

Fifth Annual Symposium on Small Towns
“*Leveraging Resources to Improve
Schools and Communities*”

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On the campus of the University of Minnesota, Morris



Monteith’s First Lessons in Geography, 1874

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What is Geography?

A description of the Earth’s surface

An attempt to say where we are
As if where we are is a finite thing
As if where we are can be told
and where others have been can be told
As if simple questions and simple answers
are enough to say we know.

How many Continents are there?

Two

From Latin, meaning *restrain*
How many restraints are there to Earth’s land?
The restraint of seashore and tide,
of rising up and flowing across
The restraint of unbroken lines,
invisible lines, demarcations of history and conflict,
of our and theirs
The restraint of seeing, and therefore of knowing

What is a Lake?

A body of water almost surrounded by land

Almost surrounded by flamingos or
red-winged blackbirds or sunning turtles
or cattails burst open and sprinkled on
the surface of the water
almost surrounded because there is no
perfect restraint on water; water has its
suitcase packed and is ready to go
on a moment’s notice

What is a Mountain?

A vast elevation of land

An elevation so vast that only distance
allows you to see it all
A place that, if you live on a plain,
you dream of climbing
to experience the thinning of oxygen,
the shifts from fields to forest to rocky outcrops to snow
while barely changing latitude,
a place you climb
in order to look down at the land spreading around you,
reflections of clouds muffling the color of orchard
and highway and village
where the grain elevators yearn to be mountains
and trains fear mountains and disappear into them, even on maps
At the pinnacle there is only the restraint of breath
All else is magnanimity, as of a map unfolded at your feet

What is a Plain?

A level tract of land

A place where horizon means not the meeting point of sky and land,
nor restraint,
but instead the wide sash of possibility,
resting place for the eyes,
the edge stroked clean by wind,
plumb line that balances the immensity of sky
with the grandeur of soil
and corn row and geese moving toward,
ever toward the endless circumference

What is a River?

A stream of water flowing through the land

Rising and falling with the seasons
Winding out of sheer curiosity,
defying the triangulator's eagerness to call it a day
Now dressed in a veil of cottonwood seed
Now ferrying wild plum petals and milkweed fluff,
spinning yellow leaves and pelicans just arrived from Mexico
Bearer of news
about high yields or drought
The hippopotami's spa
The beaver's basement
The yellow-headed blackbird's back-up band
To a plain the river is relief

To a mountain release
To a lake fulfillment

By what are rivers formed?

By springs

By spring rain, tickling past roots,
pulling along worms,
seeping and swelling,
reverberating through all that listens,
that rises up, as does a spring,
filling what restrains it to the very lips

By whom was America discovered?

By Columbus; about 380 years ago

Give or take one hundred and thirty-five years
In which we've grown closer to the history
In which the simplicity of it has been lost
but no less longed-for
In which arrivals and departures
have become commonplace but
meeting a stranger still cracks
open fear and expectation

What kind of people did he find here?

Dark-colored Savages

And now we are they, dark-colored, light-colored,
but no less Savage
no less restrained by what we've seen and what we only hope to see.

What is Geography?

A description of the Earth's surface

A measurement taken of hills and
canyons, flowing water and salt plains
A conversation between those
who have come back
and those who haven't yet gone
An attempt to say where we are
and where we've come from,
rivers and mountains and plains
rising up inside us, known and unknown
The only restraint being the limit of our curiosity.