



Brooke McKinney

Mapping

I swallow my first antidepressant when I'm 26. After seeing a psychiatrist for a year, I am convinced of my depression. He repeats the questionnaire—*Are you depressed? Do you feel depressed? Do you think you're depressed?*—as if I can locate the answer, the depression on a map, as if I can close my eyes and direct my finger to it. The better my answer, I figure, the better he can prescribe me a pill.

I have another therapist just for talking. I talk to her about this internal mapping I have yet to figure out, but she helps me reach into the chest of my childhood. This yanking of locations, landscapes, and people out one by one, trying to measure them is killing me.

The next day, I take the second anti-depressant. It gives me a headache only death can cure. My body gathers some aches and my stomach trembles inside my belly, tortured by nausea.

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Faces and shapes are easy to remember. Like the face of the first mountain I saw as a child or like the desert I first saw that didn't have a face but a distinct shape. I've been studying geography and maps since long before I knew how. I couldn't understand what they said but I could read faces and shapes. When I was a child my family would travel to the mountains for mother's work-trips. After my parents divorced, my father became a truck driver. I was his scout,

reading maps all day and night while on the road with him. He would ask me where to turn and how far and where to now. *Hell if I know*. And now when my therapist asks me if I'm depressed I reply with the same answer. Except now I'm older and reading a different kind of map.

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There are two faces I remember. When I was eight, I saw my first mountain in Helen, GA. Its face was massive and exposed.

We went tubing down the river's icy throat along the sides and feet of mountains that weekend. I was floating ahead of my father, sisters, and brother. Their voices faded behind me. My fingers and toes were numb as heart attacks. Despite my father's heart problems, he loved the thrill of cold water. My family couldn't comprehend the power of water or the power of mountains calling me away from them.

We dashed through the white of the river's curls while tubing along each other's sides. The white clouds and the white face of the mountain seemed to be a painting I did with my own eyes. I can't recall much of the faces of my family. Some sort of abstract stroke left them in the distance behind my head. I do remember hearing their wide-mouthed laughter as we watched my father dip the tips of his fingers into the water, slowing his race down the river.

The river was clear and shallow, its bottom covered with golden flakes. My father said it was gold. It was the magic marking the miles. I tried collecting it, dragging my hand in the water, but it slipped through my fingers. Water travels its own map.

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I'm sitting on a couch, a rather comfortable couch, while the therapist is asking me about my mother and father. They seem so separate today. And so my only reply is that they divorced when I was a child, like nine or ten years old. The therapist says... *Tell me about that*. I say... I

was outside playing, I think that's what children do when they're little. When I walked inside the house everyone was crying. It wasn't the usual cry of my sisters. It was the cry of a wild animal, an animal that perhaps just rambled too far from home, now desolate. My parents were far away, fighting in the other side of the house. They were screaming at each other like strangers who had decided love wasn't a word anymore. There was my father. And there was a gun. There was my mother. Her mouth the trigger. *That sounds traumatic. Here. Take this pill.*

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Geography is the study of the features living inside maps. Sometimes I look down and examine my veins, so blue and secret. If I am discreet enough, I feel my blood traveling some place. It's possible my own blood gets lost in me. I wonder what geography looks like inside our heads and how different it is or how difficult it is to follow or map individually. It is the largest map in the world. A map of unstructured turns, a mentality—a chameleon shifting through cryptic landscapes trying to fit somewhere worth fitting. I have wondered if chameleons too have an internal map that shifts direction of experience, landscape, traveled territories, color, and despair.

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I guess it's traumatic. When you're that young questioning love and death in the same moment, you become something else other than a child. The map inside you begins to tug at your little ribs so that you have no choice but to move or be broken. I couldn't get my father and mother to quit, so I ran outside and kneeled near an oak tree, put my hands over my ears, and I, too, screamed like an animal. *Yeah... that's traumatic*, my therapist repeats. And ever since that day, it's like someone thumped the world and it never stopped spinning. The therapist asks me... *Do you have any more traumatic experiences?* I don't know, I say. But how did I get here?

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Nothing can hide from the desert. My family fell apart over ultimatums, so my father became a truck driver, and I was his passenger for a summer. If the desert had a face, it didn't have much of one. On the map, its mouth opened wide across miles and miles of roads and signs. The desert's mouth swallows a map. It swallowed me. The desert made me quiet for days. I stared at it through the window waiting for it to say something. I had an impulse to project us stranded there, and I was curious to think of how long we could survive. As long as a family could survive. My family changed directions inside me. Family was no more real to me than a body of water was to a dying animal in the desert. Family was a mirage, a faceless desert. Hideously distant.

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So many faces and shapes to remember. On the map in my lap, Idaho has a chimney. What else have I failed to notice? That Oklahoma has a hitchhiker's thumb? That California is an awkward boomerang? That Tennessee is an envelope chewed by North Carolina's dogs? That Florida looks like the sock that fits in the boot of Louisiana? My father was too sleep-deprived to appreciate my imagination or observations.

My father's CB radio name was Wild Bill and his partner's was Sling-Shot. They would warn each other of bears in the grass and alligators in the road. Then Sling-Shot would yell something like "It's a bird, it's a plane, no it's JB Hunt in hammer lane!" And my father would laugh for days about that. Later I learned that drivers for JB Hunt were given horrible trucks to drive. They were the trucks with the flat faces and could only go so many miles per hour.

"Hammer lane" is what truck drivers refer to as the passing lane. It's a great joke once you figure

it out. Next time my psychiatrist asks me if I'm depressed, I'll reply, "Roger that" or "10-4" and he can figure it out.

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I swallow my first anti-depressant. It's a strange feeling to pinch a pill between your fingers, staring at until it disappears, then you toss it into your mouth as it disappears between your lips like magic. I hope it doesn't get lost in my blood or caught in my ribs, wedged and empty. Perhaps this pill is really good with maps and will find the depression that has comfortably made a home for itself inside me. Perhaps this pill will destroy depression and I won't have to think about what maps I have hoarded in this life. I am a map, come pill, let's travel together. *

The miles between must be mile-less. The miles with eyes that brings me here as they did when I was a child. Do I need this map? Does this map need me? So I swallow my first anti-depressant. I swallow this pill. This pill swallows me. A tear pushes my cheek aside so it might reach my lips waiting to suck it back into me. Because my tears, too, do not believe in maps, but have one they are unaware of. Tears travel in particular pattern. Like water, coming from somewhere and going somewhere, keeping all that invisible space in between.

