Twin Bridges Road meanders through the Kisatche Forest, awakening travelers with scattered blizzards of white dogwood. Not far beyond the end of the nineteen pine-lined miles rests the remote community of Elmer, Louisiana. There, spread across high ground, framed by ancient oaks, sits Oak Hill School.

I have the easy feeling that comes from watching sunlight sift through branches to turn dust to sparkles. The cool air carries sounds of something prehistoric lumbering through the woods where the plain flat schoolhouse rests in peace. Surrounded and surrendered, the camellia-speckled seat of learning submits itself to the towering trees.

Life is sleepy here. I am entrusted with the responsibility of enthusiastically taking the language of Shakespeare and Dickens to the woods. It will take me five years to learn that I must pack light.

As I approach the school, my mind is ripe with the great thinkers, and just as I am envisioning myself surrounded by protégés, I hit a pothole that almost throws me back into the time of Plato.

I bump across the rocky parking area and grind to a halt. Undeterred, idealistic, I step from my Pontiac and proceed to unload boxes and cases and bags. I am Emily Dickenson with her many bundles of poems. But a large tree root tears off the heel of my shoe and sends me flying.

On my first day of class, Daniel, my sixteen-year-old freshman English student, sets the tone: "You know, I welded me a chair to sit up in out back behind our trailer. My grandpa welded on the L. K. Allen Bridge! An’ I welded me a stove, to prop my feet up on. I get out there 'bout 5:15 ev'ry mornin' and smoke me a pack of Marlboros."

Thoreau knew what Daniel feels. The woods have a language all their own. And sprinkled among the hills are a people with a colorful and rich culture that must be respected and understood.

I had packed so tightly all those creative ideas, workshops, and more hours in English than I would ever need, that there was no room for feeling, for savoring, for patient moments that begin with understanding and end with acceptance. I, too, must know what Daniel feels, but on this day Daniel’s world seems alien to me.
In Elmer, people still say things like, "Howdy ma'am." They live close to the land, raising hogs and winning blue ribbons. They kill squirrels and ducks and deer with guns that ride on racks in their pickup trucks. Decorated 4-H members are no less valiant than members of The Green Berets. Boys dream of pulp wood trucks all their own and there are girls who hope above all for a man in tight fittin' jeans, his baby, and their trailer "up on the back of Mama's property." It is the land of the big belt buckle.

During my first months in this foreign culture, I had no idea how to work with my students. I certainly was not prepared to teach J.N., who came up through the woods, hid behind the butane tank, and then crawled in my classroom window peering at me through green eyes and reeking of Jack Daniels.

The only strategy I had that worked was reading to the students. They seemed to like these literature selections, but they refused to read them on their own. Many times I found myself wiping the drool from desks where students had been lulled to their naps.

Shane awoke one afternoon to find everyone gone but me. I peered at him over my glasses. "It's after five," I said in an effort to punish him by leading him to believe he had slept through afternoon chores.

He stretched and yawned, "Now, Miss Patti. Sun's too high for five." I couldn't even trick them right!

Mrs. Jackson, my supervisor, had suggested testing my students occasionally with essay questions, so that writing might become for them more "user-friendly." I did so, and all but one student submitted blank test sheets. Only Jay, a repeater, had the courage to write two sentences, both explaining why he did not like essay questions.

At one of my supervisor's first visits, she opened a student's portfolio and gasped. Mrs. Jackson was shocked to see only two papers buried there in manila. I was struggling so hard to get my students to listen, read, and speak, that I hardly had time to get them to write. It was then that I made the decision to get a smaller suitcase.

I realized that I had been omitting the starting place. If students are to write well they need to reflect first on who they are and what they bring to the classroom. I came up with activities that allowed my students to celebrate themselves and their community.

I tried to use myself as a resource, drawing from my own experience. I told students that my father was a country boy, and I shared with them the story of the convenience store worker in Seattle who offered me $5.00 to say "The Pledge of Allegiance" so that he could hear a "real life 'Dukes of Hazard' voice."

I asked my students to share a time when they encountered just how "country" they were, whether it was through accent or custom or even clothes. How many times has a great writer mentioned that each person writes best about the familiar? Self-discovery makes for honest prose.

As "teacher in the woods," I was constantly reminded of the universality of those woods. There was the time I asked students to write about an early childhood memory. Corrie wrote about her great-grandfather and an experience that has remained with her:

"He died back in 1987, and I remember going up to his casket to put him a birthday card on top of him, beside his hands. When I put his card on him, I held on to his hands and kissed him on the forehead. I miss him so much and I wish he was still here with me. Now, I wish that I would not have done what I done back then, but I was little and could not understand that he would not be at his house when I went there."

The pain of loss feels the same in both town and country.

As students began to grow comfortable writing about their personal experiences, I encouraged them to look more closely at their own community. I asked them to interview an elderly person. Many recorded these interviews and later wrote profiles about the lives of these people.

Jesse interviewed his grandfather at the local washeteria where the old man reminisced about who owned what land when and how little it cost. Jimmie Lee's "Grand Daddy" told of a pickup truck with a plywood-enclosed bed that served as a school bus, and of students who went to school barefooted. He told of the two biggest boys who were sent down to the creek to get water for the day.
Later in the year, I assigned acrostics that use the name of the town. Though often students saw themselves more as planters than prophets, tilling home ground revealed nuggets of truth. Here’s one that sophomore Michael wrote during his second year in English II (complete with original spelling):

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E veryone
L ives with there
M other and dad until there old
E nough to quite school and
R un away.
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As the Elmer area is largely Baptist, some students carry their Bibles with them and quote readily from Scripture. When studying sound patterns in poetry, they used a psalm from the textbook as a model. They wrote their own psalms and often shared them in choral readings. Their voices were strong and clear; the words came from the heart.

Biblical themes were ever present, and not without humor, as in Jason’s answer to the assignment to write a pun: “Moses knew his division.”

I parlayed students’ familiarity with Bible stories into a study of fables. After students looked at a variety of fables, I invited them to share stories about animals.

In a region where the first day of hunting season means a long absentee list, the stories were numerous and often filled with fun. The students wrote fables featuring animals indigenous to the great state of Louisiana. Dwight wrote about “The Owl and the Possum” and another student told the story of “The Armadillo and the Cataboula Cur.”

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Critters kept coming up. I asked students to create a diamante exploring something that is important to their country setting. Those who claimed that they couldn’t write, or didn’t want to, easily found a voice in this simple poetic form that lends itself to quadrupeds. David chose his favorite pastime:

Deer
Big Small
Run Jump Hop
Bellowing Rubbing Pawing
Mating
Shoot Fall Skin
Bloody Warm
Hunter
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Where is there a more accurate description of one hunter’s experience?

Often I selected novels that have rural settings and dealt with issues that were important to the kids. I taught Of Mice and Men, and even though one school board member and a bus driver/preacher led a campaign to ban it on grounds of profanity, the students identified with the small farm dream. Elmer residents experienced the joy of raising animals. Some, such as Lola, lived in Lenny’s dream description. Her Rapides Parish Fair ribbons won for prize rabbits attest to that fact. And she was afforded an opportunity to express that love in a writing activity I called “Pencils and Pens,” in which students wrote about the animals they had in the pens “out back, behind the house.”

Even though I now understood the importance of connecting learning with students’ lives and surroundings, I had not given up on the classics. But why not give the classics a rural twist?
To preface my teaching of “The Odyssey,” I said, “Let’s say you are trying to get home on the bus today. A tire blows out when the driver hits a bottle in the road. Then, the bridge is out and you have to take a detour. Cousin Clem is down in his back and takes more time than usual to cross the road to get to his mail. Farmer Brown’s cow is out in the road, and he won’t listen to the horn. When the bus finally tries to turn around in your pasture, he plows right into the barn. Do you catch my drift?”

Some students went on to write their own odyssey, their own country journey.

As Shakespeare was about to make his Elmer debut, I feared failure, and so did my students. Teaching Shakespeare is always a challenge. But through pacing and explanation, I hoped I could corral even the great master of English literature and make him accessible to every goat roper.

When teaching dialogue in Romeo and Juliet, I asked students to compose an Oak Hillian balcony scene. With Julius Caesar, I had the young ‘uns keep a diary as a main character. “You gonna stab me too, Brutus? Ain’t that a kick in the head?” wrote one Caesar.

As I became more comfortable with my students, I also became more comfortable in the community. I joined the tiny throng at the Voluntary Fire Department’s Annual Christmas Parade (and I packed a candy sack), I opened a charge account (my name on a note pad sheet by the register) at the crossroads country store called Mary Jo’s, and even bought a raffle ticket for a shotgun (God forbid I should have won). I became a part of the Oak Hill family.

Oak Hill even became a forum for my writing. I shared my work with my students and received their criticism. We collaborated on the yearbook (The Acorn) and the creative writing publication (Oak Leaves).

During my time at Elmer, I realized I had as much to discover as any student. I learned to bask in the language the students were using. I came to understand that my classroom must be filled with the students’ lives. The challenge will always be to interlace new ideas and to network old ones. I do not want students with tunnel vision. I want my students to use language, not only to take themselves to town, but also to travel far beyond themselves.