

THE HISTORY OF CARTOGRAPHY PROJECT

NO. 20. "MAP"

BY JULIE CADWALLADER-STAUB

*Commentary by Marie Akerman*

Like Julie Cadwallader-Staub I, too, have grown up surrounded by maps. When I was a kid my family crowded into our car each summer, my sister and I buried in the backseat with luggage and several unwieldy road maps. My dad led us on exhausting trips across the web of highways that link Chicago, my hometown, to every other place on the continent. Although my dad was the one who toiled lovingly over the itineraries, my mom was no passive bystander on the road. She was the navigator, pointing out when my dad had strayed from the bold line of red marker that highlighted our route—"Jim! That was the exit!" At the time I didn't realize the significance of these well-worn pieces of paper, but as I have gotten older I have come to appreciate my dad's collection of personalized road maps. They record a childhood's worth of family trips; they are memories of summers and days that I can no longer remember on my own.

My parents, who met while earning graduate degrees in geography, taught me to appreciate maps at a young age. They filled the bookshelves of our living room with state geographies. They gave me a map to play on, a rug imprinted with city streets. As I became conscious of the world beyond my house, I constructed a "mental map" of the people and places that I knew. At first my map didn't go far, but focused on the blocks surrounding my home. By grade school its sinewy threads began to stretch down the highway, pulling tenuously at each uncertain turn. Although I learned to drive and navigate the city in high school, I relied on routes laid by my parents. Some mornings my mom scribbled a simple sketch at the breakfast table, using a napkin as her canvas. After a few minutes she'd hand her work to me, a maze of lines and arrows that would guide me to a particular movie theater or store. Other times my dad gave me a large folding street map of Chicago. Downtown, I weaved around skyscrapers and taxis, seeing my surroundings from above, through the gridded paper stretched before my face.

Four years ago I headed off to college in Iowa, where threads of familiarity and affection appeared on my mental map, seemingly out of nowhere. They connected me to places I'd never been—friends' hometowns and the backdrops of histories. I no longer imagine my world as a map of where I've been, but as a map of places I "know" in multiple senses. This map can no longer be conjured entirely within my mind, but stretches onto the leaves of physical maps, holistic images connecting the histories that have shaped my

worldview. Some of these maps are worn from use. A wrinkled foldout ripped from a Stockholm guidebook, penned with dots and circles, elicits memories of a particular Thursday afternoon. A homemade t-shirt painted with the map of my college campus lies on my floor, its familiar forms charged by my affection for this small place. In the car behind my house sits a road atlas my friends and I recently used on a trip to Texas. Flipping through its pages, I can trace the lines we followed with my finger, each town name I graze nudging forth a memory: a dusty barbecue stand in Hamilton, an abandoned hotel in Mineral Wells, a German bakery in Muenster, plum-sized rocks falling off the back of a truck near Gainesville. As my mental map continues to grow, it is best understood through the tangible maps I've used.

In May I will graduate and leave Iowa. I think about this change much as Julie Cadwallader-Staub writes about her father: I picture my mental map, the web of people and places that make up my life. In her poem Cadwallader-Staub reflects upon the ability of maps to capture a particular experience of the world. As her father navigates old age she finds strength in the map of his life. Although I don't know where I will be next year, let alone when I'm 89, I too am reassured by the people and places that form my map of the world and by the family road maps that lie at its center.

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The poem is reprinted on this broadsheet with the author's permission. Julie Cadwallader-Staub lives in Burlington, Vermont. She included "Map" in her first published collection of poetry, *Face to Face* (DreamSeeker Books, 2010); it is also featured on her website, [www.juliecpoetry.com](http://www.juliecpoetry.com) and Garrison Keillor read it on National Public Radio, for *The Writer's Almanac*, on 23 March 2011 ([writersalmanac.publicradio.org](http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org)).

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