

The Road to Swanville

Rural Education & Consolidated Schools

MARGOT FORTUNATO GALT

To city dwellers, rural America may seem as far away as the moon, or at least as foreign as a picture from an old issue of *Ideals*, a landscape featuring nothing taller than a silo, with gold-green fields extending as far as the eye can see. Minnesota farmland still fits that mold, but farmers no longer plow with horses or raise six different crops. Since the mid-20th century, American agriculture has undergone a massive transformation.

Minnesota teacher Carol Thomson's brother, Jim VanDerPol, was able to tell me about this firsthand. He and Carol grew up on a farm on the outskirts of Kerkhoven, which he and his family still work. As a boy, he helped his parents with their 320 acres of fertile "wet prairie" soil. They raised five or six crops and two or three forms of livestock (cattle, sheep, and chickens for sale and for personal consumption). "No self-respecting farmer would buy eggs in a store," Jim recalled. They had to be canny, self-reliant, and prepared to manage what the seasons (and their choices) dealt them. Though the family ran some fuel-powered machines, they did so only when the tractors and trucks made human work easier; in general, their rule was never to replace human workers. All of this began to change during World War II, when the U. S. Department of Agriculture began lobbying for the consolidation of farms, hoping to move agricultural workers off the land and into factories. Consolidation continued, even increased, after the war, and simultaneously many local wetlands were drained to increase tillable acreage. As a consequence, Jim (and farmers like him) currently farms every acre, compared to his parents, who worked only two-thirds of the total acreage. Increased farm size and huge machinery have also created a slow but steady drop in rural population. Since the 1960s, Jim reckoned, "We've lost about 90 percent of our farm population in this area." Bigger farms have meant fewer farm families. It stands to reason that since bigger machines work larger fields and it costs more to purchase a large farm machine than a house, farmers who want to stay in the game must buy out their neighbors. This consolidation of what were smaller family farms into larger family—or more likely, corporate—farms has forced many farm workers into towns and from there into cities. At the same time, Jim pointed out, many former farmers have retired to town, living on Social Security or money from acreage they've sold.

As a kid, Jim shadowed his father. "You could find me if you found my dad and looked down. I was close to my twenties before I had a hero other than him. I wanted to unload hay and stock hay bales as fast as my dad could.

It took me a while to beat the bull.” In the 1950s and ’60s, farming wasn’t particularly dangerous; Jim could be constantly underfoot, learning by observing and doing, and not endanger himself or his father. But that isn’t true anymore. Today, the huge machines used on 1000-acre farms are too dangerous and expensive to let anyone but an expert run and repair them. Moreover, the machines do almost all the work. “Contrary to the received wisdom,” said Jim, “it’s tough to be a boy in this society.” By that, he meant that today few rural boys can work at learning how to farm. “The ag teacher at our school gets requests from farm boys in October to camp out in the school shop. They don’t want to go home,” Jim reported. The collaboration of entire families in farming—wives and husbands, daughters and sons—has also decreased because the machines require high technical skill and are treacherous to operate. Farm girls may still run milking machines, but they usually don’t drive combines. “Harvesting is a harrowing time when huge machines reap, thresh, and bale as fast as the weather allows,” Jim continued. There is no longer need for the strong young arms of Jim’s generation. “It’s as if their families and community have told these boys, there’s no place for you. The farm economy does not include them.” Their options after high school are either to get a factory job in the county seat or the Twin Cities suburbs, or to become a farmhand driving one of the huge combines.

Jim and his son Josh have resisted the dehumanization of agricultural expansion in favor of a return to older-style agriculture. They have shifted from “cropping to grazing,” with more than half of their land in perennial grasses which they cut to feed and bed their cattle. “We are trying a new philosophy based on principles from the Amish,” explained Jim. “Every time we consider acquiring machinery, we ask ‘Is it gonna replace people or enable people to do their work better?’ Someday, I hope we will have a community that can ask, ‘Will this machine replace my neighbor?’”



It was the last Monday in January, 7:30 a.m. I had just left Little Falls, the birthplace of aviator Charles Lindbergh, heading west on glare ice to Swanville for a weeklong writing residency. Bits of rural town residencies over the years cut loose from their moorings to swirl around me.

Rush City: no heat in my room on the top floor of an old hotel; odors of pork and sauerkraut wafting up from the knotty pine dining room.

Lake of the Woods: With its tiny Angle-Inlet school, boasting a mere ten students.

Long Prairie: Where poet and English teacher David Bengston hosted the program and his extracurricular Red Plaid Thermos Writers Clud. (The student writers’ club, mistyped by David in its inaugural naming, was henceforth dubbed “Clud.”) At their tongue-in-cheek, bimonthly meetings Clud members would raise a thermos of Tang to toast literature and the mysterious all-powerful Bob Bergstrom (David’s alias), who as president never managed to attend a meeting.

On that cold January morning, I found myself somewhere shy of Swanville, fog and snow throwing a scarf around a conglomeration of low buildings. No indication of a school, no hint of a driveway. Country people

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sometimes give off-hand directions. "Oh, you'll see it! Come in the back way." I gripped the wheel and slowed to a crawl until suddenly a swaying orange behemoth of a bus came along the road and led me to the parking lot and the back door, where contact teacher Kathy Detloff was waiting.

During our tour of the building, I hazarded a question about Swanville's namesake: "Are swans frequent visitors to Swanville?" I had once written an article about Minnesota's reintroduction of trumpeter swans. If the ground around Swanville hadn't been snowed in, I might have recognized the trumpeters' preferred "pot-holes" (Minnesota parlance for tiny glacial lakes). Though Kathy knew of no swan sightings, she was delighted that I wanted to try a swan-related exercise with my first class of fourth grade students. When I stood before them later that morning I encouraged them to stand and stretch out their arms. "Add a foot or two at each end," I instructed. Waving my paltry 5' 4" pinions, I added that humans' wingspans tended to be equal to their height. "There aren't many people who have wingspans as long as trumpeters—seven feet." The kids giggled and flapped obligingly. As they began to loosen up, I told them, "Trumpeters once resided in Minnesota in huge flocks, but they were shot because ladies in Europe liked their long white feathers and gloves made of their skin. The swans made easy targets. You would, too, if you had to flap seven-foot wings to take off."

Kathy proved to be a bundle of energy, one of those dedicated rural teachers who exemplify a truth about small-town life. Everybody does everything. I first encountered this phenomenon in my early circuit writing days in the 1980s. In Catherine Barner's wonderfully sunny, geranium-filled classroom at Battle Lake, senior boys wrote poetry without complaint and senior girls bragged about fixing their own cars. Farmers acted in town dramas and shopkeepers doubled as county farm extension agents. Small towns don't have enough people to specialize, Catherine explained. If a community wants a theater and several choirs and a weekly newspaper and book clubs—then everybody has to take part. Early immigrant farmer families made their own equipment, built their own houses and furniture, and sewed aprons or dresses from floral-decorated flour sacks. Living the typical seven miles from a town (the distance a team of horses could pull a wagon to town and back for a day's shopping), rural families created their own institutions, entertained themselves with school sings, storytelling, game-playing, and fiddling. Rural electrification did not reach many Minnesota farm families until the 1950s, and some one-room schools endured through the mid-20th century. Though electricity and consolidated schools have prevailed, self-sufficiency remains an unspoken ethic.

After the swan warm-up, I introduced one of my favorite break-the-ice exercises, the Surreal Photo Poem. In my many years of circuit writing, I've found that this exercise offers me a subtle means of gauging the preoccupations of the students and their fields of reference. In turn, the photographs provide them with a somewhat disorienting but concretely accessible visual image to work with: a hoe just about to settle into the earth, a train just about to depart. With ease, they may slide into the next narrative instant. Acquired from thrift shops and estate sales, some of my photographs have Midwestern references that are unmistakable: a trio of youths waving goodbye to Duluth from a caboose; stately studio portraits with garlands, plinths, and painted backdrops; soldiers sporting ranger-style hats and cavalry boots outside a typical small-town train station with a roof like a ship's hull. Others hail from far-off regions:

Pueblo villagers in New Mexico; African-American farmers jitterbugging in Clarksdale, Mississippi, circa 1947. These, along with images of American Indians from the 19th century, have instant appeal for my students—their fascination with the unfamiliar tugs at their imaginations.

They hurried to select a photograph, usually on impulse, but once at their desks, the students entered into an intimate—if short-lived—dialogue with the image. The quirky restrictions of old-time cameras added to the curious nature of the photos. I reminded the students that slow shutter speeds meant that subjects had to sit still for several minutes, a far cry from the Kodak moment. Formal portraits were taken in studios with fancy props. Women often stood because they wanted to show off their elaborate handmade dresses. Traveling photographers would come to town or field (much like a circuit writer) and take snapshots outdoors, with the tripod unsteady on the rough ground. As the students looked at the pictures they had chosen, I asked them to consider what occasions had inspired the photographs. Had the man in doughboy uniform returned from the trenches of France? Was this his daughter's only picture of him? Were the three women sisters? Was one of them getting married? Who was the seamstress of their dresses? When the photo only hinted, I told the class, it was up to the writer to fill in the gaps.

To make the shift from sight to insight, from observing to writing, I encouraged the students to drape one of their own memories (or an historical fact) around a figure or object in the photo. For example, I told them that when I had measles, my father brought me a stuffed lamb from his job at the Red Cross. So, I might integrate that detail into the otherwise unknown life of a mother depicted in one of the photographs: “The woman carrying the baby in the crook of her arm remembers having measles when she was four, remembers the black lamb her father brought her.” The possibilities of this kind of conflation are legion, and potentially strange. The photos act like dreams and we become the dreamers.

In Swanville, the student poems that emerged from this conjunction were quite different from poems about lived personal experience or remote imaginings. Fifth/sixth grader Jeremy H. wrote ostensibly about a curly-haired dog. Ignoring the studio backdrop of castle and clouded sky and the plaid blanket under the dog, he chose to dwell on elements that led into an outer world not so different from the woods and fields surrounding Swanville. He also embedded questions within the poem itself, as I had recommended. Sometimes a question is the greatest lesson a poem can teach, and often more believable than a single-minded answer.

The dog of the house sits on a table
while the master dreams a dream
of a flying bed which will take him anywhere.
Anyhow through the door lies the dog
looking and looking for his bone.
The wilderness is waiting for the
dog and the man. Who is next? Now, no
one, no how. Who is in the woods?

A crow, a deer, or maybe nothing,
just the smell of a flower or two,
just to enjoy the midnight
bloom. What a day, a day for you and
all.

Who else wants to be in the
place? The dog gets up and wakes his
master. Who is going and
what do you want? A walk in the woods,
I see. Some fun this will be.

Wilderness call.

Tenth grader Katie K. chose to write about a woman whose scrawny neck did not fit her homemade dress. At first, I thought that Katie had overlooked the cumbersome clothing, which I had taken to be the main interest of the image. As I examined the photo more closely, though, I found a wreath and a candle accompanied by a printed greeting, “Holiday Wishes”—even though the photo clearly celebrated her bouquet of daisies and a return of spring in an older woman’s life. It was this subtle incongruity that Katie captured: the memory of a child standing beside her stove could have been Katie with her own grandmother.

This little old lady
stands by the steps
wearing her best of dresses
holding the most beautiful flowers.
She fixes her shiny gray hair
to fit her egg-shaped head.

I see her standing by the stove
waiting for the sweet soft cooking to get done.
There is a small boy standing by her
smiling like the cool breeze on your face.

She stands on a ground filled with ivy flowers.
This big old white shack to take up
the background.
The boy who was once little
is now grown full.
Stands with the camera
ready to take a picture of
the most beautiful woman.

The Surreal Photo Poem Exercise

Step 1: Choose an anonymous old photo, discuss restrictions of old cameras. Discuss how clothing styles, vehicles, and other elements help define an era. Hint: Civil War and after, hoop skirts; 1880s–1910s, Gibson Girl hats with wide curving brims and dashing feathers, leg-o-mutton sleeves, long skirts and high-button shoes, men’s caps with short bills; 1910s–20s, knickers for boys and long black stockings for girls; 1920s–30s, men’s felt fedoras or straw “boaters” for young dandies.

Step 2: Have students imagine the occasion for their photos. Some are easy: e.g., men holding up rabbits and guns. For difficult ones, students should guess about relationships, setting, time.

Step 3: Make a list of elements in the photo. Begin with “Where does your eye go first?” List even insignificant details of clothing, posture, gestures, expressions, hairstyles, backdrops, or backgrounds; objects like a shotgun, basket of greens, or horse and buggy standing by the gate.

Step 4: Give a personal memory to someone in the photo. Or adapt a detail from history. Write what this person regrets, dreams, senses (mention the five senses), enjoys, or is afraid of.

Step 5: Decide what happened just before the photo was taken and what will happen as soon as the shutter clicks. Keep the historic era in mind: Imagine only what would fit that era. Perhaps the family had driven out to see their “homestead claim,” dressed in their Sunday best.

Step 6: To increase surprising combinations, write a list of possible additions to the poem—an odd color, line from a song, favorite food for people 100 years ago—i.e., not pizza. Add a natural detail: a meteor shower, a grasshopper chirping by the road. Add a tiny action: pouring cream from a flowered cream pitcher. Tailor poems to a particular community by including events familiar to everyone in town: a tornado, a milk truck-tipping, Halloween pranks. Local audiences, who hear these poems read aloud, will appreciate these elements.

Step 7. Start to write by selecting the point of view which will dominate the poem—someone in the photo, or the photographer, or an onlooker who doesn’t appear in the photo. A tree, a dog, a buggy all may provide a distinctive point of view.

Step 8. Start by describing a small detail. Alternate description with action, memories, thoughts, and emotions. Ask questions that raise elements of emotion in oblique ways. Keep returning to details from the photo. Make a few unusual combinations: Mix the familiar with the unexpected.

As a circuit writer, I like to draw upon my role as Stranger to help my students see, appreciate, and articulate, from a slight remove, the time and place in which they live. For my Swanville students, the photo poem exercise was just the beginning. The next day, two Swanville old-timers, Wilma Hahn and Parker Johnson, dropped by as volunteer participants in my Oral History Poems exercise. The exercise started out with more of a whimper than a bang, due to the fact that the students failed to muster many questions. But they weren’t to blame. You don’t have to see the movie *Fargo* to know that northlanders are a wonderfully reticent lot. The common Minnesota hug is A-frame, and visitors from other regions often complain that Minnesotans have a

porch to their attitudes—that is, they’re slow to argue or interfere. They call this “Minnesota nice,” but sometimes it feels more like Minnesota “ice.” The arrival of Irish and African-Americans here, as well as the recent influx of Hispanics and Somalis has contributed to a general thaw, but there is still a pervasive sense of restraint.

That’s why, whenever I’m teaching in a town that contains many generations still living in the same area, I try to encourage oral history interviews. Fielding questions is not only therapeutic for the older generation—the stories that emerge fill crucial gaps in children’s knowledge. These conversations contribute to a larger, more inclusive sense of humanity. Let’s face it, even on farms or in houses in rural towns, family conversations have been nosed aside by scheduled activities, television shows, and telephone conversations. I like to set us down together for 40 minutes and listen to how older people have lived their lives.

Instead of requiring the students to take detailed, journalistic notes during the interviews, I suggested that they simply jot down the phrases that gave them pleasure. This aphoristic note-taking helped them pay attention by giving them an individual motive for listening. It also helped them let go of their preoccupation with narrative that flows from event to event, and encouraged them to listen to the patchwork way stories are actually told—shifting from physical descriptions to snippets of conversation to off-the-cuff jokes to in-depth vignettes. If we tell the story of our own lives once a day for three days, I told them, different details and emphasis emerge with each telling.

Wilma was born in the 1920s and moved from Illinois to a township 15 miles from Swanville before first grade. Her one-room school held eight grades. “Since the teacher boarded a mile away,” she explained, “she asked me to start the fire first thing in the morning.” The round, wood-burning stove took an hour to heat up, so students wore their coats and hats for early morning lessons. Wilma’s mornings began well before school—rising at dawn to set traps for weasels in the woods. She’d bait a long line with chicken livers and string it across bushes. With her dad’s help, she’d stretch and dry the pelts, then bundle them off to Sears Roebuck. “According to their size, I earned 50 cents to one dollar,” she said. Wilma’s evening duties included the preparation of chamber pots and Saturday-evening baths made of melted snow. “We changed the water,” she added, “but not for every person.” From November to March her whole family wore long johns. Girls had it particularly rough, with long black stockings held up by garter belts. “The first day they fit to your leg,” Wilma crinkled up her nose, “then they started to sag. We wrapped them around our legs which made a lump behind.” She laughed at the memory of the unsightliness.

Her contemporary Parker Johnson remembered one-room schools at Bearhead, Pillsbury, Cyrus, and Vida—all of which were eventually consolidated into the Swanville School. Mrs. Chambers, his first teacher, “didn’t like me from the day I walked in,” he said, “though I didn’t do nothing wrong.” Often just in time for recess, she’d identify some infraction he’d committed. “Parker, you can stay in,” she’d say. He shook his head ruefully: “Discipline in those days was anything the teacher wanted. She could whang you over the head with a book, or hit your hand with a ruler.” Parker made as if he were still smarting, then smiled, recalling his subsequent spitball

exploits when the teacher's back was turned. "There were as many devils those days as there are now," Parker remarked, "but I knew the teacher knew it was me." The fourth graders laughed aloud. "The teacher said, 'Give me that peashooter,'" Parker continued. "I denied I had it, laughed, then hung onto my seat. She pulled the three of us up by our hair and our seats came along too. Then she dropped us." The fourth graders gasped. They weren't used to adults doling out such punishments. "It took me 11 years to go eight grades," Parker confessed. "And I didn't dare complain to my dad about the discipline because I was scared of getting another round from him."

The next day my goal was to connect Wilma's and Parker's more distant accounts of their youth to the students' own experience of childhood—a crucial connection that was best made subtly. I didn't want to shift attention away from the speakers, yet the students needed to get inside Wilma's and Parker's experiences and claim an affinity if they were ever going to be able to write a poem. Poems, with their compression and lightning leaps, counteracted the oral interview's tendency to wander and hem and haw. That's one reason I chose poetry rather than short stories for the students' responses. In fact, using oral history material, students often blurred genres, writing short-short poem-stories. These hybrids gave us a chance to discuss differences in genres and ways each student could develop their first drafts into either shorter poems or longer stories. Or, if they chose, leave them the way they were.

To get the students started writing poems from the interviews, I reached for Midwestern poet Jim Moore's "That Summer, for Marijo," the opening word of which ("sometimes") offers a compelling gateway (a casual equivalent to "once upon a time") to student poems:

Sometimes we played tennis,
 sometimes we sat in the dust and planned our birthdays.
 I was in love with the blonde one.
 How many evenings
 we sat on the porch
 and dusk handed over the dark
 to all of us kicking our legs under the swing.
 The horses we pretended to ride were really bicycles.
 But the love was truly love.
 Whoever we are now
 we once walked the white line of the tennis court
 one after the other with our arms held out for balance.
 The brick streets were ours!
 O, the thick shadows of those elms.
 No other childhood is possible.
 It is too late to change the name
 on the gravestone of a single leaf.

The students found the poem very liberating. Jim's catalogue of memories gave them free rein to leap from one detail to another and showed them the cumulative impact of a seemingly random list. Because lists can grow

unwieldy, I encouraged them to end their poems, much like Jim's, with an image that indicated the passage of time.

My directions for the tenth grade classes were slightly different. I wanted them to focus on one vignette from the life of Wilma or Parker and then elaborate on it. I hoped the freedom to adapt a story in their own terms might appeal to these somewhat disinterested teenagers. Swanville sophomore Lisa L. rose to the occasion by capturing Parker's humor and cadence through the use of unusual line-breaks and staccato pauses:

My routine in school was
flunk for two years, then pass to the next class.
I didn't deserve it
but that's the way my teacher was.
Soon to be divorced
she took her anger out on me.
I would answer a question right and
I would get embarrassed by her shouting
"Parker got something right"
to the entire classroom.
I got revenge by
shooting spitballs at her but
got punished by her,
took it in good humor
by laughing the whole time
my hair was being tugged.

Oral History Poems (a two-day exercise)

Step One: Conduct the interview in class. Good people to interview are retired teachers, coaches, grandparents, friends of students or staff. (It's best to have interviewees over 50 years old.) Have an adult start the questions, and then have students chime in later. The latter should jot down phrases or episodes that catch their fancy. Emphasize writing down exact phrases to lend a spoken quality to the poems. Writing a timeline on the board can help place public events such as World Wars, the Depression, etc.

Step Two: The next day, fill the board with favorite phrases from the interview. Discuss anything unclear or not understood. Comment on ways the person's childhood was different from today's.

Step Three: Read Jim Moore's poem and notice its listing of events in a memorable summer. Identify clues to childhood attitudes and behavior. Discuss the metaphor at the end, the comparison of leaves and gravestones. Encourage students to use a list shape and a startling metaphoric ending in fashioning their own poems.

Step Four: Vary moods and events and details to keep the poem lively. Tell the poem in the voice of the person interviewed. If they want, writers can enlarge on something only suggested, but the poem should stick as closely to the speaker's words as possible, trimming them, and if possible, creating a crisis. A crisis is almost always one event, different from repeated things of daily life.

Step Five: It helps if the teacher/writer creates a sample poem on the board, or the class can write a group sample poem to get started. Students may choose phrases from those gathered on the board or from their own notes. The ending, like Jim Moore's, widens the scope of the poem by suggesting not only the passage of time, but also how looking back can discover relationships among things otherwise considered discrete. Suggest some ways we mark time's passage—geese flying south, leaves turning, a face full of wrinkles, hands shaking with palsy. Then combine two elements and play around with words that evoke unexpected relationships—such as, "A drift of milkweed fluff whitening her hair."



In the mid-1980s when my residency work expanded to 12 weeks a year, principal Charles Askegaard invited me to KMS (the acronym for Kerkhoven, Murdock, Sundberg), a small consolidated district about 15 miles from the larger town of Willmar. Willmar is famous for its strike of eight women bank employees in 1976, chronicled in a documentary called *The Willmar 8*.

Mr. Askegaard suggested that I stay in Willmar at the Super 8 Motel opposite the train tracks because none of the KMS towns had any lodging. Such arrangements are common for residencies in very small towns. Even if motels exist, their indoor-outdoor carpeting often smells of hunters' beer; furthermore, eating in such small places can prove unnerving. I always seem to draw stares. At Long Prairie, for instance, though I enjoyed scrumptious baked chicken and mashed potatoes in the only café that served dinner, several pre-schoolers stood up on their seats and proceeded to point at me. "Who's that?" they called. "Who's she staying with?" In an even smaller hamlet farmers eyed me from under their feed caps while I ate lunch with the contact teacher. I soon realized that she and I were the only women in the diner. Earlier rural communities tended to treat their teachers like royalty. School-board presidents put them up, and churches vied for their voices in the choir. But the teachers were also held to strict account: They couldn't date, dance, or drink. If they managed to sneak off and do just that, they were put on probation or fired. Pure as a Madonna, retired if she became wedded to anything except knowledge, the rural schoolteacher might walk the weedy roads like a goddess, but she bore her employers' fear of outsiders and their admiration and suspicion of book-learning. These days, when most female teachers in rural Minnesota have gone through school with everyone in their age group and are likely married to farmers, suspicion of outsiders is reserved for the likes of me. And I was wearing red cowboy boots with fringe. Not likely to inspire trust.

My first residency at KMS was an unusual two weeks: one spent at the elementary school in Murdock and another in the high school in Kerkhoven, and occasional half days in the Norwegian hamlet of Sundberg. Usually my schedule gave me only a week per school, requiring back-to-back teaching in different towns that I sometimes found disorienting. I was happy to relax into KMS's generous schedule. Afternoons, as I swooped into Sundberg down a dip in the road, I felt as if I'd left the modern world behind and entered cozy Old Norway: huge maples shaded porches spindled with spun-sugar. It was easy to imagine courtly Mr. Askegaard living there. When I found him he explained that tiny Sundberg had retained its school

because they wanted the freedom to teach a little Norwegian and to study Norwegian history and customs. And, though I never partook of the school lunches, rumor had it that the cooks concocted meals of meatballs and potatoes—and maybe even *lefsa*, delicate potato pancakes dusted with sugar and rolled in jam.

My favorite teacher in the high school was Ruth Govig, whose husband was mayor of Kerkhoven, population 748, the largest of the three communities. Her eleventh-grade classroom was on the second floor of the old school, with tall windows and pools of sun on the wide maple floors. Built in 1904, and named after President Garfield, who'd been assassinated in 1888, its solid brick structure was a block off Main Street. Though I had always found something wrong with the factory model of education that inspired this sort of architecture (where the teachers were compelled to act like foremen, regulating achievement through quotas and repetitive tasks), Ruth's building appealed to me with a kind of warped nostalgia. It stood foursquare in the center of town, as essential as any other kind of working establishment, and it didn't seem afraid of a certain kind of rigor. By the time I had returned for my second residency with Ruth in 1998, however, the old high school was gone. "The new one is just west of town. Stay on Highway 12. You can't miss it." I had heard that before. But in this case her directions were as accurate as they were easy. During the 15-mile drive from Willmar, white feathers dusted the weeds at the roadside. Beyond were a series of low buildings, which I assumed sent birds to Willmar's main employer, Jenny-O's turkey processing plants. Entering Kerkhoven, I crossed a railroad viaduct, then slowed as I reached the town's main street—railroad tracks and grain elevators on one side, storefronts on the other. On the periphery of town sat the new school in a flat, treeless swath. An American flag clacked in the prairie wind, and plovers piped in the grass. It was April and cold, but the grass was greening up.

As a rule, I am saddened by the demolition of fine old schools with their operatic windows, talkative staircases, and halls wide enough to thresh with a combine. New schools may operate with much the same philosophy as their forebears, yet they possess little of their older relatives' physical assertiveness. They hunker on the edge of small towns like shopping malls. Students arrive in school buses or cars that fill huge parking lots like tourist caravans. The buildings, with their amorphous shapes and lack of symmetry, level the character of their surroundings to a kind of no man's land. It's hard to tell which is the front or back door: multiple entrances snake out in thin erratic sidewalks. Often there are too few windows. The building material is neutral, hard to identify, but probably concrete. As I walked toward KMS's new facility, across the prairie emptiness, I decided it was not so dissimilar from the turkey barns—both serviceable containers for rearing live creatures. I hesitated to carry the comparison further.

Energetic, regal, and beautifully dressed, Ruth didn't seem phased by the move. She helped orient me to the sprawling floor plan. All my classes would be down one corridor, she told me, and there, across the atrium, was a glassed-in media center where I could type up student work. Though the new corporate environment was elegant and streamlined, I worried that it symbolized a rejection or displacement of certain rural traditions. It's a cliché of cultural analysis to bemoan the commercialization and homogenization of American culture. But perhaps not so obvious is the urbanization of the K-12 curriculum—English texts with little from contemporary rural writers. And the history of American agriculture generally taught only through the Dust

Bowl. Most school material—which does not speak to the rural experience in all its change and complexity—betrays rural students to the alienation and despair already smoldering in their communities. To counterbalance this trend, I developed a group of exercises that would cultivate an appreciation of agrarian knowledge and rural wisdom. My first assignment at KMS asked students to write about things they learned outside of school. The model was Kate Green’s “Don’t Make Your Life Too Beautiful,” which celebrates the odd dislocations and accidents that make a place unique:

Don't fix the three-foot hole in the plaster
over the stairway...
You can look for hours at the pile
of shingles your neighbor ripped off his roof
and left to mold the green summer...
Leave the old worn boots stacked in the hall,
the rotten mattress in the flagstone basement.
Live out your ecstasy on earth
amid the flaking patio stones,
the boarded up back door
and the rusty car.

What emerged from the students were poems built of aphorisms and directives that no city kid could have known. “Don’t pee on an electric fence,” wrote one boy. “Don’t take a skunk out of your dog’s mouth,” wrote another. “Don’t put your head down beside your dog when he’s eating. Don’t tamper with baby snakes—the mother will come after you.” Then one worthy of the Russian artist Marc Chagall: “Goats can get up on roofs but can’t get down.” Hmm, I wondered as I handed back the papers with my red exclamation marks, whose roof was it? “Don’t shoot at baby gophers—the mothers will attack you.” “Don’t let your cousin whirl your cat around by its tail. Don’t stand behind a horse, or a cow.” Each line was a potential story. The absolute authority and uncanny specificity of these lines impressed me with the students’ knowledge of the natural world.

The next year, on the advice of Ruth’s replacement Carol Thomson, I designed a similar exercise around the work of Minnesota poet Leo Dangel. One of Carol’s favorite writers, Dangel writes of outhouse-tipping, pinochle-playing, and tractor-driving, with equal panache. I thought the students would particularly enjoy Dangel’s “How to Take a Walk.” This poem pokes gentle fun at a common occurrence, a farmer walking his fence line, carrying a shotgun. Dangel’s humor seemed to invite the students to be themselves. “Think of the moments when your experience has gone against the grain,” I told them, “when you have been aware of experiencing something different, or choosing something different. The difference can be subtle, not huge; it can also be cloaked, not altogether obvious to the outsider.”

The results, when I read them that night in the Super 8, were electric. Reading aloud the next day, the students showed more interest and respect for each other than they had before. Instead of scaling the peak of the exotic (provided by me) and worrying about showing off or failing at the game, they now were speaking with laconic humor about the prairie experience, and doing just fine. The wide circle of poetry had expanded to include them.