

North Country

A Pedagogical Almanac

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Contents

August: <i>Migration</i>	I
September: <i>Beginning</i>	4
October: <i>Pomegranates</i>	8
October: <i>Apples and Time Machines</i>	14
November: <i>How We Make Do</i>	23
December: <i>Grandbaby</i>	30
January: <i>Raccoons and Salmon</i>	35
January: <i>On the Town</i>	39
February: <i>Gun of Innocence</i>	42
February: <i>From Mea Culpa to Me Too</i>	46
March: <i>Copper Dogs and Gold</i>	57
April: <i>Attic Rooms</i>	62
May: <i>Ramble</i>	69
June: <i>Little Stranger</i>	75
July: <i>La Belle-Mere</i>	80
July: <i>Labau</i>	93
July: <i>Pony Girl</i>	100
August: <i>The Electric Girl</i>	118
August: <i>The End of Something</i>	129
Acknowledgments	135

2015

August

Migration

We are strange creatures, my dog and I, migrating north as the summer wanes. In the five years I spent in Ann Arbor before moving back to New England, I never entered Michigan's Upper Peninsula, its true north. Now, Beckett and I strike out from New England on familiar highways, pass a few days with friends in Ann Arbor, and then turn north. I've never measured the five hundred miles from Ann Arbor to Hancock in hands on the wheel and feet on the pedals. This is the kind of long-haul driving that can take you from Washington, DC, to Maine, or indeed, DC to Detroit. Michigan is this large.

When we near the Mackinac Bridge, the only point of contact between Michigan's upper and lower peninsulas, I exit the highway to walk around near the old lighthouse and the colonial trading post that once dispatched shipments of beaver pelts and *Panis*—enslaved Native Americans—to the markets of New France. The day is cloudy and the wind blows spray off Lake Huron, pressing Beckett's long black hair flat against his body. There is no one to take my picture, so I take his with the bridge in the background. I'm aiming for *Bold Border Collie, About to Emigrate*, but the wind makes him look like he's cringing, his white-tipped tail blown in a question mark around his haunches.

I look at the bridge, five miles of elegant cable suspension, and I open the door to feeling. I'm nervous; I'm excited; I'm profoundly, vertiginously alone. My husband of ten years has decided not to follow me. But here I am, headed north anyway: out of one life and into another.

Beckett and I cross over the Straits of Mackinac and enter the upper country. The change after the bridge is immediate. Instead of exits, there are roadside businesses selling venison jerky, Wisconsin cheese curds, and pasties—the small hand pies that Cornish miners brought to the region. Then we leave even these outposts behind. We forge west along the sandy north shore of Lake Michigan, hang a right at some deserted vacation cabins, and strike north across the peninsula's narrow waist. The Upper Peninsula is more than three hundred miles from east to west at its widest point, but in places, only thirty or forty miles of land separate its southern and northern shores.

Driving through eighty miles of almost uninterrupted national forest, I have a chance to appreciate the scale of the pine forests and the small scope of the human presence in them. In Marquette, the Upper Peninsula's largest city at thirty thousand people, I pull in for a moment at the faded strip mall that houses Marquette Soo Bahk Do. It's the middle of the day and the martial arts studio is closed, but I catch my breath and let myself look forward to the training I will do here, having already exchanged cheery e-mails with the instructor. I paw at my supply of snacks, which is nearly exhausted, and offer the dog a pretzel.

Up the road, I leave Beckett in the car long enough to buy a cup of gas station coffee, and the long, hypnotizing miles of pine forest outside of Marquette soon make me glad I did. The sleek, modern campus of Michigan Technological University pounces out of the trees when I finally reach Houghton. The buildings, the largest I've seen for a hundred miles, are a strange apparition.

I rumble onto the brick main street of downtown Houghton and, surrounded by nineteenth-century storefronts, find myself translocated in history once more. I stop the car and take Beckett out for another photograph with a bridge behind him. The squat, massive lift bridge

spans the Portage Canal that separates Houghton and Hancock. It's the only way on or off the northern part of the Keweenaw Peninsula that will be our home. Both Hancock and Houghton slope down sharply toward the waterway, giving the towns a stacked appearance that draws my eye across the water and upward past buildings and roof peaks and toward the forested hill top, crowned by the shaft house of the Quincy Mine.

Views that draw the eye upward have a way of lifting the heart, too. This steep terrain told me at first glance that I could love this place. I lift a prayer for happiness and home. I look at Beckett scenting the air and think with wonder that this may be the last new homecoming for this dog who's come with me from Ann Arbor to Massachusetts to Maine and back during my itinerant, career-fledging years.

After a brief stop at the realtor's office, I drive to our new home and take the last photo of the day. Beckett, with a look of wild glee in his eye, stands near the open front door. I leave the housekey dangling in the lock, drop the leash, and let him charge inside.



2015

September

Beginning

The very first thing I ask my first-year students to do is write about themselves, where they come from, and what they dream of. I do the exercise myself by way of introduction and model. The dreams I name—applying my talents to serve my students and finding a little community here—feel like enough to hope for. I know so little of the riches this place will hold for me.

My students share their dreams with me. One young man works summers fishing in Alaska and is saving money to buy a little piece of land in the Copper Country and start a family with his girlfriend. Another wants to follow his mother into nursing. A young woman who has overcome a sports injury wants to become a physical therapist. A biology major has med school dreams, and a historian sets her sights on law school. They are either proudly local or are athletes recruited from farther afield.

My students' skill levels range widely. Some are serviceable writers. Others seem wholly unacquainted with punctuation or complete sentences. The most elegant writer in the class is a young man from Detroit named Dan. He writes passionately about wanting to use his education to show his younger siblings back home a pathway to success. Enamored of his graceful sentences and his love of reading, I dream of recruiting him as an English major.

He tells me that he wants to be a point guard in the NBA. I'll see this again and again over the years: male students, often smaller than me, who hope to play professional basketball or baseball or football. I'm always dismayed and confused when students seem unaware of the differences between Division I and Division III athletics. The role of intercollegiate athletics at a small college like ours is essentially recreational. As a former and far-from-gifted college athlete myself, I don't find their passion for sports misplaced, but I do find the expectation of a payoff concerning. Division III colleges offer no athletic scholarships, and professional teams do not scout here. Some of our alumni have played stints in professional basketball in Europe, enjoying the travel and the chance to live abroad, but it's not the NBA and it's not a living.

Dan doesn't last a month in college. He stops coming to class, and when I try to send the basketball coach after him, I learn that he hasn't even joined the team. Finally, Dan tells me that his family wants him back home, but he's waiting until they can send money for a bus ticket. Alarmed that time is ticking down for him to get a refund for his tuition and room and board, I find him a ride.

He keeps in touch with me down the years, including the night he calls me from jail, having been pulled over while attempting to visit Hancock. It's midnight and he's five hours from me in the great piney nothing south of the Mackinaw Bridge. I can't miss my morning class to get him, but I go out to fill the gas tank of the friend he finds to make the retrieval. As I phone the jail to update him, I use the Doctor in front of my name, and when they ask me who I am, I say that I'm his professor, articulating sharply, as if I can push my white privilege through the phoneline and throw it over him like a cloak.

I imagined when I started working here that I would invest in students for four years and then wave them off into their futures. I didn't understand what a forty-four percent graduation rate feels like. It means saying goodbye after two years, or a term, or just a few weeks. It means writing letters in support of transfer applications. It means watching students have their college hopes upended by events in their and their fami-

lies' lives that more affluent students might have been able to weather. It means students who melt out of the classroom without a goodbye.

My university is not uniquely dysfunctional. Two-thirds of our students are eligible for federal Pell Grants, meaning that most of our students have family incomes of less than fifty thousand dollars per year. At my former employer, Bates College, just eleven percent of students are Pell-eligible. I used to walk past the old Victorian that housed the Bates admissions office on my way home from teaching and see the admissions team sitting around a large conference table, looking up applicants' family home values on Zillow. They were playing hunches to find families who might be wealthy enough to pay the entire sixty-eight thousand dollars-per-year price tag. My alma mater, Williams, is so well-endowed that it is one of the rare institutions that can afford to practice need-blind admissions instead of thumbing the scales in favor of wealthy kids, so twenty percent of its students are Pell-eligible.

College is the single most effective tool that America currently employs to foster upward social mobility. The Pell numbers make a handy index for the proportion of a student body who is seeking an education that could utterly transform their socioeconomic reality. But nationwide, the six-year graduation rate for Pell recipients hovers under fifty percent. Poor students struggle to finish college in America.

Low-income students who manage to claw their way into elite colleges gain access to the formidable academic and financial resources of those institutions, where per-student spending often far exceeds even their shocking sticker prices. These students frequently persist and make use of this ladder to opportunity. Students who land at working-class institutions like mine are also handed a chance, but it's a high-stakes gamble that can have ghastly consequences.

The students who exit American colleges and universities without degrees but with student loan debt spend their lifetimes poorer than students who seek no further education after high school. The non-graduates are maimed for life and would have been far, far better off if a recruiter had never come calling. My university produces joyful graduates in blue

robes each May and successful alumni who are proud of all they've overcome, but it also produces this long-lasting harm. America has decided that it's not enough for students to invest four years of life and effort in their college education; they must mortgage their futures on it, too.

I don't tell this to my students on the first day of school. Instead, I ask them to center their dreams in our classroom and enlist me in their cheering section. I'll stay in that section for life. Five years on, Dan drops me a note. He has two little boys named for prophets and he tells me my babies will be erudite. I think his will be, too.

