiddling with the radio dial. But to such a scale has my meter been calibrated. Living in a flat country, I began to read the flatness, to feel the slight disturbances in the field, to drive over it by the seat of my pants.

And on that plain where I grew up, there is a continental divide. Unlike the more famous one in the Rockies, in Indiana it is a matter of a few feet. Two rivers meet in the city of Fort Wayne and the third one they form flows back on the tributaries. It looks strange on a flat map, like a dual lane highway. The new river heads back north and east paralleling its headwaters going the other way. Rain falling on the east side of Fort Wayne eventually finds its way to the Atlantic. On the west, the rain will fall and travel to the Gulf of Mexico. It is a matter of a few feet. I tried to imagine continental watersheds sloping away from me.

I lived in a neighborhood called North Highlands. Before the developers came up with that name it was known as Hungry Hill because once during winter the horse drays couldn't climb the icy slopes with food. It isn't much of a hill, but it is another ending of a glacier. It is just high enough so that it is the only part of town that never floods. Since I've been alive, Fort Wayne has had three hundred-year floods, floods that are only supposed to happen once a century. The flooding is due to the flatness. After a heavy rain or a good snow melt, water everywhere starts to rise, in the rivers and ditches. It pools in sheets from the saturated ground. It can't run off since the ground is so level, so it rises. There is a skim of water in the streets. The parks are lakes. The flooding is gradual. Often it takes days. The water is finding the balance, finding the contour that runs through the town like a fault before it moves. The water keeps rising and spreading. The water, never running very fast in the river beds, stops altogether now, quivers at the brim of the old levees like that lip of water, a

couple of molecules thick, that shimmers above the rim of a full glass. Fort Wayne floods are slow disasters with people going to work as usual while others pump their basements or fill sand bags. There is always plenty of warning. There is always nothing to be done. There is not much raging water. Homes are inundated at the same speed it takes to repaint them. And when the owners repaint the houses, they dash a little line on the doorsill to mark the high water of this flood.

The flatness informs the writing of the Midwest. The flatness of the landscape can serve as a foil, the writing standing out, a kind of Blue Hotel, in opposition to the background. There is enough magical realism to go around here. A friend, Michael Wilkerson, goes so far as to call the Indiana Toll Road the Bermuda Triangle of Highway Travel. It's true. People who drive through have stories. They report mysterious breakdowns, extra-dimensional rest stops, and miraculous appearances of state troopers. In the white-out of the passage through the flatness, dreaming can take over. The dull colors richen. The corn in the fields begins to sparkle like the cellophane corn on the set of the *Wizard of Oz*. And that movie with its film noire depiction of the Midwest suggests another way of capturing this place.

I can still remember Danny Kaye introducing the movie on TV, telling the kids not to worry, that the black and white of Kansas was just the way they made the picture. Then as now, those grays of the monotonous landscape interested me more than the extravagant color. I have my mirages but they are nothing fancy—the mirror of water that coats the hot road ahead reflects the flat sky and galvanizes the horizons. For me this Midwest is the perfect setting, this matter of a few degrees, a few feet either way. Here is ground that turns at once into swamp then into sea, each a solid calm surface, beneath them all a slight tilt, a tendency really, a bias so subtle you never notice you've crossed a line, that you've reached a crisis, that your whole world has changed.

I dislike the metaphor of the Heartland. True, the Midwest is somewhere near the physical center of the map of America. But the Heartland implies that, here at some exact center, lies something secret, hidden and important, an X for a buried treasure. The Midwest is too big to be seen like that. I think of it more as a web of tissue, a membrane, a skin. And the way I feel about the Midwest is the way my skin feels and the way I feel my own skin—in layers and broad stripes and shades, in planes and in the

periphery. The Midwest as hide, an organ of sense and not power, delicate and coarse at the same time. The Midwest transmits in fields and waves. It is the place of sense. It sometimes differentiates heat and cold, pain and pleasure, but most often registers the constant bombardment, the monotonous feel of feeling. Living here on the great flat plain teaches you a soft touch since sensation arrives in huge sheets, stretched tight, layer upon layer, another kind of flood.

Perhaps I make too much of geology, topography imprinting on our lives. It was the Romantics of the last century who gave us mountains as something beautiful to see instead of as impediments to get over. From them too we have inherited “the view.” I grew up in a landscape not often painted or photographed. The place is more like the materials of the art itself—the stretched canvas and paper. The Midwestern landscape is abstract, and our response to the geology of the region might be similar to our response to the contemporary walls of paint in the museums. We are forced to live in our eyes, in the outposts of our consciousness, the borders of our being. Forget the heart. In the flatness, everywhere is surface. This landscape can never take us emotionally in the way smoky crags or crawling oceans can. We stare back at it. Beneath our skins, we begin to disassemble the mechanisms of how we feel. We begin to feel.