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Theme Essay by Robin McCarthy

For Writers, There Really Is No Place Like Home

Next week, TW's Winter 2016 issue on "Teaching Life" launches. Here, Robin McCarthy evokes the deeply personal places that teaching can travel.



I taught my first comp section in a windowless cinderblock classroom in northern Michigan. It was the fall of 2013. I'd arrived on campus two weeks earlier for an eight-day crash course for new graduate students on how to teach composition. Despite having designed my syllabus and sifted through piles of ice breakers and classroom activities, I began the semester without a vision of the teacher I would be.

I had 25 students, and on the second day of class, a quarter of them were dressed in some sort of camouflage. They were all as uncertain about me as I was about them, and I didn't win any over when I asked them to write journal

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entries describing the place they were from.

“Like, where it is? Like on a map?” one asked.

“Sure,” I nodded. “And what’s it like? What’s nice about it? What’s terrible?”

No one responded. They blinked at me blankly.

“Why?” someone else finally asked.

I hadn’t anticipated this question. I had a vague sense of the importance of valuing my students’ backgrounds, but mostly, I was meeting new people and I’m wired to relate to people in terms of place. I understand people through origins and destinations and the circuitous routes in between. There was no pedagogical foundation for my assignment; I didn’t really have an answer for them grander than the truth.

“Because I want to know,” I said.

I recalled my position at the front of the classroom, my smart skirt and pressed blouse and the syllabus with my name at the top. I was the teacher, and this was school.

“Also, because that’s the assignment. Write about where you’re from. Twenty minutes.”

They leaned back from their tables and slid down in their chairs, dug through backpacks and pulled out laptops. They peered at me over their screens until, like robotic ants scavenging for memory crumbs on red-checked picnic cloths, they typed. And in that moment, we established the format for the semester’s course: For the next two and a half months, our labor would be writing. Our subject would be place.

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I grew up in Maine and left at eighteen for college. When I left, I didn’t love my home more than any other place. I spent ten years away, between school and work and travel. But at 29, I missed home enough to move back. I lived a couple miles from my parents’ house. I ran into my old teachers at the grocery store and complained about tourists and snowfall, cringed at botched New England accents on TV.

In a way, growing up in Maine has spoiled me. I can’t live elsewhere. Not because Maine is better than other places, but because it is so specifically itself—so specifically mine. Sea salt and paper mills and potato farms have left me self-sufficient, proud, and nostalgic for the smell of sunshine on pine. I can’t fully leave my home behind because I’m always aching for it.

But when I decided to pursue an MFA in writing, it became clear I was going to have to leave again. I found my way to Northern Michigan University, where I could study in exchange for teaching. The university is located on the southern shore of Lake Superior, in the northwest region of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. The nearest major cities are Detroit and Chicago, both between seven and eight driving hours away. People in the U.P. value the natural world in the same way people from Maine do; they love it, and they harvest it, and it is the land that determines their behavior, dictates their anxieties, and warrants their celebrations.

Northern Michigan University is the product of its surroundings. The academic culture reflects a deep connection to the region’s Native American population and the iron mines that brought white immigrants to the area. The school is simultaneously a two-year community college and a four-year university, which means students can earn a certificate in welding or a Ph.D in nursing, and either way, they take the basic composition course I was assigned to teach that first year.

I understood the blank stares and raw anguish when I asked those students about their homes. I got it when Mike Zyburt (not his real name), who has lived two miles from the university his entire life, told me in his journal: “I’m from Marquette. There is nothing interesting to say.”

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"Look harder" was the only advice I could give him. It wasn't the advice of a teacher. A teacher would have suggested adding sensory detail or writing about a favorite memory and offered concrete stepping stones to a feasible essay topic. I was their teacher later in the semester, when I told them to develop thesis statements and consider point of view. But when I said, "Look harder at where you are from. Tell me everything," I was not a teacher. I was not even a writer. I was a traveler, homesick for a place I couldn't be.

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The same week I began teaching that comp class, I walked into my first graduate workshop. Within the first ten minutes, I was told I'd spend the semester writing a novel. I hadn't planned on writing a novel and didn't think I had one in me. But I did want an A in the class, so I started writing about the only place that felt deeply personal: my home in Maine.

I took my own advice to students, harnessing my longing and depositing it onto those pages. I didn't write about my grandfathers or neighbors, but I wrote about men like them. I wrote about poaching and firewood and diesel engines, pie crust and bait fish and food stamps. I woke early each morning and spent an hour letting the sea spray land on my teacher clothes.

And each time I assigned an essay, I asked my students to examine their own homes. Mike Zyburt eventually wrote about the fence he and his father had built around their backyard. Another student gave me the history of a local pottery business, and a third chronicled his distress when the Perkins diner changed hands. Each day, I released a little of Maine into my work, and my students brought more of their homes into our classroom. We got each other through that first semester.

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It's been more than two years since I taught my first class, and I've now asked students to write about where they're from countless times. There's always resistance. Some have moved around and can't identify a single location as their home. But the most common complaint is that the place they're from is boring. This upsets me more than the errors that riddle their papers; it's more dangerous than their strange relationships with cell phones and logic and reality television.

Composition instructors often say we're teaching students how to think, not just how to write. But I want to teach them how to see, too; how to view themselves as a product of place and experience, how to find value in the quotidian. We will, all of us, spend our lives navigating the distance between the people and places we love most and the circumstances of hearts, careers, ambitions, and bank accounts that carry us away. We all need to be able to tell ourselves why.

At the start of every semester, I tell students that my goal is for them to become better writers and for me to become a better teacher. That's only part of the truth, however. I want to prepare them for homesickness.

When they're drowning in their own displacement, when all they want is to hear a U.P. accent or know the score of a Lions game, I want them to remember the things about their homes that warrant ferocious longing. There was that fence you built with your father. There was the time the Perkins closed.

I am preparing them for lives of missing, of longing, of hopeless remembering. I want them to be able to access the comfort of their own stories and to find a way home.

Art Information

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Robin McCarthy's work appears or is forthcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Sonora Review*, and the *Rumpus*, among other journals. She is the managing editor of *Passages North* and regularly chaperones middle-school dances in Michigan.

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