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ESSAY TOPOGRAPHY BY KATHRYN KURTZ

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Imagine the essay as an artifact of the topography of a landscape. Wander through and discover it, a found object, like a stone or a pine cone or an antler. The words might look like markings on a beech tree. Read it and find your way to the place or the thing it describes. Hold it like a map and trace the texture underfoot. It has perspective and color unique to the writer. If the essay is beautifully formed it will take you in and out of yourself like a sailboat tacking up wind or a switchbacking trail or a meandering river. The essay eases you through the terrain. There are ascents and descents, trials that will test your imagination.

Artifact

Composing is a procedure, an examination of traits of facts of this or that—a mountain ridge, a pool of water, a stick—and the unique thoughts that encase them in a bundle. The essay is produced like larvae or a pearl. Facts become artifacts when they are artfully restructured in a unique product: the essay. The essay is a literary distortion, a byproduct of reassembly, changed by observation and trickled through thought like deposition. The reader recovers the essay as artifact and imagines, experiences the fact. The cut sunflower opens like a hand above the lip red petals of a rose; green stems extend in prisms of a clear glass vase. Can you see it? Here, an assemblage of facts produces an artifact fragment.

Topography

In the yard by the lake, a crow flies off with the crumb of a peanut butter cookie. A hummingbird shivers into the pistil of a dangling drooped geranium. White cap chop appears on the lake, chimes ring on the porch, and the gray cat stretches one leg above the glass table. Will it rain again? The crisp green leaves rustle their mint undersides. Somewhere cows group together in a field. A yellow finch sings in the staked pear tree amidst the mottled saffron leaves. A female mallard leads her teal-headed mate to the high green squirrel-baffled birdfeeder. She scoops up sunflower seeds in a hurry; the male scans the territory. Earlier, the bull thistle plant keeled over; sopped roots ooze and seed fluff floats like a tiny flock of white birds. Abruptly, on a swoop of air, a murderous shriek. That woman, the one with the barking beagle, runs out of the house by the lake, her hands cover her face. The ducks look up. She cries from some broken place inside herself. Inside the house, the neighbor dangles dead on a rope he has hung in the basement stairwell. When the rain comes the cat sits silent on the front porch. The birds she chases wait under the green sides of leaves in the oak trees.

The structure of the artifact is the structure of the essay is the structure of the fact —when assembled, they are identical. The literary structure of this formula may be

called plot. A plot cannot be imposed upon a collection of facts; in an essay as artifact of reassembled facts through action, observation, and thought, the plot is “discerned” or “released” in the new sense of the human construction.

ARTIFACT (ESSAY) + FACT

FACT + ESSAY (ARTIFACT) = PLOT

Michel de Montaigne, who is credited with inventing the essay, says that images of facts, especially when vivified, are inseparable from thought. How could it be otherwise? It was this particular thought in this moment, and no other in the universe, that recreated the image. The structure of thought is the structure of the essay.

Essayist As Hero

My neighbor, Arnold, whose family was from Tennessee, mowed the lawn on the Friday afternoons of my girlhood. I kept Dutch Blue rabbits in a cage on a shady edge of my driveway that faced Arnold's lawn. I liked to watch him mow so I brought the rabbits grain at noon that day when I heard the mower start, the day of the accident. I ducked behind the cage and watched him through the wire mesh while the rabbits sniffed my lips. Arnold was an athlete, a track star. His mother told me he ran six minute miles consistently. She looked like Mrs. Cleaver on “Leave It To Beaver.” Arnold wore a pair of black Converse high top sneakers, cut off shorts, and a green Tee shirt. Brown bangs obscured his pimply forehead. He had a big nose; I don't know why I found him so attractive. Maybe it was his thinness, his accent, his silence; he rarely spoke directly to me. A hill behind his house leveled into a soggy valley between our yards. He was mowing in the valley when I saw him jump and point to his foot. I stood up. The rabbits froze. Arnold made a sound like my rabbits, who screamed when they were scared, but Arnold didn't run, he just pointed to his foot. He looked directly at me, there was no one else. I knew what was wrong, but I couldn't move. I hated myself in that moment; I have always hated that moment. He seemed to lose power and dragged himself up the hill, into his garage. An ambulance arrived and I waited for the stretcher. He was covered in white. Should I shout to him, “Arnold, I'm sorry?” I could not move. His mother ran into our little valley and said, to me, “Will you help me look for his foot?” She held up the toe of his sneaker against her white apron and said, “It's not in here. We have to find it—he's an athlete.” I obeyed. Together we ran our fingers through the grass, some of it cut, some of it shaggy. I hoped I would be the one to glide my hand across his toes.

The composer is the hero of the personal essay and thus, by proxy, of the event. The essayist begins a journey, physical or mental, and makes attempts, faces trials, finds protectors along the way, and may become a protector to some one or some thing. The hero, often one with a flaw, is usually changed by experiences in the topography and brings something back to the departure point that makes the essayist, at least, a hero to the reader. Field data is collected or remembered and reconstructed as an essay artifact. The prose scene above is a collection of facts, the structure of which corresponds to the thoughts, the actions, and the event. This forms the plot and it was and is accessed, in part, through emotions leading to and through the topography of that yard.

Composing is what Aristotle calls an act of “imitation.” The essayist as imitator represents actions of self, actions of others, and objects or places in the topography. The essay is a kind of improvisation of events. The reader, of course, will recognize the structure of reality in finely-improved imitations.

The hero experiences objective reality with a unique thought structure, a process that Montaigne calls a “pattern.” This pattern corresponds to the structure of action,

emotions, topography, plot, and artifact in a simple formula.

HERO > TOPOGRAPHY = PLOT + ARTIFACT

The hero who sets out to explore a topography reacts with emotion, sometimes painful, to encountered "textures." Rational analysis appropriately assembles the topographical textures into the essay artifact in a process of mental and physical, inner and outer, exchange. Montaigne says that "We must learn to endure what we cannot avoid. Our life is composed, like the harmony of the world, of contrary things, also of different tones, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked only one kind, what would he have to say? He must know how to use them together and blend them. Our existence is impossible without this mixture." Habits of thought create identifiable patterns not only in the essay but also in nature.

Topo Map

Shirley Jackson wrote her autobiography about raising children in Bennington Vermont. Her husband was a Bennington College professor. Jackson wheeled her team of toddlers around in multiple strollers on the town's main street. She attended hot-headed parties at the college with her husband. The curvy roads leading in and out were hard to navigate when they were drunk. But the reader can navigate them easily by following Jackson's essays in two accurate dimensions, the pattern of her thoughts that template the patterns of topography around Bennington.

The gazebo where Captain Von Trapp proposed to Maria exists in a sunny field in Vienna Austria. He probably didn't sing "Here I am standing there loving you / so somewhere in my life I must have done something right," but according to the autobiography, he did meet her there after ending his engagement to the Countess. It is easy to spot the round white roof of the gazebo in the glade, slide your hands along the rails where they sat, and look out the windows toward the Alps. The topography is perfectly mapped; place and the action of betrothal are the same form intertwined by the action of her thought.

Does the prose segment above follow this linear construction? Thought that reflects such style in the composing strata of the essay, thought based upon scrupulous field data and accurate assemblage, will produce an artifact that is reproducible in the field in reverse formula. Such style is texture on the essay map that corresponds to texture in the landscape. The reader can follow the essay topo map back to the thing described if it incorporates the rhetorical and poetic styles of expression used to create the imitation.

The essayist is a navigator, an explorer, a mountaineer, a meanderer in the terrain. The essayist maps the topography by following the discoveries of thought in a formula that looks remarkably like its antecedent.

Thought (Action + Emotion) + Topography > Plot = MAP + Artifact

Sailboat Tacking

The Captain with the map, bits of maps of islands scribbled on a napkin, was ready to navigate the Central America sea topography. He read the wind on the back of his hand; his skin was like tumbled glass. "Just look at the ripples," he said, that trilled the water like piccolo notes. Topography is shaped by wind, waves and lake chop, mountains and deltas. This was a vast shallow sea inside a barrier reef that levied the Atlantic Ocean. The live reef creature wall snaked the coast like the edge of a tub. Inside ships could sail a deep channel, maybe ninety feet, surrounded by the neck deep lime green water of exposed reefs. Homeward, he sailed northwest into the wind, tacking all the way, nine knots, snagging the wind

on a geometric two dimensional plane.

The essay tacks between the interior life of the mind and the exterior terrain, capturing both in a self-conscious analysis that will eventually become the artifact. The most interesting part of the composing is the processing of external traits of facts through the individual mind, through facets never seen before. Each unique assemblage adds to the knowledge of particular things, of things arranged in structures. How many people know that this Captain's skin has texture structured by tropical winds? Or that a sailboat, like an essayist, can take a headlong challenge by using the power that creates the obstacle? For the essayist, the obstacle is often this tendency to "stray" in thinking—hence the reputation of the essay as so many endless channels. Yet this very effect of buffeted thought is the action in reaction to topography that powers the plot. The effect of thinking about a fact is like observing a quark: examination always changes it.

Switchbacking Trail

Double blazes on mountain trails always indicate a switch, and how apt that it should be this doubling that alerts the hiker who must move horizontally across a vertical plane in order to ascend. Sometimes the backcountry hiker continues past the blazes into the woods and loses the way. Sometimes the hiker is not looking up. Hard worn paths that stray beyond the blazes lure many hikers past the mark. Confounded, exhausted, the hiker returns to the double blazes and marks the switch. It is necessary for efficient ascension.

Some essays stray too far along with their essayists. In this case an artifact is produced that misleads to the point of irritation, what Aristotle calls "bad taste in language." These forms might correspond to the hiker on a lark, the sailboat on a slide, when in fact, the switch between the examining mind and the encountered facts must effectively drive the reader toward assimilation of what Aristotle said was the "arrangement of parts." In this case the arrangement is assisted by the efficient use of power in reaching the goal, or the point of the essay, in manageable, edited style.

Meandering River

The Catskill Mountains in New York State were formed from rubble descending the slopes of the Allegheny plateau. Melt water poured into the alluvium, meandered to the delta, and finally sorted the deposition of wavy sands into the sea. The geometry of the meandering river displays balance on the inside and outside bends of channel velocity. The river eased through the valley from side to side and carried rocks from the mountains in the fast deep center. This meandering river structure, seemingly aimless, is the one course of efficient flow. Today the story of the eroded plateau is in the topography.

If the essay meanders as its reputation seems to imply, how is it that the thought and the experience of the composer that leads to action, can be called a plot? The essay very definitely assigns a different meaning to the term plot than is typical of the horizontal plot. Even Aristotle said that action was the structure of the plot. The essayist in action is either in the field or at the keyboard, in either case composing the artifact by assembling the facts of memory. It is the reader who reenacts the plot by an act of thinking.

What is the most efficient route to the point of an essay when the essayist is meandering? On the one hand, the mind slams into its subject in the field—the inner depositional bend in a river—then veers back into processing—the outer erosive bend in a river. The deep center of the river carries the flooded topography of mountain slopes to the sea, as the essayist drives home the point of personal action to the universal case. The reader finds the artifact and feels the spark of

knowledge in the act of reconstruction.

We wander the most efficient course through topo textures; this is attained by adaptation of the mind to the terrain through action and experience and back again to form the artifact.

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Kathryn Kurtz lives on the banks of the Hudson River in Nyack with her NYC firefighter husband. He has four girls and she has three boys. Kathryn is Adjunct Professor of English and Journalism at Ramapo College of New Jersey. She has a doctorate in Creative Writing: Nonfiction from Union University, an M.F.A. in Nonfiction from Goucher College, and a B.S. in Analytic Philosophy from the State University of New York. Her book *Swichbacks: Ascending the Catskill Mountain High Peaks* is currently under review. Her poems have appeared in collections: *Kiss me Goodnight*, the *Hudson Valley Review*, and the *Catskill Canister*. She was a monthly commentator for NPR's "Marketplace" and she founded the international newsletter *Marketing to Women*. Kurtz has two new books in the oven; one is about suicides who jump and the other is about the Susquehanna River.

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