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READING THE ROWS:

A WORKING MEDITATION ON AGRICULTURE, NATURE, AND LITERATURE

by

Steven Hall

A dissertation

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Committee Approval

To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of STEVEN HALL find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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For Frank and Jenile

Acknowledgments

Completing this dissertation has reaffirmed for me a truth I've taught my writing students for years. While counterintuitive, and despite the many hours I spent working on this dissertation alone, writing is not a solitary activity. And for that reason I feel compelled to acknowledge all those who helped me along the way.

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always have the answers to my questions. More important, seeing and talking with them always makes me smile.

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My exploration of literature and agriculture in this dissertation was originally inspired by family relationships. To my father and mother Roger and Rozanne Hall I extend my gratitude and love for raising me to appreciate my ancestors and, as a result, my origins. I will always be a product of mother's gardening and father's farming. My siblings (Kathryn, Brian, Elizabeth, and Anne) and their spouses (Stu, Jill, Matt, and Taylor) have always believed in me. Since I first became determined to save the farm, Frank and Jenile's children (in addition to my father) have shown some form of interest, even if that included challenging my ideas. Discussing with them my passion for the farm and my belief in the extended family's physical attachment to the farm always provided motivation and increased insight.

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A WORKING MEDITATION ON AGRICULTURE, NATURE, AND LITERATURE

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This dissertation examines the recent outpouring of literature on agricultural themes by identifying and describing characteristic narrative personas in farm-themed literature, characterizations of human relationships on a working landscape (particularly within families), and the depiction of personal identity in a farming culture. Further, I will examine literary depictions of farming landscapes, and the representation of the complex relationships existing between people and nature through work and farming's manipulation of nature. Within a traditional model of scholarly analysis, I juxtapose personal experiences, family history, and direct observation. This form of "narrative scholarship" allows me to provide a complex and tactile analysis of the ways the human imagination depicts the experience of farming in America and to explore how my own personal identity has been shaped by the family farm.

Chapter One introduces the American Farm Elegy, a subgenre defined by nostalgic retelling of childhood on a mid-twentieth-century family farm, such as Ronald Jager's *Eighty Acres: Elegy for a Family Farm* and Mildred Armstrong Kalish's *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression*. Chapter Two presents a different depiction of the family farm, one told in the Prodigal Farmer Memoir by authors who deliberately removed themselves from the family farm upon becoming an adult, including David Mas Masumoto's *Harvest Son: Planting Roots in American Soil*, Jane Brox's *Here and Nowhere Else: Late Seasons of a Farm and Its Family*, and Howard Kohn's *The Last Farmer: An American Memoir*. Chapter Three

focuses on two contemporary novels that explore the impact of industrial agriculture on families, workers, nature, and food: Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation*. Chapters Four and Five evaluate the literary response to industrial farming's influence on our food system and culture by considering three authors with compelling, distinct voices: Wendell Berry, Victor Davis Hanson, and Michael Pollan. Chapter Six examines the literary depiction of the intimate relationship that exists between farmers and consumers and between the farm and the kitchen through Locavore Memoirs, like Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* and Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon's *Plenty: Eating Locally on the 100-Mile Diet*. Chapter Seven explores the burgeoning body of contemporary literature about sustainable farming, almost exclusively published as creative nonfiction. These include Novella Carpenter's *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer* and *The Dirty Life: A Memoir of Farming, Food, and Love* by Kristin Kimball.

Introduction

Digging for Meaning

On a gray, damp Saturday in October I drive north from Pocatello, Idaho where I've just moved to begin a doctoral program in English at Idaho State University. I should be reading another essay on literary theory for Monday's seminar, probably something from Derrida or Foucault, but I need some fresh air. Perhaps subconsciously their theories have pushed me to ask questions about my own reality. What is an author? What is a text? Why did I leave a steady teaching job for this? Seeking to clarify my motives for pursuing another graduate degree in English, I've recently begun an informal survey of my classmates, whose own motives include examining the role of cyborgs and politics in early modern drama, demonstrating the influence of science on the nineteenth-century novel, and outlining the role of aesthetics and rhetoric in the TV show *South Park*'s social criticism. Fine pursuits, all of them. But their responses have made me question my decision to come here. I'm afraid I don't share their passion for such acutely specialized academic inquiry.

Attempting to shake myself loose from my anxiety, I concentrate on the passing Idaho landscape, only to realize I don't even know where I am. It's becoming a familiar theme. Without the kinds of distinguishing physical features I grew accustomed to as a boy in southern Oregon—like the sharp peaks of the Cascades and the distinct, intersecting outline of the Siskiyou Mountains—views to my left and to my right all begin to look the same: metallic grain silos, continuous fence line, pastures scattered with wandering steers and horses, and a litany of expensive-looking tractors pulling an

assortment of curiously-shaped conveyers, presumably used for the potato harvest. Increasing activity in the fields gives me hope I'm getting close.

Finally the Menan Buttes come into view, the only distinguishing feature I can recognize. Within the vast space of the Snake River Plain (ranging from 400 miles long and 50 to 125 miles wide), geographical features like the Menan Buttes (consisting of two glass tuff cones, nearly identical in size, created when chilled magma was blown into the air before being deposited) are rare in the plain for their modest altitude. They rise only 800 feet above the plain. But when they appear I know where I am, and where I'm going. After exiting Highway 20 I head west, entering a landscape laced with sloughs and irrigation ditches (some leaving and others finding the Snake River), level fields of grain and alfalfa, and patches of native vegetation like sage and willows. At the Annis Little Butte Cemetery I veer north, finally pulling off the road into a short, single-lane driveway grown over with knee-high weeds.

I approach an old farmhouse, residence to a litany of renters during the past fifteen years, most recently to migrant workers. The front door is open. Upon entering, I nearly trip over two dead woodpeckers lying limp on the floor. A rancid, stagnant odor lingers in the air. The carpet and walls bear a camouflage of black, greasy stains. A Castillos Mexican Imports calendar is pinned to the kitchen wall. A chiseled, bare-chested Aztec warrior featured prominently for the month of May stands heroically, a curvaceous and bosomy woman lying unconscious across his arms. Unmade bedrolls remain strewn about the house, in every room but the kitchen. Soda and beer cans and other trash are strewn about, including random items of clothing. A single white tennis shoe lies on the linoleum floor of the kitchen. The workers appear to have left in a hurry.

I think back to the last visit I ever made here with my parents and siblings, now nearly a decade ago. My dad's parents, Frank and Jenile, had been gone for well over five years. As on most summer days in the upper Snake River valley, warm, blustery winds blew from every direction. Walking behind the house and among the cluster of outbuildings, a familiar smell penetrated my nostrils, a mixture of dust, fresh hay, diesel fuel, and steaming metal. Following my dad toward the eastern border of the field, I listened intently as he pointed in each direction, trying to help us put our minds around the boundaries of the old farm. He hadn't lived here for almost forty years, but as he motioned to the south indicating the far edge of the homestead (where our ancestors Peter Barbour Clark and Artemissia Clawson first settled in 1881) he looked so content, like he'd never left.

That brief visit ended inside the farmhouse. For my dad, it was his first look inside since tenants moved in. Something didn't feel the same. Instead of Frank and Jenile's lifelong home—his birthplace and backdrop for an entire youth full of memories—the house resembled a deteriorating, lifeless rental. Before getting into the car to drive away, he hesitated in front of his childhood home for a final look. After looking so tranquil while walking through the fields just minutes earlier, now the agitation spreading across his face was palpable. Once in the car he finally released his displeasure. Despite living 800 miles away, he purchased the farm when his parents passed, not willing yet to sell the farm to another family. A sense of defeat lingered in his voice, a feeling of delayed resignation: "I probably should have sold the place when they died. You just can't hold on to the past." My mom went on the offensive, immediately demanding restitution, and cursing years of faceless renters to hell for their crimes.

They'd ruined the place. For my dad, one statement would be enough. He was done speaking. In that moment I chose to reserve any comment, fearing it wasn't my place. Finally, my dad put the car into gear and we drove away. And just like that it was over. While years had passed since his father stopped farming, that seemed to be the unofficial moment when the farm was no more.

Making my way into the kitchen, I can see past the grime and vividly imagine Jenile working away at one of her daily tasks—kneading bread dough, peeling and slicing a pot of potatoes, hovering over the stove stirring a pot of gravy—biting down on her lower lip whenever she's fully concentrating. I'm struck, suddenly, with the realization that my desire to attend graduate school began with that painful moment for my parents, all those years ago. At the time I was a naïve and inexperienced undergraduate with no major, no direction, and no long-term plans. In that instant, however, I had found a purpose. This house where Jenile gave birth to my dad and one of his siblings, this farm where Frank took his children to watch with him until the water reached the end of the rows, could never be sold. The solution, at the time, seemed simple enough. Someone just needed to return, to tidy it up and make it a working farm again. Immediate and extended family would visit often, refreshing their ancestral ties to the region through physical labor in the soil of the Snake River Plain. A living farm would equal living memories. A living farm would mean a living family.

Contrary to my assumptions, my dad didn't take to the idea when I first presented it to him. "Are you crazy?" he impugned, while that terrifyingly unambiguous look of bewilderment spread across his face. "You don't make a living on a 40-acre farm. If that was possible, I would have stayed and taken over myself." But I had found something

here, a sense of purpose and meaning. So refusing to give up, I began formulating an alternate plan. Academics and teaching could be a side job, I reasoned. Just until I proved the farm could provide me a living. I began my doctoral degree at Idaho State knowing absolutely nothing about the institution or the program. None of the typical influences for prospective graduate students—prominent professors, impressive facilities, a program's reputation—affected my decision. I came here to study literature and writing only for the university's geographical proximity to a nondescript, dilapidated farm. All I hoped for is that in addition to an education in literature, language, and pedagogy, I would leave with an understanding of place, farming, and my role in the generations.

The story of the Hall family farm is not an unusual one. In recent years, despite increasing public attention to local food and sustainable agriculture, the statistics on the exponential decrease of farmers in America have almost become redundant. Or perhaps it's the absence of statistics. In 1993 the United States government announced the Census Bureau would no longer keep statistics on the number of Americans who live on farms ("Too Few Farms Left"). Perhaps this change shouldn't have been surprising. In its last counting of this statistic, the Census Bureau reported the number of Americans living on farms had dropped to 4.6 million in 1991, less than 2 percent of the total population ("Too Few Farms Left"). Less than a century earlier over one-third of the nation lived on farms. This house and farm, first homesteaded by my dad's grandfather Hubert Franklin Hall and later divided into four 20-acre parcels for each of his four children, belongs to that decline. By the time Frank planted and harvested his last crop in 1977 (the year of my birth), the 40 acres barely provided a living. During winter months Frank and Jenile supplemented the farm income by sorting potatoes in the Menan Potato Warehouse.

Frank also drove the school bus and Jenile mended and altered clothing, in addition to sewing quilts for local residents.

But the financial realities of a farmer's income in the twenty-first century never crossed my mind after I discovered what I believed to be my mission in life. All I could think about were the stories my dad told about the place we simply referred to as "the farm." His expectations for his suburban children concerning work, discipline, and integrity stemmed from his youth filled with annual plantings, harvests, and endless hot summers spent flood-irrigating the crops. My interest in the farm developed from a desire to preserve the birthplace of those stories, a place where my twenty-four cousins and I—none of whom grew up farming—could maintain a tangible and emotional connection to our family's history.

My new vision for the future immediately determined a shift in my daily reading. I discovered a growing assortment of memoirs written about the bygone era of family farms. But considering that approximately 20 million individuals in this country moved off farms during the twentieth century, an expansive collection of writing documenting the story of the family farm in America should not have been surprising. While a few of these memoirs closely examine and criticize the disappearance and transformation of the family farm, the majority utilize a documentary style, aiming simply to pass on information about a now lost lifestyle. These memoirs purport to represent the stories of millions of farming families during the early to mid twentieth century, in particular members of the last generation of multi-generation farm families.

Having looked over the interior of the farmhouse this October day, I make my way outside and wander around the yard to find a comfortable place to read my object of

study for the day. Weeds have taken over. Instead of my anthology of literary theory and criticism, I brought along a book my dad gave me during a visit home called *Clabbered Dirt, Sweet Grass*, a nonfiction narrative on the life and culture of traditional farming written by Gary Paulsen, a writer better known for his adolescent novels. "You better read this," he said, pointing to a book sitting on his side table, "if you really want to understand my childhood in Idaho." Coincidentally, my dad's older sister Peggy had told me about the same book just a few weeks earlier, before sending my dad her copy. In an email she wrote: "Steven…I just read a book in two hours…just picked it up off the library shelf. If you ever want the feel of good ol' farm days…this is the book."

Paulsen's short text is organized around a common format for farm literature: the four seasons. In short, his text relates the story of a life now gone, the realities of another time and another place. But it's the trope he uses to tell this story that brings me back to the book so often. Paulsen's foreword explains this trope, describing how the book even came about. While living in the woods of Minnesota and training dogs for the Iditarod, Paulsen's neighbors began bringing large deceased animals to him. The animals provided an excellent source of food for his dogs and a convenient way for his neighbors to dispose of the animals without letting them go to waste. When Paulsen received a call about a dead horse, he assumed it would be just another animal. When a logging truck arrived with a large horse, an old man named Gunnar Pederson opened the passenger door. Gunnar "had gone past the relative point in aging," he writes. "He was old enough so that his hands were bent with it, crooked with it and his back curved over where it would not be straight again" (ix). After introducing himself to Paulsen, Gunnar began relating a life story that eventually became Paulsen's book: "'It is my horse…We had

time together and now he is gone…I thought…I would tell you about this horse'"(x). And so, the two sat on the horse's massive side so that Paulsen could listen to Gunnar.

"'We used to do all things with horses, all things,'" Gunnar explained, "'[u]ntil they came out with the tractors that's all we had'" (xii). He continued to talk about his life, of each of his work horses, of his wife, of his children, of his farm, the farm "[t]hat had belonged to his father and his father's father, farm, torn from the woods with horses jerking the stumps when the first Pederson came from the old country" (xiv).

Rain has begun to fall. Seeking a refuge from the rain inside Frank's small milking shed, I open *Clabbered Dirt, Sweet Grass* and reread this passage while tiny plumes of dust rise from the ground with the force of each drop of rain. I move past the foreword and let my eyes flow through the vivid scenes created by Paulsen's free-flowing, running, paragraph-length sentences. It feels as if I'm sitting at the feet of Gunnar himself, recounting for me an entire life lived on the family farm where work, weather, and the seasons defined him and his family, defined life itself:

> All work, all the work there is or has been is for this now, all has been leading up to this time, this fall, and now luck, all the luck must come as well…As with the haying, families work together…one threshing machine to be taken around to several farms. (61)

Paulsen never says for sure this is Gunnar's story. For the most part, Paulsen leaves out specific family names and place names, and the reader begins to feel this is the story of every boy or girl, man or woman, who lived any part of a life on a family farm.

From the milk shed's doorway I begin imagining my dad is here with me. Doing like he used to on visits, he begins looking around, pointing toward specific homes and

fields while making a full turn. He names the family that belonged to each farmhouse, each portion of acreage. He reminisces about helping his father irrigate potatoes or milk the cows. Soon the memories seem to be overtaking him:

> One of the funnest things that I can ever remember was in the fall when all the local farmers' grain turned ripe. The grain was cut with a machine that was called a binder. It was a lot like a hay mower with a blade on it, a sickle blade that would go back and forth and cut this grain. Then there was a mechanism where a metal arm would wrap an armload of these grain stems together and put a string around it. Then after the whole field was harvested this way, people would come along on foot and take these bundles and stack them up on end. You've seen pictures in magazines and artwork showing these shocks of grain. And then a threshing machine would come along. I liked standing at the end of the thresher where the grain came out of a little pipe, collecting the grain into a burlap sack. It was a dusty, itchy job, but I loved the smell of the newly harvested grain.

Or perhaps I'm listening to my dad's father Frank. In my lifetime Frank spoke little about his farming life. By the time my memories begin Frank was housebound, suffering the physical pains of emphysema, weak joints, and general exhaustion. Digging up the life of hard, physical labor he so enjoyed, but had worn him down, almost seemed more painful, emotionally. Even when prodded to tell farming stories he'd give short answers: "I was a cowboy a bit, got bucked off a few times and got hurt." Taking deep breaths through his oxygen hose, his words and the pressure releases of the machine seemed to blend into some strange harmony of his past life and the present: "We used to raise beets and

potatoes and grain and great big fields of corn, chopped corn for our cows…I used to milk cows and raise calves and sheep and pigs." And it always seemed to end with family for Frank: "We got married and built this old house out of logs. Before we built on we got twins, and Bonnie came along, and then Roger and Foster, and they've been the joy of our lives all this time."

Near the end of his foreword Paulsen sits reflecting on Gunnar's words about why the dogs must eat the horse, must "'make him not to end so that he can go on…because the farm, the farm will not. My son will not farm nor his sons and the brush will take it back, the farm, all of it'" (xv). Paulsen concludes with several poignant questions, the same kinds of questions I found myself facing as a young twenty-something after the visit where my dad and mom seemed saddened by the end of the farm: "I sat on the horse for all this time, thinking of the things he had said, rubbed my fingers in the hair near the back of the horse and watched him [Gunnar] walking into the darkness and thought: Who will eat the man?" (xv). Closing the book and walking around the corner of the milkshed, across the weed-infested garden patch, and toward the house, I keep going over his final questions in my head: "How can it end that way? The horse goes on but not the man, not the farm—how can that be? Who will make him go on and on so that the things of him, the way of him will not stop, will not end?" *Clabbered Dirt, Sweet Grass* is Paulsen's effort to answer those questions, to keep the farmer alive through story. Graduate school and, consequently, this study became my own answer, my own attempt to answer those questions with new knowledge, with my life.

Information about farming comes from a variety of sources and in a variety of forms. Once I became determined to return to the family farm, I discovered a burgeoning

list of books written about farming. I was fascinated by the seemingly endless versions of practical guides to farming and gardening. The how-to guides—including the likes of Joel Salatin's *You Can Farm: The Entrepreneur's Guide to Start and Succeed in a Farming Enterprise* or Eliot Coleman's *Four-Season Harvest: Organic Vegetables from Your Home Garden All Year Long*—convinced me I was a patch of dirt and a bag of seeds away from calling myself a farmer. The increasingly prominent monthly magazines dedicated to farming or homesteading like *Hobby Farms Magazine*, which has created a monopoly with its offshoots like *Urban Farm Magazine*, *Hobby Farm Home*, and *Chickens*, make the subject of small-scale farming one of daily conversation. Many of these are terrific resources. I've assembled a burgeoning collection of material in my personal library—magazines, how-to guides, newspaper features—about sustainable farming. But for my dad, the very notion of how-to guides, of instructional writing about farming is oxymoronic and counterintuitive. One evening, during a visit home from school while still an undergrad, he walked past me as I sat looking over a how-to book about gardening, published on glossy pages and dominated with step-by-step images. Without stopping he turned back and mumbled something under his breath: "You can't learn to farm from books."

Despite my dad's definitive statement about books and farming, my desire to become a farmer is precisely what led me to graduate school (and more books) in the first place, and then to a doctoral program and this dissertation. And while my focus in the dissertation which follows is not specifically with the techniques and strategies of farming, but with why Americans remain so captivated, at least culturally, by the family farm, I am still unable to disconnect books and farming. My concern is with the literature

of farming, with the creative narratives that explore how humans interact with farming landscapes through work, how humans interact with each other while working on farming landscapes, and how individuals establish personal identity through working on farming landscapes.

Farm literature (in all its genres, including the vernacular)—like the farm itself—represents a key expression of the American character. As the scholar Stephanie L. Sarver contends in the introduction to her study *Uneven Land: Nature and Agriculture in American Writing*, agriculture "is an activity entangled in manifold aspects of American life and thought…[it] figures in our physical well-being, in our economy, in our national identity, in the transformation of the earth, and the loss of biological diversity" (2-3). In the body of American literature we can find accounts of settlers (and their ancestors) interacting with the land through physical labor, demonstrating shifting attitudes toward the working landscape, the role of the farmer, and the origins of food in our country. If I were writing a literary history, tracing that evolution of attitudes would provide a thesis. In some instances, in order to consider the ideas and literary devices of authors within the context of their cultural and historical backgrounds, the pages that follow do utilize tools of literary history. But I'm less concerned with evaluating change over time than I am with documenting the consistent presence of the family farmer in contemporary American literature, a presence which is paradoxical. Although the total number of farmers in this country continues to shrink (while the average size of farms continues to increase), literary depictions of the American farmer are as plentiful as ever (and typically tend toward idyllic and idealized representations). To better understand this fact, and because no overarching critical study has yet been done about contemporary farm

literature, I believe farm literature deserves a study that will insure a wider reading and greater appreciation for what it has to offer. The following pages offer such a study.

Because farm literature represents a rich and complicated genre (and reflects a layered and diverse culture in this country) I have chosen literary works that are varied in form and content. Four chapters examine nonfiction narratives of current or former farmers, one considers the novels of industrial farming, two evaluate the prominent essayists of recent decades who give voice to the vital issues of contemporary farming, and two explore recent trends in farming, such as urban farming and eating practices influenced by sustainable farming. The progress of the chapters roughly follows my own intellectual progression as I sought to clarify my own (and my family's) relationship to farming.

Chapter One introduces the texts which provided my own personal introduction to farm literature during my undergraduate studies: the American Farm Elegy, such as Ronald Jager's *Eighty Acres: Elegy for a Family Farm* and Mildred Armstrong Kalish's *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression*. Chapter Two demonstrates how the Prodigal Farmer Memoir complicated things for me by introducing new questions, including David Mas Masumoto's *Harvest Son: Planting Roots in American Soil*, Jane Brox's *Here and Nowhere Else: Late Seasons of a Farm and Its Family*, and Howard Kohn's *The Last Farmer: An American Memoir*. Chapter Three takes on a contemporary farming reality that can't be ignored, even in farm literature: the predominance of industrial agriculture's role in providing our food supply. I will focus on two contemporary novels that explore the impact of industrial agriculture on families, workers, nature, and food: Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and

Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation*. Chapters Four and Five evaluate the literary response to industrial farming's influence on our food system and culture by considering three authors with compelling, distinct voices: Wendell Berry, Victor Davis Hanson, and Michael Pollan. Chapters Six and Seven demonstrate the influence the authors from the previous two chapters have had on trends in food and farming. Chapter Six highlights the growing interest in culture, the culinary industry, and in literature for understanding the origin of our meals. These works help examine the literary depiction of the intimate relationship that exists between farmers and consumers and between the farm and the kitchen, particularly Locavore Memoirs like Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* and Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon's *Plenty: Eating Locally on the 100-Mile Diet*. Chapter Seven explores the burgeoning body of contemporary literature about sustainable farming, almost exclusively published as creative nonfiction. These include Novella Carpenter's *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer* and *The Dirty Life: A Memoir of Farming, Food, and Love* by Kristin Kimball.

Academically, I've been raised as an ecocritic. Initially my interest in the field derived from my constant preoccupation with literature that addresses the human relationship with natural landscapes, including writings from Thoreau and Emerson, Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold, Wallace Stegner and Annie Dillard. What I didn't expect when I began my graduate studies in Literature and Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno is that ecocriticism would not only dictate what kinds of work I'd study, but also shape the ways I would read and interact with literature. Scott Slovic, a

prominent pioneer in the field and one of my mentors at Nevada, describes his own evolution as a scholar of environmental literature this way: "[I]t occurs to me more and more these days that literature is, indeed, much more than an intellectual toy…[l]iterary scholarship and literature itself are, on the most fundamental level, associated with human values and attitudes" (28). As I continued to uncover literature exploring the human relationship with nature through working farm landscapes, I began to realize that the texts were, as Slovic continues, shaping "how literary expression challenges and directs readers [like me] to decide what in the world is meaningful/important to them." In other words, graduate studies began to shift from what I viewed as a professional jumping off point to personal agricultural efforts, to an education in values, the kinds of values Slovic calls "the proper domain of literary studies," values I never learned on the farm (because I didn't grow up on one) but wanted to understand on some future farm I hoped to call home (28).

Part of the educational process for me has included creating a narrative inside my head, a narrative interwoven from family stories, farm literature, literary criticism, and personal experiences derived from engagement with literature in the physical word, somewhere beyond the confines of an office or a campus. By turning to particular works of ecocritical scholarship, and putting those personal experiences and literary examination to paper, I am attempting what some have referred to as "narrative scholarship." While ecocritics are not the only scholars to incorporate personal narrative into their scholarship, one facet of ecocritical study almost makes "narrative scholarship" a natural approach.

For ecocritics, the setting or backdrop for literature plays a major role in the plot and can even be a character or protagonist. As prominent ecocritic John Tallmadge explains in his essay, "Toward a Natural History of Reading," reading ecocritically draws the "reader's attention to return to the referential world." This kind of criticism "manifests a social agenda. It wants to change the way we relate to nature" (283). He asks: "How can we read professionally in a manner that brings consideration of the referential world to bear on our interpretations and judgments in more than a casual way?" (283). Tallmadge is essentially suggesting critics of environmental literature cannot make setting so significant, cannot draw greater attention from the reader to location, without at some point leaving the safety and comfort of books and offices. And as Tallmadge goes on to demonstrate, "promising approaches toward incorporating the 'real world' have emerged on the expanding horizon of ecocriticism" (284).

The first category of "real world" scholarship documented by Tallmadge is narrative scholarship (or narrative criticism), a critical approach that interweaves unapologetic personal narrative with literary analysis, and the one I use in this dissertation. As Tallmadge puts it, narrative scholarship "foregrounds the experiences of the critic as literary pilgrim" (293). Scholar and ecocritic John Elder begins his study of poetry in *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* by arguing that "natural scenes engender and inform meditations on literature as well as the other way around (3). Another ecocritic Ian Marshall, who supplements his critical analysis of literature from the Appalachian region by including scenes from his vast experiences walking nearly the entire Appalachian Trail, suggests, "narrative scholarship is a way of putting into practice the ecological principle of interconnectedness" (8). This kind of "field-based reading," as

Tallmadge calls it, has grown among ecocritics and has demonstrated "rich and varied possibilities" (284).

Making this work for the study of literature requires "the cultivation of two critical virtues…erudition and engagement" (287). For Tallmadge, these two words sum up the two different kinds of scholarship that must be combined for a field-based reading, and suggest his belief in the need for disciplined subjectivity. Erudition encompasses all those skills a critic employs to complete a systematic reading: criticism, analysis, theory, biography, history, and more. Engagement with literature through reading and study is expanded and enhanced by "the deliberate and systematic study of the referential world through direct encounter…by going out and experiencing the landscape itself." Engagement leads to a multi-faceted scholarly experience.

To achieve such a multi-faceted examination of recent American literature about the agricultural experience, I will provide the first comprehensive description of farm literature as a genre by suggesting thematic clusters of texts and examining characteristic stylistic features. This study will examine fiction and nonfiction, including novel, memoir, and essay. This literary taxonomy will identify and describe characteristic narrative personas in farm literature, characterizations of human relationships on a working landscape (particularly within families), and the depiction of personal identity in a farming culture. Further, I will examine literary depictions of farming landscapes, and the representation of the complex relationships existing between people and nature through work and farming's manipulation of nature. I will also examine the most recent trends in farm literature, particularly activism and farming and increasing emphasis placed on food and the consumer. In addition to this taxonomy of themes, I will explore

correlations between content and technique, such as narrative voice, structure, and style. I will seek to determine what conventions of style and rhetoric are prominent in farm literature and how content influences or relates to style and rhetoric. I will consider genre, examining how the techniques of fiction and nonfiction alter tone, overall and sentence-level style, persona, characterization, and more.

Within this rather traditional scholarly analysis, I will juxtapose the model of field-based reading described above. I will draw on personal experiences, family history, and direct observation in order to enhance my reading of farm literature. During my six years of doctoral study I have helped harvest a 300-acre potato field, volunteered for a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project, worked for a small produce grower, and lived as a locavore for one month. Each chapter of the dissertation will include interwoven portions of criticism and personal narrative, each devoted to the same purposes. By employing narrative scholarship as well as conventional literary analysis in this inquiry, this dissertation seeks to echo other kinds of interconnection, namely the ways farm literature, farm landscapes, and contemporary farming practices and culture can be viewed as interconnected. By allowing me to "encounter the world and literature together, then report about the conjunction," narrative scholarship will enable me to provide a complex and tactile analysis of the ways the human imagination depicts farm landscapes and the ways humans develop relationships to those landscapes, particularly work, struggle, and change (Slovic 29). Along the way, I hope to demonstrate how farm literature and farming themes should be more relevant to ecocritics, the field of ecocriticism, and to readers at large.

Instead of immediately driving back to Pocatello on the trip chronicled at the introduction's beginning, I turned toward the southern Menan Butte, ascended, and exited my car before walking the rest of the way to the top. Looking down over the valley, I followed the South Fork of the Snake River where it winds around the butte, searching for the location of the farm's source of water—the Long Island Canal. From there, my focus worked toward the farmhouse and its first 20-acre field.

By now, this many years after that visit with my dad and mom (and deciding it would be my task to keep our family's farming culture from disappearing), I expected this place to be my home. Expected I would be an experienced family farmer carrying on a family tradition. Expected I'd be another link in a multi-generational chain of small farmers. I laughed to myself, letting out a combination of self-mockery that I'd ever expect such a thing to work and disappointment that I didn't make it work.

Nearly ten years after making up my mind to move to the family farm and become a farmer, I've moved to the region in order to pursue a doctoral degree in English. But what am I really doing here? Do I actually believe that stories and literature can bring me closer to my family's roots in farming, can become my method for studying and examining farming in America, can eventually help make me an American farmer? Honestly, I don't know. All I know for sure is that books have brought me to this point. I stood there looking over the family farm, due to the influence of words and stories. I saw this as my opportunity to seek understanding, to learn how my personal identity has been shaped by the family farm.

From here I began, reading the rows.

Chapter One

Let Me Be a Farmer:

Identity, Nostalgia, and America's Farm Elegy

The view from the southern Menan Butte hardly compares to that from other peaks I've climbed: Mount McLoughlin in the southern Cascade Range. Mount Timpanogas on Utah's Wasatch Front. Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the contiguous forty-eight states. Each of these peaks provides a panoramic perspective, the kind that makes the earth appear expansive and minute at the same time, the kind where the air is thin, plant life essentially disappears, and my own frailty becomes all too apparent. None of these things can be experienced from the Menan Buttes. Standing at just 5,619 feet (and only 800 feet above the valley floor), the Menan Buttes are more of a curiosity than a challenge, an oddity of elevation seemingly slapped down randomly amid the far-reaching Snake River Plain.

I'm back at the farm today, two months since my last visit, this time looking for another kind of perspective. I've come to see that small portion of the upper Snake River valley known as Poole's Island (bounded on the west by the Snake River, by the South Fork on the north and east, and on the south by the Dry Bed), where Frank and Jenile lived and farmed their entire lives. I've come looking for a pictorial view of this tiny farm village. In my imagination small farms become an assortment of randomly shaped puzzle pieces. The shape of each piece is formed by the country roads that thread the farmers' fields and homesteads and in this particular case by the sporadic wanderings of the Snake River and its tiny tributaries (both natural and man-made).

From this spot I try to imagine what Frank used to see on horseback during his frequent trail rides to the buttes. He must have enjoyed seeing the expanse of his farm from this distance, the farm where he worked his entire life and dedicated so many hours to improving. In the spring he'd be looking over his young crops, knee-high corn stalks and blossoming potato plants. Perhaps he would compare his place to his neighbors' farms. (Whose rows are straighter? Whose corn is taller? Whose place looks tidier?) Perhaps he sat there going over that terrible day—June 5, 1976—the one that would change him forever, when the Teton Dam failed and nearly 300,000 acre feet of water roared down the canyon, sending waist-deep water over his fields and throughout his humble farm house. The flood washed away precious topsoil and ruined his entire crop for the year. He took refuge here, on the buttes. I imagine him looking over the cattle he was able to lead away before the water arrived and offering a quick prayer of gratitude. Then in an instant he remembers one more. *My calf. My sweet calf. She was tied up in the barn*. Others around him are too busy to notice, so he allows himself a moment to mourn the loss of his calf. Because now it's too late.

I was just twelve years old when Frank died. During the viewing I wandered from the chapel, then to the casket (it was the most relaxed I'd ever seen Frank), then to the front door. From there I'd walk outside and glance over the section of Main Street in Rigby where the funeral home sat, then walk back inside for another look at Frank. I repeated these steps again and again. I didn't know what else to do. I felt restless. Perhaps because I'd never experienced this kind of loss. Perhaps because seeing my dad weep openly made me uncomfortable. Perhaps because looking at Frank's lifeless body, I couldn't elude the fragility of life. After enough time I must have made the adults

uncomfortable, because eventually the mortician looked at my mom and said, “Let me show your son something down in the basement I work on during my free time.”

Basement in a mortuary: I began to imagine the possibilities, something out of *Frankenstein* perhaps. As he led me down the steps creaked, and the smell of the cool, musty air reminded me of Jenile’s fruit cellar. As we finally turned the corner the mortician flipped on the lights, revealing an entire miniature town, filling the entire basement. The town had a city hall, main street, chapel, one-room schoolhouse, and train station. Mountains of various shapes and sizes surrounded the town and a series of railroad lines with multiple trains wandered and weaved through the town and between the folds of the mountains. This small community beneath the funeral home—simply complete, everything in its proper place, each puzzle piece fitting seamlessly—is where my thoughts turn as I look over Frank’s farm and Poole’s Island, from the butte.

In his foreword to Ronald Jager’s memoir of childhood on a family farm, *Eighty Acres: Elegy for a Family Farm*, famed poet Donald Hall explains how, “there is something appealing about a miniature universe,” created by scale: “tiny roads with tiny barriers that rise and fall, little houses with doors that open and lights that go on and off, mirror-fragments for ponds, small pupils carrying microscopic lunchbags into infinitesimal schoolhouses” (ix). As I stand looking over this tiny farming village from the butte, I’m struck by how the miniature railroad town beneath the funeral home felt so appealing as a young boy. I could make sense of that imagined place. Everything, every person, every animal, every railroad car had its proper place and purpose. A town with no change. No endings. No death.

With the distance provided by time and space (now here in Idaho and a new doctoral student), I realize that for over ten years this is how I've made sense of the family farm where my dad was born and raised. During dull moments of graduate seminars and a part-time job, I often meditate about life on the farm. During those daydreams, everything about farming looks good. Somehow the farm has morphed into an idea, some abstract notion of a place where everything about life makes sense. Where life has purpose and little regret. Where neighbors still know each other's names. Where work leaves dirt beneath the fingernails instead of red eyes from the glow of a screen. When I'm not daydreaming about farming, I'm reading stories and poems where humans and nature live together in apparent harmony, like Gilbert White's "The Naturalist's Summer-Evening Walk":

> Each rural sight, each sound, each smell, combine;
> The tinkling sheep-bell, or the breath of kine;
> The new-mown hay scents the swelling breeze,
> Or cottage-chimney smoking through the trees.

Over time, the idea of Frank and Jenile's farm has become my own personal Arcadia, an intellectual and emotional retreat from the realities of adulthood. For me, the farm has started to feel like a "literary construct," a pastoral where idealized language and images construct "a different kind of world from that of realism" (Gifford 45).

But then Leo Marx's classic literary study *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (a work I first read as a student of environmental literature in Reno) introduces me to a number of other terms to describe my desires: retreat, escape, withdrawal. Marx would say I'm simply the product of a "soft

veil of nostalgia" hanging over our society, particularly in urban areas, "a vestige of the once dominant image of an undefiled, green republic, a quiet land of forests, villages, and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness" (6). I want to resist Marx's notion, just like I resisted the assault of judgments slung at me from my dad and his siblings in various degrees. Early on my dad's older sister Peggy seemed particularly determined to demonstrate the absurdity of my plans to move into the farmhouse. Her comments always referred to the condition of the house. "That place is worn out," she might say. "It was never much of a place to begin with." "Do you realize that three of us, your dad, me, and Paddy would share a single twin bed in that first tiny bedroom just off of the mud room?" "No central heat in there, you know."

I can never understand why my ideas frustrate her so much. But if Marx is right, then I think it's because what I see when I look over the house and its 40 acres is something entirely different from what she sees. Marx contends that motives like mine are "generated by an urge to withdraw from civilization's growing power and complexity" (9). My motives, the kind of new family stories I'm trying to create, are pastoral because they are born out of the "image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural." Just like that perfectly prepared community beneath the funeral home made of trains, mountains, rivers, and farmers, my view from the Menan Buttes is of a "symbolic landscape," one created in my imagination.

The term "pastoral" can also be used as a reference to content, as "any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban" (Gifford 2). In this form, pastoral is often used as pejorative, suggesting "the pastoral vision is too simplified." Leo Marx calls this sentimental or popular pastoral, characterized "less [by]

thought than [by] feeling," and in this form pastoral expresses "something of the yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature'" (5, 6). Does this sentimental pastoral explain my emotional attachment to the farm? Can my initial desires to move to the farm and reestablish the farming lifestyle known to Frank and Jenile, and to my dad and his siblings, be interpreted as simply a form of this sentimental pastoral?

Something unexpected started to happen, however, besides the disapproval, soon after I began to vocalize my interest in moving to the farm. My detractors within the family began sending me books about farming, mostly those written by authors who, like them, were born and raised on farms before obtaining education and settling in urban or semi-urban locations. If they disagreed with my interest in moving to the farm, then why the constant rush of books? Why did my dad continually retell me stories from his youth, stories about working on the farm beside Frank, if he was so opposed to my desire to create a similar life for myself?

My dad's stories always left me with life lessons ringing in my ears, implied or directly stated: *What I wish you could understand is the value of work. What I want you to know is what it's like to be dirt poor. What you might never really understand is how the constant farm chores held us bound, unable to pursue much of anything else.*

In a similar way, this desire for providing a younger generation with the lessons of a bygone era provides the stimulus for a growing assortment of nonfiction narratives by authors who grew up on farms, the kind I continually found arriving in the mail or passed on from my dad or his sister Peggy. The premise for the majority of these memoirs is the same. Simply stated, they relate the story of a bygone era, of rural

America where life on a family farm was rich and rewarding, despite being full of difficulty and hardship. And, if we take the authors at their word, the motivation for writing is simply a desire for passing on the lessons from childhood and adolescence on a farm to a younger generation not familiar with farm life.

Two exceptional examples of these memoirs are Ronald Jager's *Eighty Acres* and Mildred Armstrong Kalish's *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression*. Reading these memoirs of childhood experienced on a mid-twentieth-century family farm is like stepping into another time and place. Through the descriptive details provided by Jager and Kalish, I wake up before dawn to milk the cows, sit down at the breakfast table with the smell of fresh baked bread overwhelming the house, hitch up the workhorses to get the first field plowed before lunch. In their memoirs, the family farm is no longer an abstract concept; it is tangible, living and breathing. Surely, I tell myself, this will be my life if I return to the family farm, after living here near Idaho State University for just the first year of the doctoral program.

Both authors approach their storytelling from a documentary style, viewing their task as an important transfer of information to a generation for whom activities like planting and harvesting crops or feeding and tending domestic animals are so unfamiliar as to almost make them a curiosity. Both authors suggest that early motivations for writing their memoirs derived from recounting long-past days to children and grandchildren. Neither of them stayed on the farm much past adolescence, and so they are left with only stories. Jager, who spent his youth in Michigan on a small farm before becoming a professor of philosophy and settling in New Hampshire, says that the "initial

seed for this book was casually sown…when my young son would scramble onto my knee after dinner and demand yet another story about 'when you were a little boy'" (xiv). Kalish describes being "peppered" with questions from children and grandchildren about her childhood. And, "lest it vanish," she was also motivated "to share that treasure trove" of experiences and memories "of a time, a place, and a way of life long gone, nearly forgotten by the world" (7). A retired professor of literature and writing, the first inspiration for her memoir came when she and her husband began walking their granddaughter to school after moving to California. After telling her a few stories about life as a young child, her granddaughter began saying: "Grandma, tell me a farm story" (6).

Memoirs like these by Kalish and Jager, which I've come to refer to as the American Farm Elegy, are abundant. Their popularity and the reasons for their success are not difficult to decipher (Kalish's *Little Heathens* became an instant hit, including being named one of the *New York Times* 10 best books of 2007). The authors set themselves and their texts up as windows into a past few can relate to in today's digital age where the closest most consumers come to imagining the source of their food is in a virtual reality created by online games like "FarmVille." With the sun gone down and chores finished for the day, the reader sits around the fireplace with the author to envision a vanished landscape. The texts provide an appealing collection of images and stories. In this context these memoirs are a modern day pastoral, idylls where a "civilized and artificial society" can sit back and glance "from a drawing-room window over green meadows" or the "weekend farm…through a picture window" (*Handbook to Literature*). Readers respond with empathy to these tales of a simpler, more honest—almost other-

worldly—existence in comparison to our twenty-first-century lives swirling with instant communication and digital relationships. We want to believe that somewhere out there people still brush the soil from their freshly-harvested vegetables, still bring in the milk twice a day, still rise for chores with the sun, and finally rest for the day when the sun goes down. And so, like Gary Paulsen in *Clabbered Dirt, Sweet Grass*, we plop ourselves down on the horse's side and listen to stories from writers like Jager and Kalish.

Reading Kalish's depiction of shocking oats with her family in the light of a harvest moon feels full of joy and camaraderie:

> The men and Big Kids used a horse-drawn binder to cut and tie the fully ripe oats into bundles or sheaves tied with twine. Standing six or eight bundles cut side down and close together, we topped the shocks off with an odd sheaf. Grandpa insisted the protective capping sheaf be placed with the oat heads facing west since that was the direction most of the wind and storms came from and they would not blow off so easily. (107)

Although manual labor like this would certainly be physically demanding (especially considering the nights only cooled to 95 degrees according to Kalish), she writes of these memories with such fondness, explaining that, "I have nothing but happy memories of that evening and several others like it during those fierce summers of my youth" (108). Jager's description of plowing with his father is vivid. The precision of his details suggests the strength of his memories of farm work from his youth:

> [T]he keen, sensuous delight of cool and shiny furrow bottoms under the soles of bare feet, flat and firm as a linoleum floor, perfect pathways, straight and narrow…the reassuring sound of the horses' steady tramp,

> tramp—the faint squish and squeak of their leather harnesses…the calm, unbroken guttural hum of the plowshare as it effortlessly lifted the sod, turned it gracefully along the moldboard, and buried it facedown in long, elegant strips; the excitement of turning the corner at the end of the field, where I had to scramble out of the way so we could make a new furrow to follow. (9)

"Perfect," "reassuring," and "calm" are the words Jager uses to describe life on a farm. Jager makes plowing a field in the heat of the day behind workhorses a desirable, compelling scene. Further, the task is shared with his father.

When I read Jager's description of following his father during plowing, how he felt "an intimate share in [his] father's wondrous operations," I can't help but think of two photos I keep in my desk drawer (9). In the first photograph—a black and white image on yellowing paper—a young boy, despite his vast difference in physical stature, stands confidently behind his father. Mimicking his father, the boy stands with hands in pockets, wearing a smile of ease and certitude, perhaps earned after a long day of labor. The boy's infectious smile reflects an obvious fondness for his father, but also for the small farm where the two work together each day. They both appear to be almost leaning back, happily taking in the results of another day in the fields: it might be row after row of potato plants in bloom, a field of freshly cut and windrowed hay, or a thick swath of sweet-smelling alfalfa ready for harvest. In dress and manner, the boy closely resembles his father—denim pants, collared shirt, cowboy hat. But in another, much less obvious way, the young boy is already becoming his father. He is learning the value of hard work. And work, in this family, serves as a bridge to intimacy.

In the second photograph, the father's appearance has changed little, except now he's wearing green rubber irrigating boots, folded down to mid-thigh. The sleeves of his western, snap-button shirt are rolled up to above his elbows. He still wears a cowboy hat, smeared with dirt around the sweat lines of his balding head. Standing to his left are his daughter and son-in-law, wearing street clothes, during a visit out to the farm, perhaps a weekend break from the university down in the city. Framing the opposite side of the image is the young boy—now a strong, capable, independent young man. He stands straight and confident. Shirtless—wearing only well-worn jeans and work boots—his arms are deeply tanned to a straight line, revealing hours of farm work in the baking summer sun.

Each photograph remains a painful reminder of a life I never enjoyed, of a person I never became. My dad shared an intimate relationship with his father, developed during long hours on the farm completing a daily list of physical tasks. These are the labors, these are the relationships, of the American Farm Elegy.

Despite the success and abundance of the American Farm Elegy, this sub-genre of memoir doesn't always resonate with readers. Classics scholar and farmer Victor Davis Hanson disparages these kinds of texts, taking issue with their "tone and historical perspective" (*Fields* ix). Most of the memoirs being written about the family farm, he contends, fall into the "lyrical, romantic" tradition. The problem for Hanson is that these texts place far too much emphasis on "the nobility of the farmer and the natural beauty of his craft" (x). In his view, this approach is naïve (ix). It's not that Hanson doesn't appreciate the stories of "childhood innocence and the security of clapboard houses,

cornfields, and baseball" (xi). Indeed, he is a fifth-generation vine and fruit grower from California's San Joaquin Valley. His youth and his family's culture were defined by an agrarian lifestyle. But the difference between Hanson and writers like Jager and Kalish is that even while Hanson sought advanced degrees and a career in academia, he continued to farm. His concern is not for the past of family farms in America but for the future. The romantic farms and farmers depicted in the American Farm Elegies written by the likes of Jager and Kalish should be let go, he argues, "because the quaint family farmstead, the focus for such fantasy, is itself becoming a caricature, not a reality, in the here and now" (*Fields* xi). Instead, he continues, the story of the vanishing American small farmer is vital not because it is simple, but rather because "he is different, vastly different, from almost all other types of citizens" (xvii).

While Hanson makes a strong argument against romanticizing the small farmer in America's past, other scholars and artists have written about the value of nostalgic remembrances. In a piece about the necessity of keeping the past alive in order to better understand ourselves and the places where we live today, essayist Paul Gruchow defends nostalgia. "It is the fashion just now to disparage nostalgia," he writes, in part because we believe nostalgia is "a cheap emotion" (6-7). Gruchow believes the problem is simply that we "forget what it means" (7). In an attempt to salvage the usefulness of nostalgia, Gruchow provides an insightful definition:

> In its Greek roots it means, literally, the return to home…Nostalgia is the clinical term for homesickness, for the desire to be rooted in a place—to know clearly, that is, what time it is. This desire need not imply the impulse to turn back the clock, which of course we cannot do. It

> recognizes, rather, the truth—if home is a place in time—that we cannot know where we are now unless we can remember where we have come from. The real romantics are those who believe that history is the story of the triumphal march of progress, that change is indiscriminately for the better. Those who would demythologize the past seem to forget that we also construct the present as a myth, that there is nothing in the wide universe so vast as our own ignorance. Knowing that is our one real hope. (7)

If Gruchow has anything to say for the usefulness of the American Farm Elegy, it is that these elegies don't just serve to turn back the clock but they actually help us truly understand where we came from, both individually and as a nation. Our country, it could be argued, was raised on the backs of its farmers. If you go back far enough, most Americans can tell stories of ancestors who settled and homesteaded and farmed their way toward independence. Forgetting these farmers' stories would mean losing sight of what defines us as Americans. And Hanson, I believe, would agree on that point. He certainly wouldn't take the side of those who argue for the triumphal march of progress, as that has contributed to the downfall of vast numbers of family farmers in this country. But Hanson wouldn't support the notion we can ignore how progress has altered agriculture. He clearly laments the final stage of the family farmer. But his intent is to avoid a caricature of the family farmer and to ask, nakedly, without the covering of sentiment: What are we losing? What will our future look like without his or her existence?

I believe memoirs like Jager's and Kalish's do have significant value and are more complex labels than the labels of naïve and romantic would suggest. In his foreword to Jager's memoir, famed American poet Donald Hall appears to have anticipated objections like Hanson's. Hall separates nostalgia into "useful" nostalgia and "dumb" nostalgia, calling dumb nostalgia "the manipulation of stereotypes" and the common human sentiment that says, the world used to be such a better place (xi). Interestingly, these two tendencies of "dumb nostalgia" do reflect what Hanson argues against, stereotype and sentimentality. And it's easy to imagine that, regardless of how adept an author is at avoiding these, any reader could infuse a text with such nostalgia based on his or her own personal response. In contrast, "useful nostalgia," Hall explains, "acknowledges the pastness of the past, its irrecoverability, and attempts preservation (not quite restitution or reconstitution) by images that conserve" (xi).

If the family farmer has disappeared, or is on the verge of disappearing (and Hanson certainly believes this to be true), then some kind of preservation is certainly needed. Memoirs like Jager's and Kalish's certainly accept the reality that the family farm, at least as they knew it, has disappeared. And that's important to remember. As Hall continues to explain, "Our reminiscence helps us remind ourselves—lest we inhabit a shallow present—that things *really* disappear. What's gone is gone, all right; by memory we keep its ghost around, not merely to look at but also to think with" (xi). And that is a key point. It agrees with Hanson's purpose for writing his own memoir, *Fields Without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian Idea*, written not just to place his family's past under glass but to understand what a future without small farmers looks like. He wants his readers to think about the present, to imagine what a society looks like without the

family farmer. Without such memoirs we have no cultural memory; we lose a vital lens to look through as we ponder the future of the farmer in America.

In the subtitle to *Eighty Acres*, Jager refers directly to his memoir as an elegy. And it's an appropriate reference because both authors approach their writing as a reminiscence of a place and a lifestyle now passed on. With rich and honest prose, both authors fondly recount their memories of life on the family farm. But there is also an overarching tone lamenting a world no longer in existence. Jager writes: "In our part of Michigan the saga of the Family Farm had a certain short and mythic symmetry: a beginning, a middle, and an end" (xiv). Kalish states bluntly in her introduction, "I tell of a time, a place, and a way of life long gone, nearly forgotten by the world" (7).

Looking down for the last time from the butte at the farm, I attach my gaze to the farmhouse. When my dad got so upset about what started to happen to the house after the passing of Frank and Jenile, I think it's because the house is a physical symbol of a working farm. After the passing of his parents, the presence of a healthy, breathing farmhouse would mean the farm is not done yet. With the deterioration of the house, my dad would have to say goodbye to the farm, just like he's done with his parents.

I reflect again on Gruchow's definition of nostalgia. In the midst of my undergraduate education, of pursuing some unknown career—a future and identity—I felt a need to know who I am and where I come from. On this afternoon, two degrees later, and now into my third, these 40 acres (though now leased by another farmer) and this house (recently used by itinerant workers) stand as physical symbols of an identity I've

been reaching for. This farm, and all its physical reminders, is why I began taking every opportunity to understand what happened here, to know what my father knows.

This includes the answers I sought to questions I began asking myself over a decade ago when my dad and mom expressed their frustration with the condition of the farm. What does the Hall family lose when the house and rickety outbuildings are torn down and the fields sold to a local farmer? What does the family's future look like with no one to call farmer?

Reflecting on these questions makes me wonder if my aim shouldn't be to resurrect the ghost, so to speak, of the deceased American family farmer by trying to replant myself here on Frank and Jenile's farm and attempt to recreate a lifestyle not lived here for decades. Instead, maybe it's enough just to keep the ghost around by telling stories of Frank and Jenile and of their five children, stories of the farm, of the long hours of work, and of their relationship to the place and to each other. Doing this the right way, I believe, would require not just preserving these memories for days of reminiscence and nostalgia, but utilizing them as necessary and useful tools as I move forward creating my own identity as a twenty-first-century son of a farmer.

Whether it's to disparage the nostalgia of these memoirs or to promote them, I can take insight away from Hanson's position and that of Gruchow and Hall (not to mention the memoirists themselves). Perhaps the essential difference is rooted in the motivations that separate Jager and Kalish from Hanson. The memoirists write to remember days that are past. The result of that is not unlike the result of the transmission of oral histories among families. Fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, eventually become characters in family stories, heroes or villains. Significant family events are molded over

time and evolve into legends and myths. The most memorable and inspiring pieces of stories take precedence over the grueling drudgeries of daily living. Hanson is motivated less by memory and more by the need to signal an alarm. He points out clearly that he won't depict the family farmer in some happier, holier light than other members of society; in fact, he often reveals how unpleasant the life of the family farmer can be. What he does do, however, is suggest that the absence of such figures will forever impair a democratic society.

What purveyors and readers of memoir must not forget is that the memoirist is serving as an intermediary of the story. Not simply a means for transmitting memory, the final form of a memoir depends on the filter of imagination used by the writer. It is not uncommon for memoirists to publish accounts of family events that separate members of the family remember completely differently. In an excellent study of the current shape of the memoir, *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing the Personal Narrative*, Thomas Larson examines the role of memory in the process of creating memoir. He dwells at length on a crucial point relevant to the genre of memoir, the simple concept that memory is not fixed. Over time, one's memory of a key life event often changes based on one's current station in life. One's attempt to remember may, in itself, alter the memory. Larson quotes scholar Barrett J. Mandel, who explains how memory can be altered by sharing one of his own vivid and cherished memories from his youth, only to learn later that the event "'never occurred—or not in the way [he] had always remembered it'" (34). Mandel calls this a "'screen memory,'" formed in order to serve as a substitution for a more painful version of what really happened. As he puts it,

"'Since my past only truly exists in the present and since my present is always in motion, my past itself changes too—*actually changes*—while the illusion created is that it stays fixed.'" The result is a process, as Larson explains, where "our minds and feelings make sense of the past as we recollect the past," a process Mandel calls "'presentification.'" This idea is important for the memoirist, who works in the present to create a version of past experiences based on memory. And key to this process, Larson points out, is that "our present situation means everything to how and what we remember" (35).

Memoirist and commentator on the genre Patricia Hampl also examines the relationship between memory and imagination. In an effort to debunk the myth that, "for the memoirist, the writing of the story is a matter of transcription," she recounts her own example of screen memory (24). After carefully detailing her first piano lesson with Sister Olive in the basement of St. Luke's School, Hampl demonstrates coming to grips with the "unsettling disbelief about the reliability of memory," when, upon reevaluation, she realizes she had a short list of facts completely wrong (24-5). She is forced to admit that invention becomes an element of writing memoir. So the key questions to resolve are why did she invent memories and why, "if memory inevitably leads to invention, why do I—why should anybody—write memoir at all? (27).

Not surprisingly, the answers to these questions are inseparable. Discovering the answers lies in Hampl's insightful truth about writing memoir, one that many readers of memoir and, surprisingly, many writers of memoir aren't willing to accept: "I don't write about what I know, but in order to find out what I know" (27). And so, as Hampl and Larson recount their experiences writing memoir based necessarily on only unreliable memories to work with, it starts to become clearer that memoir isn't necessarily about

recounting significant experiences fact for fact, but about discovering why we remember what we remember, and to reflect on why we occasionally invent memories based on our current perspective. As Larson suggests, our past changes according to our present. As we change, so does our past. The assumption can safely be made that if Jager and Kalish wrote their memoirs of life on a farm during the first year of their lives away from the farm (or after an entire life on the farm having never left), the tone and content would be drastically different.

As Hampl continues to reflect on why she has subconsciously fabricated certain details of her memories, she states her belief that, "We store in memory only images of value" (29). Sometimes the task of a memoirist is to discover why particular memories remain, when their value has currently become blurry. This connection between memory and value helps explain the mostly nostalgic, even romantic, content of Jager's and Kalish's memoirs. As Hampl explains, "Memoir seeks a permanent home for feeling and image, a habitation where they can live together" (29). After a lifetime of schooling and careers away from the farm, in a world where the pace and simple, straightforward realities of farm life have essentially vanished, an attempt to simply retell their stored experiences of a different time and lifestyle becomes a common goal for authors of the American Farm Elegy like Kalish and Jager.

Even though Jager and Kalish describe their motivation as simple documentation of personal experiences for children and grandchildren, a brief evaluation of the kinds of memories and stories they include in their memoirs suggests a significant interplay of memory, value, and imagination. A general absence of any deliberate effort by the authors to search their memories for any contemporary significance helps explain

Hanson's disdain for such memoirs. Certainly, recording such experiences and memories has value for future generations. But in the discussion about the contemporary state and future of farming in America, the American Farm Elegy only provides a stereotyped—and impossible-to-recreate—standard against which we can compare the realities of our current situation.

Hampl describes how memoir can be much more valuable than merely providing documentation of significant events:

> I persist in believing the event has value—after all, I remember it—but in writing the memoir I did not simply relive the experience. Rather, I explored the mysterious relationship between all the images I could round up and the even more impacted feelings that caused me to store the images safely away in memory. Stalking the relationship, seeking the congruence between stored image and hidden emotion—that's the real job of memoir. (30)

One might argue that the American Farm Elegy lacks such critical examination. For Jager and Kalish, the memoir serves as a useful form for documenting a way of life vastly different from that known by most of their readers. But, as just discussed, simply calling the memoirs documentaries ignores consideration of the authors' perspectives, such as what kinds of memories Jager and Kalish are working with and what they are attempting to do with those memories. When Hampl seeks an answer for her own question—Why write memoir?—it appears that even a documentary-style text incorporates elements of truth-seeking, simply by the memories that are chosen for inclusion. As Hampl states:

> Memoir must be written because each of us must possess a created version of the past. Created: that is, real in the sense of tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in place and in history. And the downside of any created thing as well: We must live with a version that attaches us to our limitations, to the inevitable subjectivity of our points of view. (32)

When Kalish writes that life growing up on the farm, "was quite a romp," perhaps we can assume that her father and mother may have chosen a different perspective if writing about their own experiences (7).

In the case of Jager and Kalish, an adequate interpretation of their farm memoirs must take into account the present situation under which their memoirs were written: professional teachers and writers reflecting on their early lives on a farm after decades have passed. The present from which each author writes is many miles and many years removed from their youthful farm memories. For Jager, his memoir is written to be intentionally "documentary," an effort to "capture and exhibit the experience of being young and on a farm" (xiii). Kalish views her past experiences as a "treasure trove," one that needs to be shared "lest it vanish" (7). Indeed, while those experiences, she says, are "indelible in my memory," they are memories of a time and place now gone. Her memoir is an effort to "resurrect them, to make them live again," at least in the imagination of her children and grandchildren, and her readers. As such, these Farm Elegies read like tributes to the past, a past so good that its loss seems tragic.

Despite my skepticism at Kalish's use of words like "romp," I can't get over her enthusiasm. She is so motivated by "the sheer joy and excitement of it all" (7). I can't

simply discount these memoirs, despite the fact they are so heavily laden with nostalgia, memory, and maybe even a touch of cliché.

It's starting to become clear that my father's stories of the past, dripping with nostalgia and romantic visions of my dad's youth on the farm, are what first shaped my motivations for becoming a farmer. I didn't make any plans to move to the farm based on my own experiences or personal knowledge with farming or skill with farm equipment. Instead, my attention was caught up by the place itself, and some abstract notion that getting to know that place would mean getting to know myself. I want to know the people I come from. But now there is no way to understand or know that place or life. Except in stories.

I believe the typical Farm Elegy is motivated, at least in part, by a similar search for identity, one rooted in a desire for a personal connection to family, its generations, and the physical places that instilled meaning into these families. In retrospect, I clearly didn't originally set out to become a twenty-first century version of the Hall family farmer. My actions were motivated by a burning desire to know and understand my own self, in the present and for the future, by planting my feet in the same soil where generations of my family once lived and farmed. Perhaps this shouldn't be so surprising. As the writer and farmer Wendell Berry commented once during an interview, knowing and understanding the past is everything:

> Well, if you didn't know any of the past, you literally wouldn't know anything. You'd have no language, no history, and so the first result would be a kind of personal incompleteness. But practicalities are involved also. If you had a settled, a really settled, thriving, locally adapted community,

> which we don't have anywhere, you wouldn't just be remembering the dead. You'd remember what they did and whether it worked or not. And so you'd have a kind of lexicon of possibilities that would tell you what you could do, what you could get away with, and what penalty to expect from what you couldn't get away with. So the memory that a community has of its dead, and of the pasts of the living would be a previous sort of manual—a kind of handbook, a kind of operator's manual for the use of the immediate place. That's the only kind of operator's manual for the world that we're going to have. (Fisher-Smith 51-2)

I'm beginning to realize that my desire for moving to the farm reflects a desire for place, for relationships, for generational knowledge. My relationship to Frank and Jenile resembles that of many born in the mobile reality of the late twentieth century. One week visits each year during the summer. Card for my birthday. Maybe a phone call on Christmas morning. With this understanding comes an unusual obsession for learning everything I can about Frank and Jenile, the things I had no interest in while they were still alive. Not long after deciding I needed to move to the farm, I began asking my dad what Frank was like before he got sick. I asked him what kind of mother Jenile was. I insisted my mom teach me more about the few things I can remember about Jenile. Like her magnificent cake-like white bread. I asked if she had the recipe. But for Jenile there was no recipe. It was intuitive, the result of making one or two batches each week during 57 years of marriage. Thankfully, my mom stood beside Jenile on one occasion and wrote down approximations of the ingredients and the order of combining. She made a record. A document. While physical labor as a young person felt like sheer drudgery, I began to

look for opportunities to work, spending summer months with my parents and offering myself as a gardener's apprentice.

In other words, I began accepting my obligation to the generations. In the same interview quoted above, Wendell Berry insightfully explains how the relationship shared by families is defined by obligation:

> The obligation is very great and moves two ways. The old have an obligation to be exemplary, if they can—and since nobody can be completely exemplary, they also have an obligation to be intelligent about their failings. They're going to be remembered in one way or another, so they have an obligation to see that they're remembered not as a liability or a great burden, but as a help. And of course the young, the inheritors, have an obligation to remember these people and live up to them—be worthy of them. So it's an obligation that goes both ways, and it's inescapable. Once you become involved in this sequence of lives, there is no way to escape the responsibility. You inherit, and in turn you bequeath an inheritance of some kind. (52)

Berry's explanation of "obligation," "remember," and "inheritance" makes me recall the efforts of Mildred Kalish and Ronald Jager to understand their own families, childhoods, and lives lived on their families' farms through each of their memoirs. By documenting their experiences as farm children, and examining the lives of previous farming generations, Kalish and Jager analyze how being raised on a farm came to influence their adult lives, but each also seeks to pass these lessons on to those generations who will follow after them.

What would I pass on, what inheritance would I bequeath, if I never truly gained an understanding of what Frank and Jenile had to share? Growing up away from the farm, stories of irrigating, threshing grain, milking cows, harvesting spuds, all just sound like fairy tales from a far off place and another time. Making plans to return to the farm might have been unrealistic, even fanciful, but my motivations have been sincere, rooted in a desire to inherit what the generations have to pass on to me. A desire to understand and know where I come from. To be something Frank and Jenile, and my parents, can be proud of. And then pass that on to another generation.

Chapter Two

America's Prodigal Farmers:

Narratives of Transition, Uncertainty, and Family

Place. A simple enough word, presumably. But the frequency with which this term is used in academic studies often makes it feel vague and indefinite. In his extensive examination of the human perception of nature, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Harvard scholar Lawrence Buell defines place neatly as "perceived or felt space, space humanized, rather than the material world taken on its own terms" (253). As Buell's definition suggests, we often define ourselves through a place, particularly our own distinct perceptions of that place.

Wendell Berry extends this concept of humanized space from the individual to the community, including to multiple generations within the same community. In his comments from the interview quoted in Chapter One, he refers to some sort of an implicit, shared manual or handbook for understanding or using a place, made from the "memory that a community has of its dead" (52). Although I'm not sure what this manual or handbook looks like, there's something about his concept I find compelling. Inspired by such a construct, I came to this university in southeast Idaho just for its proximity to my dad's childhood home, Frank and Jenile's 40-acre farm and their now derelict farmhouse.

But unfortunately, I don't really know or understand the contents of this farm's handbook. Due to a dramatic difference in time and place (Frank and Jenile were both gone by the time I turned fourteen and I grew up over 800 miles away in southern

Oregon), my relationship with Frank and Jenile never fully developed. Because of his health Frank was housebound and melancholy, making my relationship with him essentially nonexistent. If Berry is correct, if I have "an obligation to remember" Frank and Jenile, and to "live up to them—be worthy of them," I'm going to need a way to enhance my relationship with them, even if they've been gone now for over a decade.

I begin by sorting through copies of old photographs I requested from my mom, almost like they are trading cards and I'm looking for a gem I've never seen before. Sifting through photographs of Frank, I find scenes and images unfamiliar to me. Walking next to a tractor with his neighbor in the driver's seat, Frank's grin is palpable. In another photograph, Frank leans against the doorway of his milking shed, a sober face looking out over his small farm. Not much, but he knew every inch. His daily, dusty, sweaty labor made things grow, made his place beautiful. And he loved it. Even when he took a few moments to pose for a photo with children home from college he is wearing irrigating waders. Work defined him.

But I never knew that Frank. When Frank died in 1990, after a decade-long fight with emphysema, I was just twelve years old. I never saw Frank on his tractor. Never saw him ease into his saddle and ride off on one of his beloved horses. In fact, I have only one memory of him even walking out of doors. In all of my memories, when Frank wasn't lying in bed he was sitting in his reclining chair, the clear plastic tube from his breathing machine wrapped around his ears and inserted into his nostrils. While his grandchildren played noisily around him, Frank struggled to breath. He stared forward and scratched his bald forehead, dappled from so many years working under the sun. His eyes seemed unfocused, as if he was looking into the distance. The distance of his past. He was

remembering better times, when staying indoors was a choice, when waking each day included the ability to work. In the image of my memory Frank is beaten by disease, prevented from doing or even seeing everything that once defined him. He is irritable, lonely, and tired.

Born on June 12, 1911 in Glen, Montana (located about 45 miles south of Butte just off I-15), Frank Hugh Hall lived a life intimately tied to Western landscapes, through ranching and agriculture. Frank's father Hugh left southeast Idaho in 1908 when he took a job as the foreman of the Woods Livestock Company Ranch in Glen. Frank was born on this ranch, in an 11-bedroom frame house, presumably constructed for workers. In 1915 Frank's father and mother, Margaret, moved back to Annis, Idaho where they had purchased 20 acres from Hugh's brother Cumer. Though only four when they left Montana, Frank maintained a fondness for the area throughout his life. He spoke frequently of Montana's expansive ranches and open range and I believe he often imagined the ranch in Glen where he was born while looking over his relatively meager 40 acres. In his mind he was on horseback, moving a massive herd of steers down off the mountains onto a ranch for warm-weather grazing. In June of 1971, on his sixtieth birthday, Frank insisted his youngest son Foster drive with him up to Glen to commemorate his birthday by visiting the ranch where he was born.

From the age of four until his death, however, Frank lived and worked in and around Annis, not Montana. It could be said that Frank belonged to the last generation raised in Annis when people stayed to make a living in the valley. Relationships formed in school became lifelong friendships. Most young men inherited farms, and friends and extended family members regularly shared equipment and labor during busy periods such

as the planting and the harvest. Frank's childhood was shaped by labor in the fields (cultivating, planting, and harvesting), relatively modest cattle drives between the farm and his father's ranch in the Teton Basin, and fishing on the sloughs.

On May 18, 1932, in the home of his parents in Annis, Frank married Jenile Young, who he met at a community dancehall named Riverside Gardens. Children came in 1933, twin daughters named Peggy and Paddy. Jenile gave birth in a maternity room above the doctor's office in Roberts. The medical bill totaled $35. For the young couple, cash was limited. Frank paid the doctor with a calf, a piglet, and a mixture of vegetables from the garden. During the first year of marriage Frank and Jenile lived with his parents while he earned money by moving rock with a team of horses and sleigh for road and canal repair.

Frank spent the summer and fall of that same year harvesting timber from the mountains north of Annis. In the summer of 1934, with help from his Uncle Riley, Frank constructed a two-room log cabin. Frank liked to say that he spent all of $200 on the cabin. Frank's father Hugh gave him 20 acres. With a house and now land, Frank and Jenile had a farm, and began raising chickens, milk cows, hay, sugar beets, grain, and potatoes. The next two children (Bonnie and Roger) were born inside the log cabin. All of their children (including Foster, the youngest) were raised on the farm. Over time, additions made the house livable for five children and two adults. Plumbing was installed. Siding was added. Frank and Jenile never lived in another house.

Frank's life was shaped by the labor of farming, a labor determined by the constant change of the seasons. Springtime called for the clearing and cleaning of irrigation ditches and the planting of crops. Summer meant hay season, when neighboring

farmers worked together, cutting hay and raking it into small piles to dry. After several days the hay was pitched onto a wagon and eventually transferred into the barnyard with a derrick. The grain harvest also called for cooperation. The final harvest—potatoes—came in October, just in time before the ground froze with the first cold nights of autumn.

Frank drove a school wagon during the school year, made of a team of horses and a wagon (sleigh during winter months), where the children would huddle around a coal stove placed in the middle of the wagon for the children to stay warm. Years later, beginning around 1963, Frank drove school buses in the morning and afternoon, tending to his animals and fields in between. Frank and Jenile also supplemented their income by working for a potato-sorting warehouse in Menan. Eventually, Frank obtained another 20 acres from his sister, but making a living on their small farm was never easy. As he put it, "Sometimes it has been hard to make a living on this small farm, but we are out of debt, so guess that is about as much as a lot can say" (Hall 236).

In 1976 the newly completed Teton Dam broke, releasing the waters of the not-yet-full reservoir to roar down the river canyon, before flooding a greater portion of the upper Snake River valley. The water receded in just one day, but the line of mud and sand on Frank and Jenile's walls reached over three feet high. Most furniture, wallpaper, and paint were ruined. All crops were lost. Irrigation ditches required extensive repair. It took months to recover from all the damage. Frank was sixty-five at the time of the flood. With his health failing, the stress and strain of overcoming the effects of the flood took their toll. He managed to farm for only one more year before leasing his fields in 1978.

Disease and illness defined Frank's final years. Emphysema left him feeling weak and short of breath. He was eventually bound almost completely to the house, sitting in a

chair or lying in bed, attached to a respirator. Frank died in his house, in the morning, on March 1, 1990.

Sorting through photographs and hand-written letters Frank sent to members of his family, I seek the voice of a man long passed, the voice that faded even before disease took his life. And in the lines of his letters to family members, containing the scratching and scribbling of his scanty writing, I see the rows of his farm. It is a search for meaning and understanding, a search back in time. In his few written words, I seek an understanding of Frank's life, one shaped by physical, grueling labor.

For the first time in my life I begin hearing Frank's voice as I've never heard it. As one of Frank's youngest grandchildren, my memories of Frank are monochromatic, as I've suggested above. When I was born, Frank was sixty-five years old and no longer farming. My first memory of visiting Frank and Jenile on the farm is from about age six or seven. The memory is completely centered around work, the physical labor of taking a heaping mound of cut logs and, during my family's week-long visit, splitting and stacking the firewood which provided Frank and Jenile's sole source of winter heat. Frank left the house once during this first week of memories, and only with great strain. He sat on an unsplit log, his right elbow resting on a knee, one hand pressing against his cheek to hold up the weight of his upper body. He took strained breaths, released in short, accented notes of stress, pain, and discomfort. My Frank was a beaten, weathered farmer, cantankerous, sullen, and depressed.

I remember no words shared between him and me during that visit, unless his scolding of me can be considered as communication. Inside the house, while running from one room to the next, I tripped on the long, clear plastic hose of his breathing

machine. My momentum pulled the tube from his nostrils and dragged it across his face, leaving it barely dangling on his left ear. I don't remember his exact words, but they could have included any of several combinations: "What the hell?" "Get this little nincompoop away from me." "Damn kid." Needless to say, in the snippets from Frank's letters to my dad and mom (and oldest sibling Kathryn) I'm finding a different voice. His words reveal a man of feeling, a man full of life and wit, a man deeply connected to his family, his farm, and his community.

Frank's letters are loaded with ordinary accounts of tedious, grueling, manual labor in many forms. Frank and Jenile resorted to multiple forms of work to stretch their farming income. Just one example:

> I have been working on a beet dump out west of Osgood for a month. It is 21 miles to drive. It hasnt been hard but is tiresome. 2 farmers out there had 1690 acres of beets. James Bros got done today and Albertsons still have quite a few left. You should see the big Pile there is around 20,000 tons. they are moving some of them now to the factory in big trucks. I get $2.67 so should make a little money.

There is a pattern to the content of Frank's writing. Each letter recounts the events that shaped Frank's life; it is always cows, work, family, community. The order appears to be determined by what weighed most heavily on Frank's mind at the time. Consider his comments from three separate letters.

> I havent got a job yet guess I will just stay home and do chores. I lost one steer last week he had had Pneumonia and just didnt get over it. It has been pretty good weather here but it rained last nite so the corralls are bad

> again. I am going to see if I can find a few good cows and sell the others. They are most all going dry. Hay is comming up to $30 a ton. There are lots of beets left on the fields yet. It is awful late and wet so doubt if they get any more.
>
> We went to Clara Lemons funeral at Rigby. Eva died yesterday morning about 6 oclock she suffered quite bad the last couple of days. The funeral is at Menan Monday. We stopped to see Mrs Stewart when we came back from Lemons yesterday. You should see her. I cant figure out how any one could live in such a condition. She must not weigh more than 50 or 75 lbs. I got 2 more little white faced calves a few days after you left. I need 2 more to put on the nurse cows but they are hard to find and they are from $65 to $80 a piece.
>
> Fos will be home about 10th of March. guess he is going to Bonnies to work with Jim this summer. do you watch the P.O.W.s land when they come back is sort of sad in a way. doubt if they all look as good as the first ones looked. I sold 5 holstein heifers didnt feel like milking all my life got $450 ea[.]

The physical realities of the farming life and his personal concern for family and friends seem to be all one for Frank. The complete lack of transition between news of cows, news of children, news of neighbors reflects a sincere unity in Frank's life. These are the ordinary events making up Frank's reality.

Frank represents a rapidly disappearing group in this country, particularly during the last half of the twentieth century—small-scale, independent farmers. Scholar and farmer Victor Davis Hanson has written extensively about this genus of family farmer, both modern and ancient. For Hanson, the loss of the small family farmer means much more than an altered food system. Rather, Hanson is "more worried about the cultural and historical ramifications of the elimination of an entire genus of American," a genus that he finds distinctly valuable for the way this "bothersome, queer oddball…has been…the critical counter voice to a material and uniform culture" (xvii, xii). Hanson does not make the case for the small farmer's importance over any other member of society. But he does argue that the American agrarian has been unique in lifestyle and accompanying credo, devoted to "staying in one place, working with one's hands, challenging nature through group struggle, passing on something better than what one received" (xix).

Small family farmers rarely leave any of their own written stories behind, other than in pieces like the kind of simple letters Frank sent to children and grandchildren. But in a book exploring the notion of place, *The Proper Edge of the Sky: The High Plateau Country of Utah*, Edward Geary suggests farmers like Frank leave much more behind in the physical remains of their farms. In his study Geary equates landscape with text. While not a new idea, Geary emphasizes the uniquely individual relationship one can establish with a place and the creative ways that relationship might be expressed: "The idea of the landscape as a text has long been part of the American consciousness…To one whose sense of things derives from a particular place, the shape of a particular horizon that constitutes the only proper edge of the sky, it may be highly personal, a diary, even a confession" (1-2).

Could Frank's letters be interpreted as a reading of his landscape, and his encounters with that landscape through work? Can Frank's relationship with that land, his interactions with the same land over the course of an entire lifetime—farming that land, caring for it, living and dying on it—be discussed in the same terms one might refer to a poet and his text? Thoreau wrote of such a possibility:

> There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged. (300)

At some point I began imagining Frank as a farmer-poet, simply because I felt that he had poetic sensibilities. Whatever that means. It's a vague notion at best. Frank didn't write much, but his short letters to his children and grandchildren do reveal a particular depth of feeling. For his twenty-ninth birthday, Frank's youngest son Foster received a card from him reading, "Where has my little boy gone?" (Hall 246). While eulogizing Frank during his funeral his daughter Paddy recounted a letter her twin Peggy received from Frank that began, "We buried Jim Grey today." Paddy asked, "Doesn't that sound like a beginning of a good novel?" If so, then a classic Western for sure.

Just two generations later few, if any, farmers know Frank's reality. When Frank married Jenile in 1932 and built the old farmhouse and began farming, nearly half of the United States workforce was employed by agriculture. After a dramatic shift in the government's agricultural policies (reflected in Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz's

stump speeches promoting “fencerow to fencerow” agriculture and the motto “get big or get out”), agriculture has become a specialized, colossal industry and employs less than 2% of the population.

One consequence of this transformation of American agriculture has been the transition for farm families into new professions and more urban residences. Every time a farming family feels compelled to quit farming—or is forced into selling their farm—an entire generation of farm youth must move elsewhere to find professional opportunities. Over the past number of decades this massive shift in the workforce has led to millions of young people leaving their families’ farms in order to seek new employment and residence.

This national shift away from agriculture has resulted in an interesting assortment of memoirs examining the American family farm. One subgenre of these memoirs documents the experiences of a particular generation of agrarian progeny—a transitional generation. Unlike Farm Elegies, which reminisce fondly about a previous, but now extinct, farming life, these memoirs place emphasis on the pivotal moment when farming is on the verge of ceasing to be a part of daily life for the authors’ families. For the authors of each of these memoirs, this includes the personal decision to leave their family farm, presumably permanently. Although the reasons for leaving the farm may vary, the decision to separate oneself from the family farm and trade the work of the farm for another kind of life remains a constant theme in these memoirs.

Because these memoirs focus on the period of transition and possible end of an era for a farming family, they are typically defined by conflict rather than nostalgia. By documenting one’s removal, sometimes even escape, from the farm (including the loss of

cultural and financial inheritance that goes with the farm), these Prodigal Farmer Memoirs provide a voice for the thousands of farmers' sons and daughters who became members of the last generation of their families' farms.

Howard Kohn, author of *The Last Farmer: An American Memoir*, couldn't get off his father's farm in Saginaw, Michigan fast enough. While Kohn describes his father Fredrick as "rooted in the earth," perfectly content to farm forever on his small farm, he feels "loose and on the make," anxious to establish his own life away from the farm (17). For Kohn, the life of a farmer's son is a "slow, unforgettable time of cow-milking and haying and woodcutting, chores upon chores in raw weather, an unchanging time, a time that seemed a sentence of indeterminate length from which escape at times was doubtful" (9). His depiction of memories of farm work cannot be further from the "romp" described by Mildred Kalish in her Farm Elegy, as discussed in Chapter One. So, just days after his eighteenth birthday, Kohn escapes the family farm by enrolling in college, with no intention to ever return in the role of a farmer. After graduating from the University of Michigan he works as a writer, roaming from California to New York City, and eventually to Washington, D.C. As he says, "I felt, when I left, that I had been granted a new life: the traveling life of a writer, as it turned out" (9).

In the first memoir of her trilogy exploring the American family farm, *Here and Nowhere Else: Late Seasons of a Farm and Its Family*, Jane Brox returns to the farm of her birth (located a short distance outside Boston) after living away for many years, in order to help her aging father and troubled brother. Brox's description of her life while away from the farm, working as an early-morning baker living on a small island just a ferry ride away, could not sound more different from her youth on the family farm.

Although she returns home to visit her parents a few times each year, "the farm felt well in the past to me. And the distance seemed to widen more every time my father or mother...would suggest I come back" (33). Brox moved to the tiny island (seven miles wide and fifteen miles long) after college but never intended to stay for so many years. Whenever her mother asked Brox why she was living there, she was "never able to say." If anything, Brox's musings about the farm, the "waterworn hills of this cultivated valley, a land shaped by hands and tools and machinery," in contrast with those about the island, "So small and exposed...terror and beauty in such measure," suggest she continued to live on the island simply because it wasn't the farm (33, 34-5).

But despite the relevance of the theme of departure to these stories, these memoirs are really about what happens after the eventual return of farmer's sons and daughters. In the memoirs of both Kohn and Brox, returning is not a celebration. Returning is a result, at least in part, of the family farm and its future reaching a decisive moment. The return of a once-departed son or daughter comes with its own conflicts and challenges. As a result, instead of simply reminiscing about a past farming life, these memoirs focus on the unavoidable consequences of return for each author and what their return to the farm means to the future of his or her family and their farm.

As a family's land is considered for potential sale or use for other purposes, family members who are part of the transitional generation are often placed in an awkward position. Either they cannot make the family farm economically viable for another generation (even if they have the desire to do so), or they have no desire to continue the farming tradition and simply choose to walk away. In the process, family relationships are strained. Farming parents often feel disappointed. Farming progeny feel

guilty, like they've let down multiple farming generations by not continuing the family farming legacy. Rather than write about the good old days before the end came, these memoirists take on the subject of dealing with the transition (often the impetus for their eventual return to the farm after living away for years). During their return they deal with the stresses of trying to save the farm or the realities that become a part of ending a family farm. Because of the way they document a deliberate choice to walk away from a farming inheritance, followed by a return and reconciliation (though not always easy), these Prodigal Farmer Memoirs reveal the intricacies of family relationships to the small farm tradition in America.

Howard Kohn did not become a farmer. And yet, despite his years of longing for escape, leaving turns out to be more difficult than imagined. "I was trying," he writes, "at every turn to put distance between myself and the farm" (15). Sixteen years of professional wandering ensued. Yet Kohn feels a particular sense of responsibility for the farm, in part because he is the oldest child, but mostly because from adolescence he sought a different path from his father. As his father grows older and his health deteriorates, Kohn begins to make frequent trips to the farm, only to eventually realize he never really left the farm. He will always be a farmer's son. During much of his adult life as a successful professional writer, the farm rarely left his thoughts. Kohn's attachment to the farm is rooted by a bond with family and place formed through work. Referring specifically to one section of the farm, he writes: "The forty had something special about it, something—as parcels of land go—that disproportionately and metaphysically made it a Kohn place" (189).

Jane Brox reflects on the vividness of her memories of a youth spent farming: "The feel...of a ripe ear of corn was something I'd never forgotten, or how to spot signs of borer, and the grade on the apples and tomatoes" (25). But her decision to return to the farm appears much less decisive than Kohn's. In fact, she seems uncertain for herself. When customers or visitors to the farm ask her what's brought her back, she responds with half-hearted answers, like "the place is so much work now" or mentions her parents' increasing age and need for assistance (21). But she's left asking the question of herself: What's brought me back to the family farm? And her mind doesn't turn to the farm, to the constant work, or to her parents' ageing.

She thinks back to an evening where she and her siblings were all home for Christmas. The one brother who remained on the farm, Sam, had Brox and another sister and brother cornered while they sat on his couch. Sam had been working on the farm for fifteen years but still had no ownership. He fought issues of "unpaid bills...cocaine, and mood swings" (22). Brox writes poignantly of Sam defending his efforts on the farm to his siblings. Pacing back and forth while looking down at his siblings, he condemned them: "You left. You left. You left."

Brox's portrayal of Sam serves to emphasize the personal changes and growth that she experienced during her years away from the farm: "My brother Sam has lived here, only here, for more than half of any long life, and the land is still not his own—not his orchard, not his fields, not his to dream on, not his to lose. More than anyone, he's bounded by these stone walls, the pines, these furrows" (15). Unfortunately, Sam's ability to properly manage the farm is severely compromised by drug addiction, his inability to fulfill his responsibilities, and his increasing bitterness towards family members.

Both Kohn and Brox, in different ways, reveal a sense of generational responsibility to their family and farm. Each of their reflections on this sense of responsibility represents a portion of the parable of the prodigal son found in the New Testament that is often overlooked. In his examination of appropriations of the story of the prodigal son in American literature during a lecture at Baylor University, Manfred Siebald notes that in addition to "the perspectives of three different persons" in the parable (the father, the younger son, the older brother), Jesus also made a division "within the perspective of the younger son": "between the homecoming of the son as he envisions it and the actual homecoming to the Father." Siebald explains, "These two versions of the prodigal son's homecoming form a narrative opposition." The returning son, "has visions of his homecoming as a contrite son"; he will be happy if his father allows his return and lets him do the work of a servant. In contrast, the father's perspective of his son's return is a "totally different version…the father does not hold his son's misdoing against him but reinstalls him as someone who holds all the rights of sonhood." This contrast of perspectives in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, as explained by Siebald, focuses attention on the varying perspectives held by returning sons or daughters to the family farm, as well as their farming parents.

Although Kohn's title clearly gives away the harsh reality of the Kohn farm's eventual future, at times during his multiple visits to the farm to see his dying father, Kohn imagines taking over the farm and continuing his writing career from Michigan. But Kohn's motives are unclear, even to himself: "Was I aiming to preserve the farm for my father, or did I want to assert my ideas for their own sake, to seize a final adolescent opportunity to brag and strut and prove something?" (55).

Kohn is willing to do the unthinkable—return to the farm work he always despised—because he fears for what he would lose if the family farm, that physical place, is lost. But after months of mental wrestling, Kohn realizes that much of his motivation can be attributed to the way he views the physical place as integral to his memories. "The generations were built into the house," he writes, "the longest boards, oak and hemlock, had been taken from the double-planked sections of the barn and incorporated here…upon which were Heinrich's handprints, and Johann's, my father's, mine" (226).

In the end, for Kohn, preservation of the past does not provide enough motivation to achieve the patience and determination to keep a family farm alive. He admits to himself and to his wife that he feels lost on the farm, "idle and misplaced," and that his "ideas were childlike impulses at a time when adult decisions had to be made" (228). For Kohn, accepting the eventual passing of his father Fredrick also means accepting the end of the Kohn family farm.

Despite Brox's devotion to her family, especially to her father, it remains clear she never intended, or even desired, to return to the farm for long. She'd outgrown the farm. After her years away multiplied her experiences and expanded her perspective, the farm house she stays in feels restrictive: "It feels small when I think about it, confining…I can't gather everything under one roof anymore. Not enough space, enough time, no way to close the distances between all the things I love" (7). The size and shape of the farm have not changed; it is Brox who has grown and developed. But places also change, and Brox's transformation while away from the farm foreshadows the imminent transition of her family's farm with her parents moving into their eighties.

Sometimes these changes to place are beyond the control of the people who inhabit them. For Brox a bus ride through the countryside of her childhood is a glaring, physical reminder of the way places change, even in the country: "[T]he world has closed in. To be a child here would hardly be the same. Even the far edges of these woods have been claimed by houses. I now see lights through the trees to the north where once the view had nothing human in it" (90). Sometimes, even when physical places change, the memories of those places remain as they were first known. Brox writes: "When I went off to college, afterwards lived away, I remembered the stand as that same white, dusty place, even as I heard how they were building the new stand, which was closed in and at least a dozen times the size of the old one" (24). Despite the constancy of the farm in Brox's memory, the farm and its surroundings have clearly been altered while she lived away. Her descriptions of the changing countryside demonstrate the effect on an entire region when local and familial circumstances force individual farm owners to make difficult decisions that lead change. Brox's memoir demonstrates that this is clearly the case with her family.

And while the farm changed in Brox's absence, her years away have opened up new ideas and opportunities for Brox, like a writing career. Taken together, these changes make it difficult for her to return and then to stay. For Brox it is the combination of new dreams, "ideas for books I want to write…more and more time at my desk," the inability to work with her brother, and the fact that her return came too late that finally makes her realize her return will not be permanent (143). Her parents will soon be gone, leaving Sam alone to continue his inconsistent efforts on the farm.

The difficulty for Brox to work well with her brother Sam is reflective of the story of the prodigal son, with one difference. While Sam never left, his behavior more closely resembles the prodigal son. Struggling again with the reality that Sam's efforts won't help preserve the farm for long, Brox looks for ways to deal with the uncertainty of the future of the family farm: "I come back to my red-eyed justifications: *The land is tired, a long stretch of fallow years would be the best thing*" (135). Arriving at this conclusion isn't easy for Brox, and doesn't feel at all definitive. She fights feelings of guilt. Returning to the farm was essentially an effort to help her father and to help Sam. If left up to her she likely would have never returned. But she's left to wonder if returning was a good decision, whether she's even been helpful: "*What's to come? Has my being back here changed anything? Maybe it's made things harder for everyone*" (134).

And yet Brox's return makes it clear to her that the fields and rolling hills of the farm will always be a part of her identity. But now Brox must accept the reality that her family, whose culture has for so long been influenced by life on their farm, must now change, a change which will alter the future of the family's entire lifestyle and, as a result, the identity of each member of the family. Brox finally admits to herself that even her return could not alter the inevitable future of the farm. But her thoughts and memories will still be shaped by her unchanging vision of the farm, because she "can't imagine this place as anything other than a farm" (143).

Just days after my first trip to see the farm after moving to Idaho I decide to call my dad. For years I've been taking new ideas and arguments about farming to my dad. He's never supported my desire to farm and so eventually I stopped approaching him with my current farming plans. But today feels different. I live here now and moving to

the farm feels within reach. So I want him to know why I chose Idaho State University for graduate school. I want him to know that my decision to enter a doctoral program in English means much more than graduate seminars, professors, and scholarships. I want him to know that the decision to apply here at ISU at all was based entirely on geographical location—a place. My choice represents the culmination of years of non-academic preparation. All my reading about farming. Daydreaming about farming. Discussions about farming. Now my education is taking me to the source of our family's farming history. And all these things—my personal study, farming visions, and the move to southeast Idaho—make me feel like everything is coming together.

That line by Brox keeps rattling inside my head. Like her, I can't imagine Frank and Jenile's place as anything other than a farm. And for some reason, I've believed for years that it's my obligation to prevent it from ever going away or becoming something other than a farm. Currently, the farm simply sits in limbo. In my mind, my duty is to get things started again. To make it a working farm, living and breathing with the memories of generations of my family's farmers.

I want my son Ezra to know what I've learned about Frank through mental inquiry. But surely there's more to my obligation to the generations than simply passing on information about Frank's life. As Wendell Berry suggests, this "kind of operator's manual" should be "for the use of the immediate place" (Fisher-Smith 52). Truly fulfilling my obligation to the generations, according to this definition, goes beyond simply telling family stories. It requires gaining the physical skills necessary for working with the farming landscape. Saving Frank's farm (and his memory) seems as important as ever. Will photos of Frank and his letters mean anything to my own son if the physical

space of the farm is gone? I'd be leaving the farm if I walk away now. I have to return and keep the farm from being absorbed by the first land-grabbing megafarmer who will suck it up and make it a tiny, indistinguishable portion of his thousands of acres.

After considerable study and reflection about the Farm Elegy, I finally understand that I'll never recreate the life my dad's parents, Frank and Jenile, enjoyed on the farm. But what could I understand about them and my dad if I were to move to the farm and seek to make it a profitable enterprise? It would require extensive amounts of preparation and mental and physical labor. Surely it would involve no shortage of failures. But over time, what could I learn about myself, my family, and the farm that would be worthy to pass onto another generation?

All this makes perfect sense to me. I want to share these thoughts with my dad, but his former skepticism makes me hesitate. I now understand that life on the farm, at least as he knew it, can't be preserved. My job is no longer to fix the farm in time. But I still believe the farm has something to teach me. Something that shaped my dad and helped determine the way he would eventually raise me. Understanding what life on the farm could teach me would be just as important as my graduate program. And at the same time, I could help move the farm into the future. How could he say no?

"So here's what I'm thinking," I begin carefully after reaching my dad over the phone. "I want to spend at least one year, maybe two, learning to be a farmer at the old family farm," I explain, trying to restrain my enthusiasm. "I think I can create a class schedule so that I only have to commute the hour down to Pocatello two times a week, three at the most."

The other end of the line is quiet. Too quiet. All I can hear is my dad's breathing. Is that happy breathing? Frustrated breathing? I'm looking for anything that might tell me what he's thinking. The absence of words feels awkward. So I start talking again, trying to fill the silence.

"So I know five years ago I thought I could just plop myself down and start farming. From scratch. With no experience."

I wait for a response. Again, nothing.

My comments begin to anticipate his response: "But now I'm going to school. Right here in southeast Idaho. Just down the freeway. I'll have my academic study on campus, and when I go home to the farm I'll have my farm education. This experience will help me understand you, help me envision the stories you've always told, and help me appreciate life's lessons you've always wanted for me."

Silence.

The most prominent and prolific author of a Prodigal Farmer Memoir is David Mas Masumoto, a Japanese-American peach and grape farmer from the San Joaqin Valley. Masumoto first entered the literary scene with the publication of *Epitaph for a Peach: Four Seasons on My Family Farm*. While his use of the word "epitaph" in his title might suggest the death or end of his family's farm, Masumoto's memoir documents his tireless efforts to reinvent his farm, both in his methods and in his marketing. The memoir begins with a story he wrote for the *Los Angeles Times* about his family's Sun Crest peaches, an older variety giving way to newer peaches that are, as the fruit brokers describe, "'fuller in color and can last for weeks in storage'" (x). Despite the advice of fruit brokers, Masumoto works to save his shrinking patch of 350 Sun Crest peach trees,

once fifteen acres and 1,500 trees. In a way, the Sun Crest peach is a metaphor for Masumoto himself and other family farmers attempting to avoid a "continuing slow extinction" (xi). And he soon discovers that saving this variety of peach, and his entire farm, "will necessarily include family" (92).

Epitaph for a Peach details the challenges of making a small farm economically viable in an industry where uniformity of appearance and product sturdiness when packing and shipping are valued over variety, flavor, and freshness. It's a jeremiad for tradition and quality produce. It provides tangible evidence that farmers facing the either/or decision of "get big or get out" may have other options available to them. Just like Masumoto, farmers can discover new ways to be successful, without selling out completely.

But it's Masumoto's second memoir, *Harvest Son: Planting Roots in American Soil*, that really details the challenges faced by a family when a farm transitions from one generation to the next. *Harvest Son* provides the back story of how Masumoto left the farm as a young man and returned in an effort to keep the farm going for at least another generation. Masumoto's memoir begins with a brief account of a childhood on the farm that resembles, to some degree, the Farm Elegies of Ronald Jager and Mildred Kalish discussed in Chapter One. He describes a typical work day. In the morning he's driving a tractor with the snow-capped Sierra Nevadas to his east and the Coast Ranges on the west: "I tightly grip the steering wheel, grit my teeth, and clench my arms close to my body, trying to retain heat" (30). As he drives into the day's first sunlight he is finally able to "relax and stretch, exhale with a low, deep sigh, allowing the warmth to penetrate." At the end of the day Masumoto takes a moment to enjoy the "brilliant

lavender hue" against the Coast Ranges on the horizon. All is right with the world. And although, he reflects, "I often stop my work and wonder about life on the other side of our mountains…to many of us farm kids, the center of the world lies here with our families working the land" (30).

The pioneering families who migrated to the Central Valley (including his grandparents who emigrated from Japan) toiled "behind mules and horses, opening the earth for the first time with plow and scraper" (31). These early California farmers, Masumoto muses, came "not as explorers but settlers who came to stay and live." And, like those who came before, Masumoto expected he would do the same: "We grew up expecting *and* wanting to help—this was a family farm."

But these nostalgic reminiscences are short-lived. As childhood turns into adulthood, the nostalgic reminiscences are overshadowed as the realities of farm labor become increasingly apparent. "The demanding physical labor coupled with lousy prices broke the strongest of bodies and spirits," he explains, and "I began to hear talk about 'getting out of the fields' as my brother started college, as if that were our new goal" (42). Masumoto compares living and farming in California's Central Valley to "stepping back into feudalism. The scattered towns stand in the valley like walled cities…The farmers are the peasants, working the surrounding lands, shipping food off to urban centers…A few times a year we venture into the big city"—such as Fresno—"but quickly return to the safety of our farmlands" (45). In his feudalism analogy, "people…are born laborers and will die as laborers." And while the "lords and leaders live far away…no one protests or demands change. We are loyal." But as a teenager, he continues to wonder about life on the other side of the mountains. While everyone around him appears

"content and serene" and "strangely comfortable" (45), Masumoto "longed for something not found in the valley" (49). He focuses increased attention on his education. It becomes part of what he describes as his "perfect plan": "I would exploit my good grades and use higher education as my ticket out of the valley" (49).

While not a perfect analogy to the prodigal son from the New Testament, Masumoto walked away from a farming inheritance. And, by doing so, one could argue that he threw away the knowledge and resources provided to him as a youth on the farm. When Masumoto left his family's 80-acre farm in Del Rey, California for university life in Berkeley, he didn't expect to ever return. But eventually, just like the prodigal son, Masumoto made his way back, much to the delight of his mother and father (who are equally delighted to see him gradually take over operations of the farm).

Masumoto realizes, with gratitude, that "little changes" on the farm: "[O]ld farmers still work the land, their children run off to the big city, and the peaches and grapevines need pruning" (117). Always work. And so without any fanfare he slips back into the routines of farm life: removing hardpan from the fields, irrigating peaches, shoveling weeds. Admittedly, Masumoto is not in "farm shape" (120). After just one day of work on the farm, he walks "like an old man, hunched over and in small steps." His "hands shake…too stiff to grip a pen, aching with deep pain." However, he doesn't hesitate to throw himself into the work. And that labor immediately ignites memories of his life on the farm before leaving: "My arms and hands recall the familiar rhythms; my muscles have retained their memory of farmwork" (17).

Unlike the prodigal son in the parable of Jesus, Masumoto does not return destitute and pleading. He's received an education. The possibilities are endless. Before

returning, Masumoto graduated from Berkeley and gained entrance to a number of graduate programs. So why return? Why choose returning to the farm over graduate school? Initially, Masumoto seems uncertain about his motivation for returning. Or, perhaps he doesn't want to admit to himself, and others, what brought him back is that he feels drawn to the farm. So he offers others and himself, easy explanations: "I came home to help Dad—that's what I told myself" (119).

But Masumoto's reasons for returning appear more complex than this. Yes, his father is ageing. And no siblings have chosen to stay on at the farm. But something else is pulling him back. Something about the daily grind of farming feels inescapable. Perhaps it comes, in part, from a feeling of responsibility. Or the memories of his community. But he must have been filled with self-doubt. His university friends certainly doubted his decision. Surely, he must have asked himself: Is farming really my destiny? Did I gain an advanced education only to return and farm? "Initially," he explains, "I set out to prove that you can go home again" (119).

Masumoto's first day of demanding physical labor, leaving him with "badly blistered and shredded" hands, might have made him wonder whether returning was the right decision (120). But after three days of watering peaches and explaining to a college friend the intricacies of irrigating—"adjusting the valves to maintain a good 'head' of water so that it reaches the ends of rows, directing the volume by opening and closing channels, connecting the ends of rows so the liquid turns down another row…and constantly repairing breaks in the borders and furrows"—he realizes for the first time how much he actually knows about farming (121). Masumoto takes heart in this

realization and wonders what it would take to "become one of the best young farmers in the valley," even though at first he hesitates to even call himself a farmer.

For Masumoto, life with his family on a farm is about being bound together and bound to the land, through work. During countless hours working among peach trees and grape vines when young, he formed strong relationships with his parents and grandparents. Having chosen to continue his family's farming tradition, he now enjoys sharing his working life with his wife and two children. And the work of the multiple generations of Masumotos is left rooted in the land: "I can see past and future in these old peach trees, Dad's work of planting an orchard alongside of my labors to regenerate the old. I will keep this old orchard…these might become family trees" (135). Through his decision to return to the farm, Masumoto reinforces his family's bond to the land and to each other. Despite these themes of connection and continuity Masumoto also acknowledges the constant presence of change in the life of farming. And he enhances that change by adopting methods that alter the rhythms of the farm.

Masumoto's memoir recounts a rare success story in contemporary American agriculture. Not only does he maintain the legacy of a proud farming family, but he does it without giving up his conviction for quality products and sustainable methods. Despite his early challenges to make the transition, he eventually became the family's best chance for the future.

A cursory comparison between *Harvest Son* and other Prodigal Farmer Memoirs makes it clear that Masumoto's memoir differs dramatically from others in its themes and attitudes. Distinctly absent from Masumoto's memoir is any hint of animosity for the family farm. He follows his itching for more excitement to Berkeley, where he enjoys a

rewarding experience of academics and student activism. While he imagines a life as an academic, his interest in graduate school seems to originate from his curiosity and academic ability and not from any desire to avoid farm work for the rest of his life. Masumoto never reveals negative feelings for his farm upbringing, only curiosity about the world beyond the farm. At heart, he always loved the work of farming and how it reinforced his family relationships. Even if Kohn and Brox could have found ways to stay and keep their family farms running, it's not clear they would have done it. Masumoto reveals a determined optimism for the future, a willingness to evolve in order to survive as a small farmer. In these ways, Masumoto's memoir is mostly an anomaly among Prodigal Farmer Memoirs. But at the same time, *Harvest Son* is probably the most like the story of the prodigal son, because Masumoto finds a second chance.

I think about Masumoto while waiting for my dad's response. As when I first discovered Masumoto's story, I'm feeling invigorated. Yes, I think. This is it: a model for my own *return* to farming. Like Masumoto, I imagine myself saving the family farm. I will restore the farmhouse to its original quiet comfort, making it a place for cousins and siblings to visit, a place visually connected to memories of Frank and Jenile. I don't need to preserve the past inside a glass case. I will take the farm into the future. Like Masumoto I will utilize methods for the contemporary market. My efforts will no longer be an exercise in nostalgia; I will be a real flesh-and-blood farmer.

My dad will join me in Idaho during planting season. He will show me how to run the tractor and use its assorted implements. I'll help him flood irrigate the fields—just until the water reaches the end of the rows—until I feel confident doing it myself. Later, he'll return for the harvest. We will celebrate the new life, made possible through the

combination of our efforts and the bounties of Frank's 40 acres. What an experience it will be. Two generations working side by side, one generation bleeding into the next.

After waiting for this long without any response from my dad, the silence on the other end of the phone begins to make me uncomfortable. The absence of any response from my dad cuts into my mental wanderings. He is typically stoic, so a cautious, deliberate answer from him is not unexpected. But for some reason I had also convinced myself he would respond with enthusiasm, which is probably why his actual comments feel so debilitating.

"I don't think you really know what you're saying," he finally announces bluntly. "You don't know what that entails. There would be too many obstacles. It simply wouldn't be feasible."

And as if these comments weren't blunt enough, just for good comfort he adds: "You don't even know how to drive a tractor."

Ouch. How do you respond to that? It's like I'd asked him to go to the moon. Earlier I felt like an overfilled balloon, ready to burst with enthusiasm. I wanted to tell him all about this fellow from California named David Masumoto. About how, despite the obstacles, he'd found a way to keep his family farm alive for another generation. How he'd established a remarkable bond with his family through work. But I hesitate, fearing my dad would chastise me again for trying to learn about farming through books. So I attempt my argument from another angle, echoing Wendell Berry's notion of obligation to community memory (without revealing I got the idea from a book).

"Dad, getting to know farming and the area will help me understand the family, your perspective, and all the things you always wanted us to understand but couldn't because we didn't grow up on a farm."

"That's fine, I guess," he responds. "But even if you did live there, you wouldn't find the same place. Farming there isn't the same."

And before I could counter, he goes on: "Farmers use computers now. And the farms are all essentially corporate now. How would you get equipment? What would you plant? People just don't have self-sufficient farms anymore. They're planting commodity crops—wheat, barley, corn—on thousands of acres."

And now I can almost hear my energy escaping as I sink back into my chair, almost fully deflated. This entire conversation went differently in my mind. I imagined some kind of ceremonious transfer of keys to the farmhouse and tractor from my dad to myself, including a father's speech where he says something like:

> *I hereby declare you a sixth-generation farmer in the upper Snake River valley. You will carry this family's history and culture into the future, all while sitting on a tractor. Now, go forth my son.*

What more can I say? I won't be another Masumoto. Am I really more like Howard Kohn, I wonder, desirous to remain connected to the farm, yet deep down fully aware how unrealistic returning would really be?

During the conversation with my dad, I find myself thinking more about Kohn's narrative. In order to evaluate my motivations I begin by comparing Masumoto's memoir to Kohn's, focusing on the differences between the two. As mentioned above, Masumoto spends a significant amount of time working and writing trying to establish his own

identity. He is working to gain a future in farming. Kohn returns to his family's farm because he recognizes how much that connection continues to define him. But by the end of his memoir it becomes obvious the farm's end is near. The memoir becomes less about him and more about his parents, the generation whose livelihood and lifestyle is ending in the face of rapid transformation in agriculture. This makes Kohn's memoir (and others like his) extremely valuable, because this last generation of family farmers (even more than their children), often goes without a voice.

My obsession with reestablishing the farm began out of a simple desire to maintain the family's history, stories, and memories. Because I equated place, physical space, with everything that happened on the farm, I believed that if the farm was sold, or even if the house was altered or torn down, all mental and emotional associations would also be lost.

Kohn eventually realizes something I need to understand about Frank and Jenile's house: "But—how had I not seen this before?—this little empty house was only a little empty house" (255). Like Kohn I had been viewing that little farmhouse beneath the buttes like a museum, a sanctuary that could never be altered. But that is an inaccurate perception. I recall the house's story as told to me by my dad. The house is constantly evolving. Frank constantly made changes to meet the needs of his family, including the addition of rooms. Or adding siding. Indoor plumbing. Another sitting room. A second wood stove. The house, the farm, isn't just about a place infused with memories. I was beginning to believe Kohn's words when he finally realizes what his father's efforts were all about. It was "not the preservation of the family farm," he says, "but the preservation, the well-being, the extension of the family" (255).

Was I really just trying to preserve the past? Was I being childlike when adult decisions needed to be made? For years I'd envisioned my professional aspirations through the farm's lens. I'd seen myself using professional training off the farm to help maintain a family tradition on the farm. To me it seemed like a noble life's calling. But were any of these adult decisions even mine to make?

My dad has said many times that if he could have discovered any way to make a living and support a family on that farm he would have stayed. During the summer months between his freshman and sophomore years of college, he planted five acres of potatoes on land he leased near his dad's farm. His goal was to make enough profit for the following year's tuition. After purchasing potato seed and using his father's tractor and implements to prepare the soil and plant the seed, Frank harvested and sold my dad's potatoes. By the time potato harvest arrived he was well into his fall semester in Utah. Net gain: Zero dollars.

My dad claims his father Frank recognized the realities of a changing world long before that, one where simple farmers on small homesteads couldn't make a living in an increasingly mechanized and expanding countryside. Frank's lifelong struggle to make a living taught him that agriculture was changing; 40 acres meant a minuscule effort compared to 1,000 or 2,000 even 5,000 to 10,000-acre commodity farms. So he urged his children to obtain an education, to seek a different kind of life.

The obvious struggle revealed in Frank's letters demonstrates that Frank knew his farm would not last through another generation. Few farmers remain in Annis today, due in part to the number of acres it takes one farmer to make a living. Frank anticipated the future for farmers and for his children. He strongly encouraged his children to obtain

education, to seek opportunities he did not have. His letters clearly demonstrate his support for my dad to leave the farm. But Frank also hated having him gone. As one of the last generation of small farmers, with no sons to work beside, Frank felt lonely. His letters suggest he wished my dad could still be there, could work by his side. Frank always wanted my dad to know what was happening with cows, crops, and outbuildings. But he also just missed his presence. Nearly every letter suggests this fact: "I kept looking for a letter from you but it didnt come…It has been lonesome here since you left." "Sure is lonesome around here." "Seems like ages since we heard from you." Farming can be a lonely life, especially when your sons and daughters have no choice but to leave the farm.

I try to imagine Frank's experiences and a conversation he might have had with my dad. Was the conversation difficult for them? Did my dad respond with frustration—maybe like I've done with him—saying, *No way. I'm going to be a farmer. Just like you. Just like your dad*.

Maybe my dad can feel my disappointment through the phone. He finally offers me an olive branch of sorts: "Well, if you're so determined to try farming, maybe we can get you set up as someone's manual labor. You could go learn about farming somewhere else." Apparently he didn't hear me when I said he would spend those two weeks teaching me. I want to learn from him. On Frank's farm.

My dad continues by implying something I'd never imagined, that even he isn't sure he knows enough to farm these days: "You know, people think farmers are dumb clucks, but farmers have to know a lot. Growing season is so short in Idaho, they have to know the exact morning to go plant, when to start irrigating." His comment reminds me

of Masumoto's experience describing the intricacies of irrigating peaches to his college friend who can't understand his decision to return to the farm after graduating from Berkeley. I don't have knowledge like that. And neither does my dad. He is a physician who is a farmer's oldest son.

And then suddenly something finally makes sense to me. After so many years of listening to my dad talk about life on the farm, of viewing him as my own resident farm expert, he becomes someone who *used* to live on a farm. Suddenly my dad becomes less of a farm expert and more of a physician who grew up helping his father Frank farm on a small Idaho farm when he was young.

"When did our family last farm there?" I ask him, trying to change the subject.

"Well," he answers, "your grandpa quit in 1978, so that farm would probably be unfamiliar terrain, even to me." He goes on, "To be honest, I'm not sure I would even be able to do what you're saying."

My understanding has been all wrong, I realize. I can't be a prodigal farmer, because I've never left. I never left because I wasn't a farmer's son. And because I never left, I can't return. All this time I've played this scene of return over in my mind—again and again. I would return with fanfare. I would find a home in this place. But it was only a vague dream. In my dream the farm never seems to change. But things have indeed changed. I never lived in this place. There is no returning for me. In my new reality I imagine returning and nobody recognizing me. Someone comments that I sort of resemble someone that used to live and farm here.

My dad is the farmer's son. The farm defines his work ethic, his parenting style, even his hobbies. Before he could retire, he found a way to return to farming when he

purchased a 50-acre ranch among the rolling hills of southern Oregon's Siskiyou Mountains. So now his hobbies include irrigating pasture, raising steers, and making hay.

What I find most interesting, however, is the way the farm seems to define my dad's self image, despite his protests of potential incompetence. I believe he has always compared his abilities and qualities as a professional to Frank's life as a farmer. He regularly refers to himself by saying, "I work on pumps." While an accurate description for a cardiac surgeon, it also reflects the humility and manual labor of a farmer. Throughout his professional life, he has found a way to imagine himself, and his work, through the perspective he gained as a farmer's son.

Finally I understand that the Prodigal Farmer Memoir tells my dad's story, not mine. Although he's never returned to the family farm in the same way as Masumoto, Kohn, and Brox, the farm never left him. (Still, he maintains ownership of the farm, perhaps because he continues to imagine the possibility of a future return, even if his parents are gone.) And while my dad will never write his own Prodigal Farmer Memoir, for professional writers like Brox and Kohn this comparison of their writing life to the working life of a farmer becomes an important part of accepting the reality of their future lives away from the farm, as well as the unclear future of the farms that helped define them. Although neither stayed on to farm permanently after their brief returns, this comparison suggests they will always carry with them the manual or handbook from the memories of their farms. Even while writing.

When it becomes clear to Brox's father that life's path will take her elsewhere, towards other pursuits, she wants to help him understand that writing, her kind of work, is good and worthy. And perhaps not all that different from farming. She describes writing

creatively by using, "his own idea of work, of a steel blade cutting through the thick April rye, and his wake of turned-up earth" (124). Despite the differences between farming and writing (Brox tells her dad: "'You get a different kind of tired'"), most of Brox's writing is about farming.

Brox acknowledges writing's shortcoming and frustrations: "So much to tell, and even with all the quiet of winters here, there doesn't seem to be enough time. The connections between things takes so long to become apparent. I always seem to want to say more than I'm able" (125). At times Brox seems to be finding similarities between the two activities, "I put down the words, then take them back. Go down a different path. Work, senses, anger, the rust, the relics, the seeds" (126).

Like Brox, not only does Kohn write about farming, but he also compares the writing process to farming. Kohn explains:

> It was not until later…that I fully realized how much my writing is like my father's farming and how much I had become like my father. Writing and farming are endeavors of the solitary, driven soul, driving against the odds…Writing and farming enlarge also the chance of individual consequences. You can fail. (257)

For Kohn understanding the similar qualities of his profession with farming serves as a breakthrough of sorts. It helps him overcome a sense of guilt he's carried for leaving the farm and his father, despite being the oldest son. This realization helps him renew his relationship with his father before illness takes his father's life.

After a long phone call with my dad, one defined by disapproval and refutation of my ideas, I'm looking for a casual way to change the subject again or simply to end our conversation so I can hang up the phone. But before I can, my dad surprises me with a final comment, one that suggests that I was right when I imagined that he might be unwilling to let me onto the farm because he hasn't given up the possibility he might return some day.

"You know," he says, "if you're really so interested in farming, you'd better get your own farm. This is my farm."

His suggestion catches me off guard. For one thing, his idea suggests he is finally accepting my farming proposal. If you really want to farm, he appears to be saying, go find your own way. Just leave my farm to me.

And this makes sense because when he and his four siblings inherited the farm, he bought out their portions. Giving the farm to me would mean admitting that he was done with the farm and done farming. But his purchase of land in southern Oregon implies he is just beginning to reconnect or return to farming for himself. So, from here, I accept his suggestion by turning my attention to becoming a farmer, on my own farm.

Now I'm left with another question: Just how does a young American with no previous experience make a living farming in the twenty-first century? Fortunately, contemporary literature has something to say on that subject too, to help guide me.

Chapter Three

Industrial Farming and Literature:

Humans, Nature, and the Struggle for Control

Ever since I decided it was my destiny to make a living farming on Frank and Jenile's farm, friends and family members began asking me what I would grow and how I would make it profitable. I began concocting plans designed to match the size and location of the farm with today's market. When I was an undergraduate I became obsessed with strawberries. I would pore over magazines, looking for ideas about unique or unconventional farming trends. After reading an article about "weeder geese" (geese used to forage on weeds between row crops as an alternative to herbicides), I researched strawberries and geese for months. Jane Brox's description of her family's roadside stand in her memoir *Here and Nowhere Else* gave me images of a produce farm where I could grow and sell dozens of different fresh fruits and vegetables. Later, after discovering bottled milk from a family dairy in California at a grocery store in Reno (unhomogenized milk with a layer of cream just below the unopened cap) I imagined building a creamery and bottling my milk from my own small dairy herd.

At other times I actually wrestled with the practicalities of farming. For months I wrestled with the challenge of water: how would I water vegetables efficiently in fields set up for flood-irrigation? Later on, livestock filled my thoughts. I would distinguish myself by raising heritage breeds (traditional breeds that have become rare with increased breeding under industrial conditions). I bought encyclopedias of chicken, pig, and cattle breeds. I picked my favorites based on the breeds' colors, physical appearance, and unique features. For example, I became captivated by the Highland breed of cattle,

originating from Scotland, for their long coats of dark red or black hair, their short legs, and a look of ruggedness that almost makes them look wild for domestic animals.

Before I learned better, I took every new idea to my dad. In my mind these ideas were brilliant breakthroughs, solutions to the puzzle of turning a small farm into a productive, self-sustaining business in an industry dominated by corporations and megafarms. Although my dad's responses were typically cynical, I wanted his approval. But eventually I kept new ideas to myself because they mostly just resulted in comments or stories designed to discourage me from pursuing my farming fantasy (comments like "That's not how people farm anymore" or "That won't work; I wouldn't even know how to do that" or like his experience briefly mentioned above when he barely broke even after growing five acres of potatoes between his freshman and sophomore years of college).

On the occasion he related his experience potato farming I tried to counter by suggesting I could find a better way to make farming profitable.

"Dad, I can do this," I implored. "I don't plan on growing forty acres of just potatoes. I want to try something new, farm a variety of crops and animals, create a farm that reflects a traditional homestead like Frank and Jenile's but meets the demands of today's market."

He looked incredulous. I'd made it sound so easy.

"Don't you think I would have stayed and farmed if I could have found a way?"

He had that look on his face. The one that told me he was serious; the one that I had no chance of countering.

I never realized he felt this way about making a living as a farmer. At his father Frank's urging, my dad left behind any visions he might have had of taking over the family farm. He looked for new opportunities through education. He became a successful physician, highly regarded in the community where he made his career. Why would he have wished for anything else?

But apparently he had. He'd wished for a life on the farm, just like Frank and Jenile's. But instead he walked away in order to provide a better life for his own children. And now I was trying to take all the opportunity he'd given me and return to the life of a poor, struggling farmer.

Looking back, I realize that this was my dad's Earl Butz speech. But instead of reeling off cheap, pithy quotables like "get big or get out" or "from fencerow to fencerow," he looked me squarely in the eye and simply said, "Look, things aren't like they used to be. Farming has changed. It started changing before I was born. Why do you think my dad and mom struggled so hard to make it work?"

I tried to reply, to plead with him to give me a chance, but he cut me off before I could begin.

"Now, look. There are only a handful of folks still farming, where in my day every family farmed. And in order to make any money, that handful has to purchase or lease every acre they can find."

He was right, despite anything I could say. The evidence was undeniable. Just as he'd told me when I asked what went wrong with his five acres of potatoes—"Too few acres. Profit margin, if there was any at all, was too small."

When he was a boy, every family living in his tiny community sustained itself by farming. Today only a handful of the families living in Annis still farm, and even fewer actually make a living farming. These include Richard Sheppard, whose father began leasing the farm's 40 acres in 1978, when ill health forced Frank to call it quits. Richard still leases those acres, but today Frank's 40 acres makes only a small portion of the thousands of acres Richard farms in the area, a disconnected and random collection of owned and leased ground. He farms mostly wheat, corn, and alfalfa. Clearly the few who have stayed on to make a living have learned to adapt. If my dad had tried to stay and farm, he also would have had to make major changes in the way he farmed. Forty acres would have become 500 or 1,000, even 10,000 acres. Just as Frank's 1956 Massey Harris tractor replaced two work horses, Daisy and Doll, that simple but efficient tractor would have been replaced with something many times larger and more comfortable, including a closed cab, air conditioning, GPS system, and CD player.

In a lighter moment, almost like my dad was trying to move away from the serious talk, or just to make me feel better, he suggested something he's never said before (something I'd certainly never considered): "I guess you should have studied Ag Science. There's a lot to learn about how things get done on farms these days. I certainly don't know how it all works." I've reflected on the irony of education and farming many times. My dad found professional success for himself—escaped a dead-end farm—through advanced degrees and training and now I was trying to return to that farm through my own advanced education. Strangely, I never thought about studying Ag Science. I thought advanced training in literary theory and criticism, literature, and creative writing were exactly what I needed to become a farmer.

But what if I had chosen to pursue a degree in Ag Science? Thanks to the geographical location of the university where I've chosen to pursue a doctoral degree, I've frequently been given the opportunity to observe and reflect on the life and practices of the contemporary farmer in America. My curiosity for modern agriculture compelled me on multiple occasions to wander through the annual Eastern Idaho Ag Expo and Idaho Potato Conference, held in Idaho State University's student union and indoor football stadium. Each year dozens of vendors (including seed companies, fertilizer dealers, tractor makers, and mechanized irrigation manufacturers) fill the two facilities to overflowing, and over 5,000 growers from around the region gather to hear about recent innovations in the industry. Still ruminating on my dad's suggestion that I go and find my own farm, I consider registering for and attending this year's educational seminars, to be held during the conference next week. Although I didn't choose to study Ag Science, what could I learn from the conference to help me start my own farm in southeast Idaho? And what could I learn that would give me an accurate insight into contemporary methods of agriculture?

Registration for the conference seminars is only twenty-five dollars. So I go online to find the schedule and begin reading over the list of presentations and speakers. A few of the topics sound straightforward enough: "Potato Crop Development"; "Weed Management"; "Cover Crops." But most of the topics make me wonder whether I could get my money's worth from the conference: "Humic Substances & Bio-char"; "Bacterial Ring Rot"; "Potato Nematode Management." Are these the specialized topics I'll have to master before becoming a farmer? I don't even know what those topics mean. Perhaps a conference for industry insiders is actually not the best place to begin my education in

modern agricultural practices. Instead of attending the conference, I decide to just walk through the Ag Expo again, this time looking more seriously at the equipment farmers are using before I begin making a list of what I'll need to start a farm.

The Holt Arena, Idaho State University's indoor facility for football and basketball (and indoor track), feels like an oddly appropriate building for the Ag Expo, because it more closely resembles a farmer's oversized outbuilding than an athletic stadium. The Holt is also known as the Mini-Dome, but I've also heard it described as ISU's potato cellar. When I'm near the Holt and I look over its semicircle of corrugated steel rising up from the blacktop of the surrounding parking lot, I see an oversized potato storage facility, the kind seen from freeways and highways all throughout southern Idaho.

The first thing I see upon entering the Holt is an immense American flag hanging from the ceiling, expansive enough to serve as a backdrop for the entire event. Pocatello's "original" country music station, KZBQ 93.7 FM, plays over the loudspeaker—"East Idaho Country!" Monstrous tractors made by several different companies fill the arena. But a John Deere grain combine in the center of the floor dwarfs the tractors—the main attraction. An older gentleman helps two young boys onto the combine by hoisting them up the ladder and into the driver's seat. A young mother walks around the combine with a child in her arms, pointing out the combine like it's a feature at an amusement park. Almost as impressive as the combine is a chemical sprayer with booms that extend on both sides. Its insect-like arms must be thirty feet long each. How many rows will that cover with chemical pesticide in one pass?

The Spudnik company's display of potato diggers also attracts my attention. The company's play on words, and its implication for the role of technology and progress in

agriculture, makes me smile. These diggers look like some kind of strange hybrid tractor and portable assembly line. A half-circle of men and women have gathered to watch a large flatscreen TV streaming footage of the Spudnik potato diggers in action. By now I feel like I'm able to recognize the farmers among this crowd. They stand apart from vendors and non-farmers like myself with an outfit of firm-fitting wranglers, cowboy boots, parkas over a plaid button up, and a trucker's hat bearing the logo of a tractor maker, fertilizer dealer, seed seller, or similar such company.

Surrounding the massive equipment, retailers' booths line the walls on all four sides of the building. Their visuals are striking. Lemken: The AgroVision Company, in addition to displaying an actual segment of a center pivot irrigation system, has set out a series of posters portraying a wide expanse of blooming potato plants, one long row after row after row. The center pivot in another image provides the frame for a scene of lush alfalfa, suggesting the benefits this machine provides for spreading water automatically and efficiently. Even an image of a big tractor with double wide tires in the front and back pulling a potato planter or a plow begins to look aesthetically pleasing. This is American agriculture: Stars and Stripes in the background, shiny and expensive equipment, and visuals of vast single-crop farming landscapes.

This patriotic depiction of farming feels familiar. It represents one side of a heated conversation taking place in our country about farming and farmers. This conversation requires listeners to consider some fundamental questions. Who is the American farmer in the twenty-first century? What methods does the contemporary farmer use? Should consumers be concerned with these questions, or only care that food is available to put on their plates?

One voice in this conversation could be heard when the Ram Truck brand launched its "Year of the Farmer" event during Super Bowl XLVII in February 2013 with a two-minute advertisement featuring a striking pairing of images and spoken text. One by one, a slideshow of thirty-two still photos begins. The initial absence of any background noise or music reinforces their visual impact: a solitary steer in the distance lingers against a desolate winter landscape; a lonely, one-room church house rests on a desolate prairie; a weathered rancher leans against a corral (a web of furrowed lines surrounding his eyes reveals decades of labor beneath an unrelenting sun, and yet he appears content); a farm house appears before dawn with a single lit bedroom (presumably for a waking farmer, dressing before another day of grueling, physical labor); a lone farmer kneels in a tiny chapel with his forearms against the pew in front of him, holding his hat in his hands. Is he praying for the harvest? Is he asking for answers after another year of failed crops thanks to nature's unpredictable weather?

Finally, an unseen narrator cuts into the silence and begins to explain why these images matter. The narrator's voice is that of the late columnist and radio personality Paul Harvey, and the text is from a speech given by him in 1978 at a meeting of the Future Farmers of America. Before viewing the advertisement I'd never heard of Paul Harvey, but his voice sounds strangely familiar. He speaks with vigor, almost like he's sounding a rallying cry: "And on the eighth day, God looked down on his planned paradise and said, 'I need a caretaker.' So God made a farmer."

With one biblical line the narrator implies that the farmer was God's final creation, that special class of humans who are uniquely capable of caring for the rest of His creations. And, having inserted such notions of birthright and godliness, the

emotional effect of a few still images becomes palpable. I respond viscerally to the images of an American cultural icon. Goose bumps appear across my arms and my heartbeat quickens. I feel compelled to stand and shout: *Yes! This is the American farmer. God did indeed make the farmer.*

The narrator continues, explaining that the farmer is someone "willing to get up before dawn, milk cows, work all day in the field, milk cows again, eat supper, then go to town and stay past midnight at a meeting of the school board." The farmer knows how to overcome risk and unpredictability with an undying optimism, so that even though he is "willing to sit up all night with a newborn colt and watch it die," he can "dry his eyes and say, 'Maybe next year.'" The farmer is clever and adept at making do; he can "shape an ax handle from a persimmon sprout, shoe a horse with a hunk of car tire…make harness out of hay wire, feed sacks, and shoe scraps." A farmer has unwavering integrity and incomparable fortitude, so that he can "plow deep and straight and not cut corners." A farmer's labor is never done. He is, "somebody to seed, weed, feed, breed, and brake, and disk, and plow, and plant, and tie the fleece and strain the milk." But he's also soft and gentle; he is "somebody who'd bale a family together with the soft, strong bonds of sharing, who would laugh, and then sigh and then reply with smiling eyes when his son says that he wants to spend his life doing what Dad does."

"So God made a farmer."

Based on the portrayal of the American farmers featured in this advertisement, why wouldn't I want to be a farmer?

In fact, it's images just like these that made me want to be a farmer in the first place. It's the summer of 1999 and I'm sitting in a church gym in Menan, Idaho with

aunts, uncles, and cousins I haven't seen for years. We watch a musical photo album that includes shots of the entire family. And I feel glad to be a member of the family, a growing diaspora scattered across the country. But this humble farming community represents the origins of everyone present. I'm twenty-two years old, a college undergraduate with no major and no real sense for the direction my life should be going. Frank and Jenile have been gone for almost ten years. And I feel little connection to them anymore. But during one particular portion of the video slideshow, accompanied by Aaron Copeland's "Simple Gifts," I looked over images I hadn't seen or thought about in years: the farm house, family members sitting together on the back lawn, grandchildren exploring the farm and riding horses, my dad (just a boy) wearing boots and a cowboy hat, and Frank and Jenile, taking a break from their work to pose for a picture.

I break down. I sit at the folded table with a half-eaten piece of cake in front of me, weeping. I put my head down on the table and try to hide my face. But I'm unable to see the images. So I lean forward and place my chin on the table's edge in an attempt to keep a low profile.

I believe my response to these images originated from an unconscious desire to establish some sense of roots, or even just to feel attached to a place. To origins and tradition. To a sense of purpose. At the time I'd never lived in Idaho. I'd never worked on a farm. I'd only visited the farm infrequently as a boy. But watching this musical photo album helped me feel like I belong here: to this family, to this farm, to this lifestyle. I also believe this helps explain my reaction to the "Farmer" advertisement. But in this instance, my response was more than personal; it was cultural and historical.

As it turns out, I'm not the only viewer to react so resolutely to the advertisement's depiction of the American farmer. Within twenty-four hours of its release, the advertisement had been viewed 4.6 million times on YouTube (Piller). And the specific reactions to the advertisement were vigorous. Writing for the online magazine *Slate*, David Haglund called it "the most striking Super Bowl ad" of 2013. During the *Wall Street Journal*'s live blogging of the Super Bowl commercials, advertising consultant Cindy Gallop called it the "Great American Super Bowl Commercial." Chris Jansing of MSNBC said, "This is the first commercial that has blown me away" (qtd by Gavin). NPR's Scott Simon tweeted, "I'm a city kid…& tears are streaming over that...ad." The *USA Today* Super Bowl Ad Meter contest ranked the "Farmer" advertisement the third-most popular of the year.

For those who make their living farming, the advertisement seems to represent public recognition for what their hard work contributes to this country. Chris Heins, a farmer, tweeted gratitude for the advertisement: "Incredibly humbled by the #soGodmadeafarmer commercial. That, folks, is exactly why I do what I do. Thank you, Dodge, for that moment." Farming mother Katie Pinke from North Dakota expresses a similar sentiment in her blog post about the video: "After watching the commercial, I feel like there is more hope in the world. Hope for agriculture, for family farmers, to feed a growing population, to connect everyday Americans to where their food comes from and to build a greater connected community for agriculture in America." In an online article, agricultural journalist Andy Vance vocalizes what the advertisement means to millions of non-farmers: "[L]ast night, during a record-setting television broadcast, tens of millions of Americans heard an iconic voice remind them of what it means to be a farmer, helping

reconnect them to their own fond memories of our nation's food producers" (qtd in eatocracy.cnn.com).

Despite the initial, mostly positive, responses, Vance's quote also reveals why, after the initial hum of praise and pride quieted down enough, an equally energetic series of responses began to question the commercial's authenticity. Vance's emphasis on the word "memories" suggests that we only "reconnect" with our "fond memories of our nation's food producers" through the past. It begs the question, does the "Farmer" advertisement accurately represent American farmers and farming in the twenty-first century?

In her blog on food and food politics, food historian Rachel Laudan argues that the "Farmer" advertisement is not a depiction of the contemporary American farmer at all. Instead, she contends, the advertisement is a reflection of our collective nostalgia. She believes this misrepresentation is harmful, because it prevents us from approaching the realities of agriculture in the twenty-first century: "[I]f we continue to accept the kind of images promoted by this ad, images of the farmer as a good hearted chap, working with the technology of the late 1930s…[H]ow are we ever going to get a sensible grip on agriculture?" She's suggesting that the more we're enthralled by an out-of-date image of farming, the less capable we are of fully understanding contemporary agriculture and how our food is produced.

Lauden's point is well made. But if we do decide to get a "sensible grip on agriculture," to what sources will we turn to obtain that grip? The "Farmer" advertisement conveniently overlooks any of the coarseness of contemporary agriculture (although the final image of the advertisement does show the Dodge truck—the first

appearance of the truck or any indication of the corporation—parked in front of a massive metal chicken house of the variety that holds about 10,000 birds). One particularly cynical response to the advertisement's nostalgic depiction of the American farmer is a parody called "God Made a Factory Farmer" from the comical video website "Funny or Die." In the parody, a snide and sarcastic sounding narrator describes a blending of images from the original advertisement with additional images not found in the original using an altered version of the narration that speaks of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, genetically-modified seeds, agribusiness, farm subsidies, and special interest groups. The parody is whimsical and sardonic. It leaves us scolding ourselves for responding so fervently and blindly to the "Farmer" advertisement's cliche-ridden representation of farming in America.

After depicting some of the harsh realities of factory farming, the narrator of the parody notes how the word "farmer," "still evokes salt-of-the-earth American gothic imagery." We've seen the images from the parody before (feed lots, chemical sprayers, factory farms), whether in the news, in documentaries, or in books, but despite what we, the general public, know about industrial farming, we don't seem able to let go of the nostalgic image of God's farmer. The parody represents just one brief example of another voice in this conversation about farming currently taking place in our country. Appropriately, another corporation represents an equally bold voice to counter the ideas displayed by Ram Truck in the "Farmer" advertisement.

In February 2014, Chipotle (the national chain of fast food burrito restaurants known for its efforts to serve environmentally-conscious food by knowing the source of its ingredients) released the first of a new four-part web series called "Farmed and

Dangerous," airing on Hulu. In the opening scene of the first episode, the corporate headquarters of Animoil (an innovative ag corporation pushing the boundaries of food production beyond anything we've seen before) appears beneath a dark, somber sky, filling with lightning strikes. In a nod to Dr. Frankenstein (or perhaps Dr. Strangelove), we find Animoil's main scientist, Austrian-born Dr. van Riefkin, busily experimenting with new food inventions. He is the creator of petropellet, cattle feed designed to decrease the amount of petroleum required to produce beef by simply feeding it directly to cattle, which becomes the main subject for the show's narrative. (It's worth noting that Dr. van Riefkin is also working on an eight-winged chicken, a beheaded and de-feathered version of which becomes a disturbing image from one visit to the Animoil laboratory.)

Here we meet Buck Marshall, head of the Industrial Food Image Bureau (I.F.I.B.), a public relations firm hired by Animoil for image consulting. Animoil's CEO wants to show Buck Marshall agriculture's latest innovation, a steer fed on petropellets. When Buck asks about any possible side effects caused by feeding petroleum to cows, the CEO replies, "The side effects are minimal. Except sometimes they explode." Not surprisingly, at the end of this scene, the cow does explode. Somehow security footage of the exploding cow is obtained and posted on the internet by Chip Randell, sustainable farmer and head of the Sustainable Family Farming Association. (Chip's name is one of only three subtle nods to Chipotle during the web series.) The rest of the series develops into a battle between Chip and Buck (or sustainable farming and industrial farming), moderated by Buck's daughter Sophia Marshall, who works for I.F.I.B. but in the process of trying to persuade Chip to end his campaign against Animoil falls in love with him and turns to the side of sustainable farming.

Chipotle has become known for utilizing non-traditional advertising. “Back to the Start,” is an animated commercial (accompanied by Willie Nelson’s cover of the Coldplay song “Scientist”) about a farmer with adorably round pigs who industrializes his farm in an effort to keep up, but after experiencing guilt and regret works to return his farm to something sustainable. “Back to the Start” proved so successful (first released online, then at movie theaters, and during the Grammy Awards broadcast in 2012) that two years later Chipotle released another animated commercial featuring the same distinctive animation. “The Scarecrow,” featuring Fiona Apple singing “Pure Imagination,” compares food made anonymously in a factory with fresh, wholesome food prepared by hand. The two animated commercials have accumulated 8.3 million and 12.5 million views respectively on YouTube and have helped establish Chipotle’s brand (as defined by their “Food With Integrity” campaign) as a restaurant devoted to “serving the very best sustainably raised food possible…support[ing] and sustain[ing] family farmers who respect the land and the animals in their care…[and] whenever possible…use[ing] meat from animals raised without the use of antibiotics or added hormones.”

Many of the reviews of the web series seem determined to ask, Just what, exactly, is “Farmed and Dangerous”? Is it art? Is it advertising? Is it a fascinating hybrid of the two? Or is it just an effort at continued branding by Chipotle, using fear tactics to increase revenue? Communications director for Chipotle Chris Arnold insists that “Farmed and Dangerous” is not advertising: “It’s not promoting our limited-time volcano tacos or something. It’s trying to make you think” (qtd in Cushing). Tim Piper, the director of “Farmed and Dangerous,” calls it “strategic entertainment” (qtd in Cushing). In an excellent analysis of the show by Elizabeth Weiss printed in *The New Yorker*, she

compares "Farmed and Dangerous" to the "advertiser-producer model" of television that began in 1947 with "Kraft Television Theatre" where "[n]etworks sold the airtime, but advertising agencies...produced the content on behalf of their clients." But the difference, Weiss points out, is that while "'Kraft Television Theatre' was entertainment that happened to benefit an advertiser," "Farmed and Dangerous" only "looks like entertainment, but it's primarily interested in expressing a message that promotes a product," with "actors playing characters who *seem* like cartoons, whose dialogue has all the music of talking points."

As a case in point, when Sophia visits Chip's farm their walking tour of the place sounds something like a stylized summary of several of the typical arguments about industrial farming. After Sophia asks, "So this used to be an industrial farm?" Chip explains the farm's story:

> Yea, back in the day my dad got caught up in the factory farm movement, big CAFO, the whole deal. But the more I got involved with running the farm the less I could see the benefits…It was disgusting. They [referring to pigs] were living in their own excrement, getting sick, biting each other's tails off. One fall the ventilation system broke. And the whole herd suffocated…But for every new problem there was always some corporation there, ready to sell us the solution. There were days when all my dad did was give antibiotic injections to pigs…We forgot we were dealing with living things. Then one day my dad was gored in the leg by one of our boars. It got infected. That boar had been on antibiotics its whole life…the strain that infected my dad resisted every medication we

> tired. There was nothing they could do. So that's how this farm became mine. Now I raise my animals naturally.

Chip's story of his farm is another version of the "Back to the Start" advertisement, describing the negative results of industrializing, leaving us with "questions of science and progress" as the song from Coldplay goes. Thankfully the farmer from the advertisement (and Chip) decides to "go back to the start" by making his farm natural again. The argument is presented in black-and-white and the solution as simple and easy to accomplish.

"Farmed and Dangerous" is promoted as satirical comedy. And at times it's legitimately humorous. But what is the show trying to accomplish? One excellent analysis of its purpose, by freelance journalist Tove K. Danovich, suggests it's not really clear who this show is meant for. As she observes, "[t]he show contains enough obvious backstory on why industrial agriculture is bad, that it comes off as too basic for those who already know and dislike these practices." At the same time, she believes industrial farmers will be offended by the show (and since its release they most definitely have been) and are highly unlikely to be inspired by the show to change. That leaves those who don't already know much about contemporary agriculture and where their food comes from, which is what makes Danovich so concerned. The audience that remains is fed a narrative of good versus evil in a black-and-white reality "where you don't even need to hear what comes out of anyone's mouth to know what side they're on." Further, she contends that unless viewers "already knew what the facts were, it would be difficult to discern the real from the satirical." In this light, she refers to "Farmed and Dangerous" as a "comedy of morals"; the problem, she argues, is that "[i]f you want people to rethink

[their morals], you have to give them more than a list of facts." Finally, she uses the television show to sum up a major flaw in Chipotle's marketing campaign (what she calls "advertainment" and includes the show and animated commercials): they don't give "people the ability to make decisions—and therefore real, lasting change—for themselves."

There are plenty of voices in this conversation about farming and food that couldn't be labeled "advertainment," but for the average American with a desire to truly understand this country's food system, information from such divergent sources can easily become overwhelming. A seemingly endless supply of food and farming documentaries has been released in recent years, most of them determined to convince viewers that our food system is broken, including *Food, Inc.*, *King Corn*, *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*, and *Farmageddon*, to name just a few. Books like Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* have been highly influential in getting people to think about the origins of their food, inspiring a local food movement. But documentaries and books like Pollan's have also been countered by other voices, including a recent documentary called *Farmland*, intended to help Americans "step inside the world of farming for a first-hand glimpse into the lives of young farmers and ranchers" and to "learn about their high-risk/high reward jobs and passion for a way of life that has been passed down from generation to generation" (Farmlandfilm.com). The film provides sweeping, even stunning, images of America's farmland and makes the farmer's life feel inspired, if challenging. But the film's funding came from the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance, making it difficult to watch the film at face value. The film, like many voices in the conversation, comes with an obvious agenda. And for every book like *The Omnivore's*

Dilemma, individuals devoted to understanding our food system can find voices to counter Pollan's perspective, including Pierre Desrocher's *The Locavore's Dilemma: In Praise of the 10,000-mile Diet*.

I began reading for this chapter in an attempt to discover how one can make a living farming in the twenty-first century and to gain an understanding of the typical contemporary farmer. Instead I've found myself drowning in a sea of opposing views, a black-and-white debate that at times feels equally plausible from either perspective. At times I respond the same way I believe many Americans do: by shutting out the conversation. If I had studied Ag Science, I suspect my perspective of this conversation about food and farming would be influenced by science and technology. I would likely understand America's current food system, but I also suspect that I wouldn't have gained the skills necessary to become a farmer. Instead I would have gained the education necessary to enter an industry and to provide services to farmers and ranchers as a commodity or meat grader, an inspector, a loan officer, a farm or feedlot manager, or a plant or animal geneticist.

None of these fields seems likely to get me closer to Frank and Jenile and their farm. But does a degree in English get me that much closer to them either? One literary scholar, William Conlogue, suggests literature just might get me closer to them and to an understanding of farming in America. In his study, *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture*, Conlogue points out that despite decades of evaluation of agriculture's transformation during the twentieth century in avenues of history, economics, and politics, "no one has ever fully explored the literary response" (4). That fact seems reasonable enough. On the surface, an academic study of farming in

this country seems more likely to be undertaken by a historian or economist than by a literary scholar. But he also argues for the value of literature in understanding the current debate over food and farming in America. "[L]iterature," he argues, "is the place where the debate [over whether industrialized farming is a better form of farming than small-scale family farming] is most fully alive and where the arguments are most clearly framed" (4). If Conlogue is right, maybe my decision to study literature means more than just my passion for the subject. Could literature be the primary means for understanding this heated debate about how we farm and where our food comes from?

Some thoughtful writers are exploring the complexities of the subject by acknowledging that no easy solutions and answers exist to understand the conflict and debate over agriculture today. Two novels in particular have helped clarify my own understanding of industrial agriculture: Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation*.

In an ambitious retelling of Shakespeare's epic tragedy *King Lear*, Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*—set in Iowa farm country during the late 1970s—explores the complex realities of industrial farming for the environment, families, and communities. At the novel's beginning, successful farmer Larry Cook decides, rather impulsively, to retire and divide his thousand-acre farm between his three daughters: Ginny, Rose, and Caroline. Narrated by Larry's oldest daughter Ginny, the initial scene depicts the Cook family's farm in Zebulon County as "the center of the universe" (3). Here the farmland stands perfectly flat, where everything "must come to perfect rest and once at rest must send a taproot downward into the ten-foot-thick topsoil." Reflecting back to her

perspective as a young girl (before the death of her mother), Ginny perceives her parents as "unhurried and self-confident, complacent with the knowledge that the work at our place was farther along" than the neighbors, including Larry's best friend Harold Clark and the Ericsons (5). In short, she affirms, "our farm and our lives seemed secure and good."

But their lives quickly begin to unravel. The novel takes pains to depict this farming community as overly concerned with appearances. Indeed, it's Harold's excitement to show off his new tractor (at a party to celebrate the return of his son Jess after many years away from home) that seems to push Larry to unexpectedly announce the incorporation of his farm. When his youngest daughter Caroline expresses the slightest hesitation about inheriting one-third of his farm, Larry immediately cuts her out of the deal. The rest of the novel centers around the idea of control, the control Larry has exerted over his farm for so many years and the control he continues to cherish while passing the farm down to his daughters. And, after finally relinquishing ownership of his farm, Larry instantly begins to lose control—mentally, physically, and emotionally—while Ginny and Rose seek to gain greater control with their farmer husbands Ty and Pete, both of whom look for ways to expand their operations by utilizing the latest industrial methods. This struggle for control eventually ruins the relationships between many of the novel's main characters.

Smiley's novel also comments about the consequences of attempting to exert excessive control over the environment. From the very beginning of the novel, Smiley paints this farming landscape as one deeply shaped by its human residents. As the narrator Ginny describes, thanks to an early agricultural technology designed to drain

wetlands and make them farmable, land was made "new, created by magic lines of tile my father would talk about with pleasure and reverence" (15). Larry's pleasure and reverence stem from the fact that these lines of tile allowed him to farm more land. It gave him control over nature. And, finally, "tile produced prosperity—more bushels per acre of a better crop, year after year, wet or dry."

Smiley's depiction of Larry Cook suggests that this kind of control over nature eventually transforms him into an unbearable individual. As a farmer he always needs to be better than his neighbors. In her youth Ginny imagined her father as the man who owned, "[t]he biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer" (20). She admits to never achieving that proper "optimum distance for seeing one's father." Despite the massiveness of their farm, her father "was never dwarfed by the landscape—the fields, the buildings, the white pine windbreak were as much [her] father as if he had grown them and shed them like a husk." Eventually this sense of complete control is revealed to have extended beyond the fields, when the reader learns Larry sexually abused his daughters Ginny and Rose in their youth.

As mentioned above, the novel takes place in a farming culture where farmers worked diligently to be more successful than their peers. In many ways this was obtained by demonstrating a greater control over nature, represented by financial success. Larry and Harold Clark, even while best friends, played this game. As Ginny describes it, Harold's sudden decision to purchase a "brand-new, enclosed, air-conditioned International Harvester tractor" is still "rankling" Larry early in the novel, perhaps because Harold found a way to innovate before he did (17).

This "rankling" surely stemmed from Larry's vision of how a farmer should achieve success, what Ginny describes as an "all-encompassing thrift that blossomed, infrequently but grandly, in the purchase of more land or the improvement of land already owned. His conservatism, however, was only fiscal. Beside it lay his lust for every new method designed to swell productivity" (45). In Larry's own words: "'There isn't any room for the old methods any more. Farmers who embrace the new methods will prosper, but those that don't are already stumbling.'"

In Smiley's depiction, Larry Cook's character serves as the consummate modern farmer. Now certainly Smiley is not suggesting that gaining excessive control over nature turns all farmers into self-serving, abusive, and, finally, demented individuals. But I must also admit, I've never felt too comfortable around big farmers, not because I don't agree with their methods, but because I'm impressed with the obvious competence their control over nature gives them. They have a thorough knowledge of the latest varieties and methods, they know complicated equipment and how to keep it working, and many of them manage their own corporations. While wandering around the Ag Expo, I wanted to ask the farmers about their farms, their equipment, their crops. But my questions would reveal my inexperience: How many acres do you farm? Is that a lot? What is this tractor implement for? What do you do with your crops after harvest? And so I hesitated.

In some ways, Larry Cook reminds me of these farmers: wealthy, capable, and successful. In complete control. I feel some of this discomfort when reading about Larry's disdain for the third neighbor Cal Ericson, or at least for his farming methods. The Ericsons were not born farmers; they "came to farming late" (43). Cal was educated at West Point and Elizabeth came from the suburbs of Chicago. Larry likes to point out

that their education didn't help make them better farmers. For the Ericsons, farming was more about following their interests than about the bottom line: "He never consulted the market...only consulted his own desires and didn't focus" (44). Cal and Elizabeth decided to raise a small dairy, twenty holsteins and one jersey, "'because they like them.'" Without a creamery in the vicinity, economically this is a terrible decision. In sum, Larry "disapproved of Cal Ericson's aspirations, which seemed to be merely to get along, pay his mortgage, and enjoy himself as much as possible."

The Ericsons are only secondary characters, utilized by Smiley early in the novel as a contrast to Larry Cook and Harold Clark. But through this disparity between characters, the Ericsons help define what a real or proper farmer looks like. Ginny observes, "We might as well have had a catechism," one that would sound like the following:

> What is a farmer?
>
> A farmer is a man who feeds the world.
>
> What is a farmer's first duty?
>
> To grow more food.
>
> What is a farmer's second duty?
>
> To buy more land.
>
> What are the signs of a good farm?
>
> Clean fields, neatly painted buildings, breakfast at six, no debts, no standing water.
>
> How will you know a good farmer when you meet him?
>
> He will not ask you for any favors. (45)

The language and content of this farmer's catechism sound like Paul Harvey's speech utilized in the "Farmer" advertisement. It describes what we expect a farmer to be and do. I paid little attention to the Ericsons during my first reading of *A Thousand Acres* before beginning the doctoral program. But after seeing the "Farmer" advertisement and the web series "Farmed and Dangerous," I'm struck as I re-read the novel why the Ericsons' brief appearance at the beginning of the novel is so crucial. The differences between industrial farming and small-scale farming, at least as we perceive them, are chasmal, not only in terms of productivity but culturally as well.

I feel compelled to ask: What sort of farmer do I want to become? Certainly my goal has never been to obtain an increasingly large number of acres. I've spent little time thinking about consulting the market. Am I just like Cal Ericson? Am I interested in farming just for the fun of it, out of passion or whim? My motivations have always been rooted in personal desires, first for strengthening my personal attachment to family traditions, and later for trying farming methods that sounded fun and interesting, like large strawberry patches or heirloom tomatoes or heritage turkeys. Looking over my evolving motivations for farming, I'm beginning to wonder whether it sounds like that dreaded term (at least to me)—hobby farmer. Dreaded because it's something you do in your free time, when you're not punching the clock. Dreaded because you do it for fun, but it's really only important to you. And everyone else just observes from a distance and says, *Oh, isn't that nice—he has a way to relax*.

But a farmer, a real farmer, is defined by his farm, his fields, the unceasing labor, the struggle against the unpredictability of nature. So how does one become a farmer, the kind defined by Ginny's farmer's catechism and not Cal Ericson, hobby farmer? On the

other hand, Ginny uses the farmer's catechism to define her father Larry Cook, who lets his obsession for control destroy him. Would I want to be like Larry Cook, at least as a farmer? Considering the fact that Larry eventually grows insane like King Lear, I might rephrase that question. As I said, I'm certainly not trying to suggest that Larry Cook is Jane Smiley's attempt to stereotype the American farmer. But in recent decades, due to improvements in technology, farmers have gained increasingly more control over as well as the ability to cultivate larger amounts of land. Much of industrial farming is about eliminating the unpredictability of nature and, therefore, gaining greater control. These advances in technology help farmers eliminate pests and weeds (either through application of chemical pesticides and herbicides or use of GMOs), apply water more efficiently (through the use of methods like center pivot irrigation), fertilize their crops (through chemical fertilizers), and simply to cultivate more ground. The size of farm equipment makes it feasible to plant and harvest thousands of acres on a single farm. I believe Larry Cook's character compels readers to ask: Can we, as humans (as farmers), gain too much control? And if we can, what are the consequences of gaining too much control?

In order to make sense of this conversation for myself, I've been forced to analyze the source my own nostalgic sentiments. But I've also had to accept the potential shortsightedness of the view that equates all farmers and ag corporations with the evil enemy. Curiously, as I've reflected on both perspectives, it seems highly plausible that the source of my nostalgic feelings (and the collective nostalgia referred to by Rachel Laudan) and the efforts of farmers (whether they be small-scale farmers or industrial farmers) can be traced back to a single word: control.

My own initial desire for control came from watching the video slideshow made from compiled still images of Frank and Jenile on their farm. In order to preserve their memory for myself and for my family members, I needed to become the caretaker for their farm. As long as there remained a living and working familial presence on the farm, Frank and Jenile would remain in spirit and in the memories of their descendants. Despite the economic and geographic realities of America and the distancing of extended families, I would use the farm as a way to maintain control over our family's memories and culture.

This form of control, rooted in nostalgia, required an absence of change and was reflected in my plans for managing the farm. In order for family memories and family culture to be preserved, I believed it would be necessary to farm in the exact same manner as Frank and Jenile. I imagined farming those humble 40 acres and making a living, just like Frank and Jenile, even if it was a humble living. Just like them, I'd share labor and food with my neighbors. I would wave to neighbors and fellow farmers as we passed by on the country roads. Not only would I maintain a lifestyle unchanged by modern progress, but I would also enjoy spending my days amid a farming landscape, one known for its verdant pastures, straight rows, and small herds.

It would be almost ten years after the family reunion before I read Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World*, but I was experiencing a form of what he describes as the "Agricultural Sublime," or the "satisfactions of the ordered earth" (183). Pollan's notion of the Agricultural Sublime can help explain the positive response to the "Farmer" commercial and my own nostalgic images of Frank and Jenile's family farm. As Pollan says, it's about the "satisfaction of having our way with

nature: the pleasure of beholding the reflection of our labor and intelligence in the land" (183-4). If given the chance to live and work on Frank and Jenile's farm, to have complete control, I believed I would preserve a lifestyle, a family's culture and history, and gain enough influence over nature to maintain a financially viable farm.

But this fiction of control continues to hold on to my imagination. Whenever some unpleasant reality of life creeps in—whether it be challenges of education, employment, finances, or relationships—my mind turns to that future (perfectly imagined) farm, where I will be in control of everything. Everything will go smoothly because I will be in charge, allowing me to make things go just the way I intend. Pollan suggests that, "[p]erhaps more than most, the farmer or the gardener understands that his control is always something of a fiction, depending as it does on luck and weather and much else that is beyond his control" (184). The goal for the modern farmer (and the corporations providing new technologies for the farming industry) is to remove or alter anything that is beyond the control of the farmer. By doing so, luck can be removed. At least in theory. Human ability and scientific progress continue to drag agriculture into new territory accompanied by new successes. But this progress also comes with new questions about the potential for unknown consequences. Currently the focus of the most heated debate is the rapidly expanding field of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

In *All Over Creation*, the novelist Ruth Ozeki examines the issue of GMOs through a wonderfully playful, yet critically intense, story that should give everyone reason to pause. The novel revolves around Yumi Fuller, daughter of Idaho farmer Lloyd Fuller and his war bride Momoko. Yumi fled Lloyd's farm in Liberty Falls, Idaho in 1974 at the age of fifteen, after an affair with her history teacher Elliot Rhodes. Soon

after, Lloyd and Momoko fall onto hard times and eventually sell their farm to Will and Cass, the latter being Yumi's best friend growing up. With no one else to care for Lloyd and Momoko (he has suffered two heart attacks and cancer, she has Alzheimer's), Cass becomes a volunteer caretaker for them both. Yumi, who eventually settles in Hawaii, sells real estate and has three children with three different men. It's been twenty-five years since Yumi left, but as Lloyd and Momoko take a turn for the worse, Cass finds a way to track Yumi down and persuade her to come out to the farm.

While all this is taking place, the reader meets a group of young radical environmentalists—known as the "Seeds of Resistance" (each member is referred to as a Seedling)—whose general interest is in "food-related issues," and their current focus is genetic engineering: "Basic Biotech. Consciousness Raising 101 (52, 53). The Seeds of Resistance are a rambunctious bunch: Y, who is the unspoken leader, charming and attractive; Geek, who is the brains of the operation; Lilith, who provides the feminist voice (she is Y's girlfriend); and Char, a quiet, French-speaking teenage girl from Montreal (Char seduces Frank, who joins the Seedlings and eventually has a baby girl with Char). We meet them in suburban Ohio, where they have parked the vehicle they call the Spudnik (described as a "robotic armadillo, a road-warrior tank, a huge armored beetle"), which they use to travel around the country performing protests, or "actions" (48, 53). The Seeds of Resistance are something akin to a twenty-first-century version of Edward Abbey's Monkey Wrench Gang, an impassioned group of young people determined to save the world from itself. The Spudnik's common diesel engine has been modified to run on vegetable oil and so the Seeds of Resistance are at the McDonald's in

Ashtabula, Ohio to convince a young and naïve janitor named Frank Perdue to let them have their used supply of cooking oil from French fries in order to power the Spudnik.

These two storylines cross when the Seeds of Resistance find a newsletter written by Lloyd for Momoko's seed company, Fullers' Seeds, a business meant both to support them after selling the farm and to promote biological diversity. Newsletters from Lloyd use biblical language to argue for plant variety and against agribusiness: "I used to farm potatoes, and I have witnessed firsthand the demise of the American family farm. I have seen how large Corporations hold the American Farmer in thrall, prisoners to their chemical tyranny and their buy-outs of politicians and judges" (67). The Seeds of Resistance feel they have found their guru and head for southeast Idaho.

Until the appearance of the Seeds of Resistance, *All Over Creation* feels like another story about farming and generations. But instead of dwelling on the passing of the family farm onto one's progeny and the kinds of challenges that brings, as *One Thousand Acres* examines, Ozeki's novel begins by introducing a family that has ended its life on the land as large-scale farmers. But when the Seeds of Resistance enter the picture, another storyline becomes evident, one that details a black-and-white struggle between agribusiness and green activists.

The first "action" we view the Seeds of Resistance perform takes place in a grocery store where the Seedlings block the checkout aisles while Y gets on the PA system to raise consciousness about the genetically engineered potatoes customers are buying. Soon a "reggae version of 'Here Comes Santa Claus'" comes blaring over a boom box pushed in a shopping cart to introduce a life-sized Mr. Potato Head, played by Geek (89). This immediately wins the attention of the children of the store. Mr. Potato

Head begins dancing in the aisles while handing out anti-GMO leaflets. Then the Seedlings start throwing potatoes and other vegetables back and forth through the air. Finally, Geek takes the microphone and gives a speech about GMOs, performing a magic trick where a potato in his hand becomes a can of insecticide: "This, my friends, is the perverted magic of biotechnology" (92).

These extreme characters and laughable performances of the Seeds of Resistance lead Claire Dederer, reviewing for *The New York Times*, to use the word "farce" to begin to describe *All Over Creation*. If anything, the Seedlings serve to add humor to what can, in reality, be an extremely contentious debate about our food system. But I believe Ozeki has a more serious purpose: she utilizes the extremism of the Seeds of Resistance to intentionally amplify the obvious differences between industrial farmers and those who adamantly oppose their practices. But by utilizing humor in this context, I believe Ozeki suggests the absurdity of making this a black-and-white issue where neither side is willing to acknowledge or consider another perspective.

Whatever happened to Yumi, you might be asking, the character I suggested is at the center of the story? For most of the novel she keeps her distance from the conflict. As Dederer suggests in her review (and I would agree), "[a]t first her indifference feels like a weakness in the book." This indifference is emphasized, and becomes even more convoluted, when her former lover and high school history teacher Elliot returns to Liberty Falls as an employee of Cynaco (the company manufacturing NuLifes, a GMO potato Will is considering growing and that the Seedlings are fighting to undermine) to save the company's public image, and the two of them enter another affair as adults. But,

as Dederer contends, Yumi's "apathy is critical to the book. She's the rest of us, neither for nor against, just going about the business of life."

At first glance, it would not be difficult to interpret Ozeki's novel as a superficial representation of today's struggle between agribusiness and environmentalists. By setting up these two groups—these polar opposites—I believe Ozeki's novel compels readers to recognize that the reality of contemporary food issues like GMOs is much more complex. The Seeds of Resistance stand in contrast to contemporary farmers like Will, who eventually uses some of the acres he purchased from Lloyd to grow NuLifes, a potato that is genetically engineered with a pesticide in the plant designed to kill the Colorado potato beetle when it eats the plant.

Will's character reminds me of a young farmer I've become acquainted with, Kamren Koompin, who happens to farm in American Falls, Idaho, the source of inspiration for Ozeki's Liberty Falls. Kamren allowed me to spend an entire afternoon with him last summer, driving around and monitoring a major portion of the 9,000-acre Koopmin family farm that he helps to manage, along with his brother, father, two other relatives and approximately 15 full-time employees. Kamren doesn't wear a ponytail like Will (in fact I've never met an industrial-scale farmer with a pony tail), but Kamren can't easily be placed within stereotypes of big farmers. (For one thing, Kamren is a democrat, a rare breed in southeast Idaho.) Kamren went out of his way to drive me to two separate locations to show me how (thanks in large part to his own innovations) the Koompin farm has been able to cut back on chemical fertilizers. Recently the farm developed a relationship with a small feedlot in American Falls. The Koompin farm helps the feedlot deal with disposal of an excessive amount of animal waste and, by utilizing open space

next to the feedlot, specialized equipment, and time, the Koompins are able to replace a significant portion of chemical fertilizer with natural fertilizer. This doesn't mean, however, that for 9,000 acres their farm doesn't still use a steady amount of chemical fertilizer. In fact, one of Kamren's tasks for the farm is to do all the spraying (presumably herbicide, and insecticide) utilizing a sprayer with excessively long arms, like the one I saw at the Ag Expo.

Based on my conversation with Kamren throughout the day, he would clearly be happy to utilize any innovations that would make their operations safer and cleaner. But his top priority seems to be efficiency of time and resources, and that requires gaining as much control as possible. In order to gain control the Koompin farm hires ag contractors who help them monitor their operations. For example, Doc Stukenholtz from NutriSolutions checks the NPK (Nitrogen-Phosphorus-Potassium) levels in order to determine which areas need additional applications (and in what ration) of fertilizer and provides Kamren with detailed printouts of maps and calculations. Kamren showed me one method of that application, which utilizes the center pivot irrigation system to mix chemical fertilizer with the watering. Kamren insisted that it's really not complicated, just like "Miracle Grow at the end of your hose." On just a slightly different scale.

Kamren explained to me that using more advanced tools like this, and the information provided by people like Doc Stukenholtz, allows farmers to gain more specific knowledge and, coupled with more advanced tools, to be more efficient with their use of time and resources. Kamren's explanation of contol, and using new advances to gain greater control, reminds me of a discussion I had with an employee of Monsanto whose expertise is helping farmers find the most efficient and specific chemical fertilizers

to meet their needs. He told me that, “The biggest thing people need to understand is that close to eighty-five or ninety percent of the people that are in big farming are very conservative environmentalists,” placing emphasis on each syllable of the word en-viron-mental-ist. “They’re very good stewards,” he continued. “They know that if they mess up their ground they don’t have it.” And so they look “very strongly at how they take the resources they have available to them and produce as much as possible.” While I’m still skeptical of his comments—especially his description of farmers as environmentalists when it seems their biggest concern is “getting the largest return for their investment”—after spending an afternoon with Kamren I did gain a greater appreciation for the efforts many farmers are making to take care of their land while trying to increase production. And getting to know Kamren made it more difficult to be satisfied with my own mental stereotypes of large-scale farmers.

While Lloyd farmed before the introduction of GMOs, his farming methods before Will purchased his farm were not unlike most contemporary methods. Perhaps the most obvious similarity between Lloyd’s farming operation (before retiring) and Will’s is the absence of variety. This is why Yumi’s personal story is so relevant to the story of modern agriculture. Yumi is a hybrid: Japanese American. Her father Lloyd, an Idaho native and traditional farmer who raised hundreds of acres of just one or two crops, represents a lack of variety, not unlike genetically identical potatoes. Her mother Momoko is a “born gardener” who represents diversity to a family and a region where there is none and who plants “varieties of fruits and flowers that no one had ever seen before in Power County” (5). When she whispers to her young plants, “’Be strong, my little seedling!’” you can almost hear her whispering to Yumi as a child. Yumi describes

her experience as a child, as a Japanese American in Liberty Falls, Idaho, as feeling like "a random fruit in a field of genetically identical potatoes" (4). And so again, this narrative becomes a discussion of control. When Yumi left Liberty Falls as a teenager it was because she felt controlled by her father, just like he attempted to assert control through his farming methods.

Just as Jane Smiley starts her novel with a description of the land, Ozeki begins her novel, "with the earth" (3). In a section narrated by Yumi, Fuller Farms is described as small "by global or geologic measure," but as "vast, by human scale." This farmland "used to be the best topsoil around," she says, but "[t]here's less of it now." But despite the practices by farmers like Yumi's father leading to a decrease in topsoil, Lloyd Fuller, as a young farmer in his annual speech to the Young Potato Growers of Idaho, speaks with praise and optimism for their methods, suggesting harmony between man and nature: "'It is crucial to plan the applications of pesticides to harmonize with seasonable cultural practices" (6). Thanks to language like that spoken by her father, Yumi begins to see Fuller farms as "living proof to us all that with the cooperation of God and science, and the diligent application of seasonable cultural practices, man could work in harmony with nature to create a relationship of perfect symbiotic mutualism" (6). But then Yumi, points out 500 acres grew to 3,000 acres and so on. And the suggested harmony between humans and nature (indeed the very definition of such harmony) becomes increasingly tenuous with time, technology, and growth.

So how in the novel does Lloyd, one of the largest potato growers—a monoculturalist—in Liberty Falls, a proponent of big farming methods, become a guru to a group of radical environmentalists? When Momoko begings saving and selling seeds

she does not have Lloyd's support. Instead, he has been a "bit disparaging" of Momoko's garden, because "all that diversity" makes him nervous (111). He would watch her grow a variety of plants in her garden and he "thought her frivolous for planting what seemed to him to be a confusion of flowers, fruits, and vegetables." One of the reasons Lloyd seems so uncomfortable, at least in the beginning, with Momoko's garden is that the variety and diversity makes it difficult to monitor everything, to prevent and tend as necessary with chemical applications, at least in the view of a lifelong industrial farmer.

After Lloyd's second heart attack in 1983 he has to walk away from growing potatoes completely, leasing his acreage all to Will. This proves to be the turning point in his life, the seed of his new philosophy. In another section narrated by Yumi, she describes Lloyd as being unable to get over the "potato habit" (112). Throughout his farming career he loved the way "every potato was capable of creating endless offspring out of chunks of its living flesh" and he took pride in mastering the "art of storing potatoes" in a modern cellar where the temperature is controlled and potatoes can stay fresh for an entire year. However, his health affects his abilities to complete his work as he had done during his entire adult life. This limitation leads him to observe another way and after gaining the adequate strength following his second heart attack, Lloyd begins to follow Momoko into her garden. For quite some time he feels out of place, "afraid of seeming invasive," and only watches from the side as Momoko works (114). But one day he gets down to ground level with Momoko to look at a squash plant: "There was something about these heat-loving vines, twining and tendril bearing, that appealed to Lloyd, and before he knew it, he had folded his long, stiff legs and was down on his knees in the warm dirt beside her" (115).

As Lloyd begins to master the knowledge of so many different plants and the methods of breeding them, he becomes something opposite from the industrial farmer he had been for decades. Instead of growing one crop, he helps Momoko grow dozens of different crops. This work is detailed, requiring an intimate knowledge of individual plants, gained only by spending time at the level of the plants. The collected seeds are sold to customers all over the world, customers who they know by name. Customers even come out to show their respects when Lloyd dies near the end of the novel. Ozeki describes Will as a caring husband and a thoughtful big farmer, but in the end it's Lloyd who gets the readers' strongest sentiments. He transforms himself from a monoculturalist big farmer, operating one of the biggest farms in the region, to a supporting assistant to his wife Momoko (whose passion for variety and beauty in nature becomes a great emphasis in a novel about industrial farming) as they grow a small garden full of exotic plants and flowers. While a sense of control is mostly gone (the control he felt when growing one or two crops closely monitored and determined by chemical applications), Lloyd gains intimacy with the ground again and a renewed sense of purpose.

The notion of a sense of purpose takes me back to the Ag Expo and just what I might have been hoping to achieve while there. In light of my dad's five acres of potatoes and his "break-even" experience, I begin to compile a brief list of what I might need to grow potatoes today:

500 acres of farmland (a modest amount by today's standards)	$1,500,000
John Deere 8210 Tractor	$115,000
Grimme 6-Row Potato Planter	$59,900

Spudnik Potato Harvester $58,000

I stop there, even though I could keep going: center-pivot irrigation, temperature-controlled storage facilities, sprayers, trucks for transporting harvest. And then a year's worth of seed, chemicals, fuel. This isn't looking promising.

What if I tried another avenue? Maybe I could start by finding a job moving pipe this summer or sorting potatoes after harvest in the fall. Then before long, maybe I could get on with one of the larger operations in southeast Idaho, perhaps on their planting or harvesting crew. I'd work long hours, but if I work hard enough, I might be promoted as a farm assistant.

I see job postings like this all the time. Like one from Wada Farms, a 30,000-acre potato farm in Pingree, southwest of Blackfoot. The posting is for a full-time position, one requiring a resume demonstrating the ability to "solve agricultural problems." I would be one of the staff who "collects, analyzes, and evaluates agricultural data as directed by [a] farm management group"; I would "interact with representatives of commercial organizations [and] county government"; I would be the one who "maintains program records by completing forms, reports, logs, and records," including "filing and retrieving information"; and I would assist the "Agrimark Manager with insurance claims, chemical and fertilizer records, and other tasks." Obtaining this position may take some time, however, since I would need experience not only in "basic agronomy [and] crop planning" but also in "FSA compliance, and GPS mapping."

When my dad said he wouldn't know how to farm like they do these days, he meant exactly the sort of slate of responsibilities posted for this job: farmers today have to be mechanics, have to be familiar with GPS, have to be able to interpret agricultural

reports, have to interpret the markets and trends in commodity training. Or they just have to hire people to do all those things. The really big farms have a hefty staff just to keep equipment operational. Wada Farms has 250 full-time employees. That number is determined in large part by the company running a massive facility where they pack and ship the crops the farm grows. The Koompin Farm where Kamren works doesn't pack or directly sell their crops to consumers, and they typically employ about 15 full-time employees beyond family members in order to manage the 9,000-acre farm. Large farms also employ subcontractors for other purposes: somebody to test soil, someone else to test moisture levels, a highly trained pilot to drop chemical pesticides and herbicides from the sky.

Hopefully, after a number of years, if I were to make a good impression and meet the right people, maybe I could manage someone's farm. Every good farm corporation needs an able-bodied farm manager. This position would include my own office, and I'd be the first person the farm owner would call when something needed to be done.

The scenario sounds familiar. To supplement my income while a student, I've been working for a corporate retail store, unloading trailers of freight during the predawn hours. The managers here work their way up the ladder for twenty years before they get their own store. Maybe if I work for twenty years I could manage my own farm.

But, of course, it would never be my own farm. Would this really be the life I'd imagined when I first became so determined to rescue Frank and Jenile's farm? I never wanted to farm from a computer. I wanted to discover an intimate relationship with Frank and Jenile through obtaining a deep and layered knowledge of their farm and the surrounding landscape—the river, the buttes, the soil, the seasons and weather patterns.

And now I'm imagining the steps I'd have to take in order to become a farm manger, for someone else's farm. Is this really where I go from here?

Chapter Four

The Literary Farmer:

Farm Narratives as a Call to Agrarian Revolution

"You can't learn to farm from books."

My dad's admonition from soon after I resolved to become a farmer, noted in the introduction, still echoes in my ears. But each time I reflect on the current status of my objective to become a farmer in twenty-first-century America, I immediately turn toward my bookshelf. Many of my favorites among that tall stack of books about farming are works written by a Kentucky farmer and author who has become an icon and is often referred to as an American hero. Oddly enough, I found Wendell Berry while living in the very urban setting of Honolulu, Hawaii. After receiving my bachelor's degree with majors in English and Korean from Brigham Young University-Provo I took a job answering phones, making copies and sending faxes, and brewing coffee for a small civil engineering firm in my hometown in southern Oregon. It didn't take long before the monotony drove me toward preparing applications for graduate programs. If a bachelor's degree in English or Korean had gotten me this far professionally, just think what a master's degree could get me.

When the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa accepted me into its Korean Literature program, several factors contributed to my decision to choose that school. The quality of the graduate program was at the bottom of the list. Two years in Hawaii. Beaches, sun, and surf. Easy decision. The question I kept asking myself was also the least obvious question: Can a master's degree in Korean Literature get me a life on the farm?

Before applying to the program I researched the languages offered at a two-year religious college located just twenty minutes from Frank's farm. Other than major western languages—Spanish, French, German—only two languages were offered: Japanese and Chinese. Certainly if a job applicant trained in Korean showed up, ready to add another East Asian language to the college's offerings, it would be a natural choice for administrators. Right? Hawaii, here I come.

Despite the tropical fantasies that determined my choice of graduate school, farming once again hijacked my attention. During the first eight weeks after moving to Hawaii I'd spent more time on my couch reading about farming than I had at the beach surfing, sunbathing, or swimming. All because I discovered a book I'd never seen, written by an author I'd never heard of. And the book, I became convinced, contained the message I'd been seeking for years, ever since deciding to become a farmer.

And this was welcome—even essential—new motivation to reaffirm my commitment to farming. Thanks to my initial (perhaps excessive) enthusiasm about farming, I suffered some hits from friends and family about my plans for a life in agriculture. Many of my early comments about becoming a farmer received similar responses: giggles (followed by, "Oh, you're being serious"), blank stares, or thinly-veiled disbelief ("Well, that's an interesting plan" or "I hope you find success with that"). Most responses came bluntly: "You don't know what you're talking about. People can't farm that way anymore"; "You don't just get into farming because you want to"; "Farming is big. Those 40 acres would be a drop in the bucket. Maybe a hobby, but you'd probably lose more money than make money."

Ten years later, I can hardly remember exactly how I discovered Wendell Berry, or why I found his work while living in Hawaii. The Korean Literature program certainly didn't offer any courses in Wendell Berry. Perhaps my favorite online bookseller recommended one of Berry's titles based on other books I'd purchased. What I do remember clearly is the day Wendell Berry arrived in the mail. From the opposite side of the Ala Wai Canal I watched the sun go down over Waikiki. With the light of dusk remaining and a fresh breeze blowing, I sat on the concrete steps outside my third-story apartment facing a rundown city block to begin reading *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*.

I read that a farmer is a nurturer and not a specialist:

> I conceive a strip-miner to be a model exploiter, and as a model nurturer I take the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer. The exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's. (7)

I read that a farmer is tied to the land (just as the land is tied to the farmer) by much more than merely dollars and cents: "I am talking about the idea that as many as possible should share in the ownership of the land and thus be bound to it by economic interest, by the investment of love and work, by family loyalty, by memory and tradition" (13).

I read that a farmer, in addition to being a product of his or her cultural environment, is a product of generations:

> A good farmer...is a cultural product; he is made by a sort of training, certainly, in what his time imposes or demands, but he is also made by generations of experience…accumulated, tested, preserved, handed down in settled households, friendships, and communities that are deliberately and carefully native to their own ground, in which the past has prepared the present and the present safeguards the future. (45)

At that, I stopped and put the book down. My thoughts turned to my dad. To his indefatigable work ethic. To the way his personal habits still adapt with the seasons, decades after leaving the farm. To his dietary preferences. My dad is a cultural product of the farm in southeast Idaho, of the years of hard physical labor spent beside Frank before leaving for college.

So what about me? Am I a cultural product? And of what? Suburbia? American pop culture? What generations of experience have I been made from? My dad is certainly a product of many generations of farmers. He learned to work and make choices by watching his father Frank. And his grandfather Hubert. And so on. Can I be a product of these farming generations, without having been raised on a farm? Can I be a product of these farming generations having grown up native to a region of ground unknown to my ancestors? Certainly, to some degree, our family's farming history continues to influence our family culture while off the farm. And yet, when my dad permanently moved away from the farm a certain link was cut, making me and my siblings part of a new kind of generation. This, I thought, is why I need to make a life on the farm in Idaho, to enable me to become a product of the generations before me.

The night having grown dark, I took up the book and continued reading inside my apartment. Now this man, this Wendell Berry fellow, was speaking directly to me and not just about a farmer:

> No matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can live fully in it only by living responsibly in some small part of it. Where we live and who we live there with define the terms of our relationship to the world and to humanity. We thus come again to the paradox that one can become whole only by the responsible acceptance of one's partiality. (123)

That 40 acres and humble farmhouse. What would it mean to me if I could be living responsibly for it? How would it alter my relationship to the world? To humanity?

Yes! This is it, I thought. That evening I imagined that I had learned from Wendell Berry what it meant to be a farmer. Now I needed to tell someone, to explain in more detail why I'd become so obsessed with this potential return journey to the farm. My dad had already told me I couldn't learn farming from books. So my thoughts turned to my mom. From the beginning of my farm talk when it began years ago she has demonstrated a willingness to hear me out. She has shown genuine interest and avoided judgment. I called her immediately.

"Mom, you won't believe this," I began. My heart was racing, my breathing heavy. You'd think my call was to announce something more consequential: gainful employment or engagement to a beautiful woman. But all I wanted to do was to tell her that I'd been reading a book, one published in 1977, the year of my birth. But to me something about finding this book felt life changing. "You won't believe what I've

learned since moving to Hawaii," I continued rapidly. "Farming doesn't have to be big. There's more than one way. And this proves everybody who's been doubting me is wrong." I took a breath and continued: "This means my ideas aren't crazy. I can do this with the farm's 40 acres."

She responded as she often does whenever I approach her about my determination to become a farmer, with encouragement—"Good. It sounds like you've figured some important thing out"—tempered by a lack of certainty: "Just keep working. You need to finish your degree and get a job and then you can start implementing some of your plans."

I never finished my degree in Hawaii. But she says the same thing to me now, whenever I feel like quitting the doctoral program and finding a farm.

As I read from Wendell Berry then, and continue to read more from him now (in addition to other writers who seem to speak in concert with him, including many who are personal friends, such as Gene Logsdon and Wes Jackson), I keep coming back to a single word: agrarian. Berry counsels that agrarianism is "the countervailing idea by which we might correct the industrial idea" ("The Whole Horse" 67). But just what is agrarianism? Before I discovered Berry, my answer to myself was straightforward and superficial. Agrarian must be anything having something to do with agriculture: farming, farmers, rural living, and working the land. The most commonly associated definition for the term, as described in the Oxford English Dictionary is anything, "of or relating to cultivated land or the cultivation of land." Simple enough, right?

But the more I read Berry and the more his writing leads me to additional agricultural-themed literature, the more complex and layered the term "agrarian"

becomes to me. In his anthology, *Agrarianism in American Literature*, M. Thomas Inge points out how "ideas or attitudes toward the farmer and his craft" can be viewed through a diversity of perspectives, including the "philosophical, imaginative, mythical, political or economic" (xiv). Some of the most basic and consistent themes Inge finds in American literature relating to the concept of agrarianism include the following: "The cultivation of the soil...has within it a positive spiritual good...It is an occupation singularly blessed by God"; "Only farming offers complete independence and self-sufficiency"; "The farmer has a sense of identity, a sense of historical and religious tradition, a feeling of belonging to a concrete family, place, and region"; "Industry, capitalism, and technology...are often destructive of independence and dignity"; "Agricultural communities...provide a potential model for an ideal social order" (xiv).

Published in 1969 (right about the time Wendell Berry came onto the scene), Inge's anthology does a fine job seeking to place the literature of the New World into the historical and intellectual context of agrarianism, including ideas that have been developing and evolving since the time of Greek writers like Hesiod, who composed *Works and Days*. In the past four decades since the publication of this anthology and since Wendell Berry published his first work, agrarianism as a philosophy and as a movement—not just as a descriptive term—has seen a steady resurgence.

In the introduction to *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, a noteworthy collection of essays about agrarianism by contemporary writers, Norman Wirzba frames agrarianism as a forward-thinking, "compelling and coherent alternative to the modern industrial/technological/economic

paradigm" (4). He carefully points out that, "It is not a throwback to a never-realized pastoral arcadia, nor is it a caricatured, Luddite-inspired refusal to face the future."

When I first discovered the writings of Wendell Berry I thought I'd happily found justification for restoring Frank and Jenile's plain farm in order to preserve my family's simple past. As my reading of commentary on agrarianism has broadened, however, I'm forced to confront myself with several questions. Am I just seeking some sort of pastoral arcadia? Have I been creating a caricatured version of Frank's farm in my mind? Are my efforts just an attempt to live in the past? Or a refusal to face the future? A future where I don't want to accept living and working in a modern, industrial, digital economy and society?

These questions make my head throb. I thought my objective for moving to the farm was simple and without hesitation. I would take a step back in time and help my extended family members preserve the culture of our farming generations. But according to Wirzba and others, agrarianism is forward-thinking and innovative. And, as Wirzba expresses in another statement, agrarianism includes far more than just a "few remaining farmers" (5). No, he explains, agrarianism is "a comprehensive worldview that holds together in a synoptic vision the health of land and culture." That word—culture—brings me back to Wendell Berry and his book *The Unsettling of America*. Here Berry argues the reality of "culture as one body," in which "all of its disciplines are everybody's business" (43). An agrarian citizen, he suggests, one who understands the importance of "healthy *farm* culture" to the health of a culture as a whole, does not necessarily have to be a farmer.

One year after moving to Honolulu, I jettisoned the idea of studying Korean Literature—thanks in large part to Berry—and returned to the mainland and enrolled in a groundbreaking, and still relatively new, graduate program in Literature and Environment (L&E) at the University of Nevada, Reno. The L&E program could be described as devoted to "the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world" (Glotfelty xv). I enrolled in the L&E program because I'm enthralled by literature and I cherish nature. And, at the time, that's all I knew. While there, I studied ecocriticism and became familiar with the intricacies of literary theory, criticism, and ecology. My professors asked me to rethink the definition of nature. Attempting this included considering the ways our perception of nature is influenced by history and culture. Words like "wilderness" and "sublime," "nostalgia" and "pristine," became entangled in my now muddied understanding of the natural world and why I felt so drawn to it.

But one word I rarely, if ever, heard during my program in Literature and Environment was the one word I couldn't stop thinking about, the word I began reading about in Honolulu: agrarian. Despite recent efforts by society—many of them crucial and encouraging—to preserve nature, to leave it untouched, we simply cannot ignore the relationship between humans and land through work.

The piece that influenced my views the most while in Reno is an essay by environmental historian William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." Cronon begins his essay bluntly: "The time has come to rethink wilderness" (69). He argues that the notion of wilderness is essentially a human invention; it is a "reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires" (69-70). Our

misunderstood definition of wilderness, one where "wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural," leaves no possibility for humans to interact with nature, whether sustainably or not. For, Cronon continues, "If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall" (80-1).

Cronon is certainly not opposed to wild nature or setting aside large tracts of land, but he challenges the ideas we associate with the word "wilderness." Specifically, he counters the "wilderness premise that nature, to be natural, must also be pristine-remote from humanity and untouched by our common past" (83). Because, he continues, this "wilderness dualism" "denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship" (81). This perception prevents us from accepting that we, as humans, cannot separate ourselves from nature. In fact, we sustain ourselves through nature. Cronon argues that "we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as about not using it" (81).

With the help of Cronon's essay and agrarian authors like Wendell Berry, I decided while a graduate student in Reno that the human relationship to land through work had a greater role in saving our world than simply preserving the pristine, untouched natural landscapes (if any truly remain). Clarifying this relationship, in an effort to define an appropriate kind of interaction with nature, is one of the most important roles of agrarianism. Berry's essay "Preserving Wildness" directly addresses the "proper relation of humanity to nature," and the fact that the topic has become "polarized" (137). On one end of the discussion are those who believe that "all creatures, including humans, are equal in value." As a result, the discussion of the "proper human

use of nature" is ignored. At the other extreme are what Berry calls "the nature conquerors" who "divide all reality into two parts: human good, which they define as profit, comfort, and security; and everything else." This dichotomy of perceptions still exists almost thirty years after Berry wrote this essay. It's what makes this particular essay of Berry's (as well as Cronon's essay) so important and relevant.

Far too often, the environmental debate is posed as a struggle between extremes. So many fail to view "the middle" as a side in the debate about the proper human relationship with nature, because "[t]he middle ground is where we actually live," as William Cronon explains (86). The middle ground, Cronon continues, is crucial to gaining a new, proper understanding of wilderness because, "It is where we—all of us, in our different places and ways—make our homes." As Berry contends in "Preserving Wildness," understanding the middle in this struggle between humans and nature requires recognizing that while "the human and the natural are…different," they are also "indivisible" (139). Due to this fact, not only is "the middle...a side" in the debate, but the middle also happens to be "the real location of the problem" (138). The problem, the reality, as Berry explains, is that "we can live only at the expense of other lives. Our choice has rather to do with how and how much to use" (139). We need to understand nature, and our relationship with nature, from the perspective of the middle ground, where we live and spend most of our time. We make our livings there. We both interact with and use nature to sustain ourselves there.

In Berry's view, the polarizing argument about the proper human relationship to nature is derived from "the human predicament...a spiritual predicament": "To use or not to use nature is not a choice that is available to us; we can live only at the expense of

other lives. Our choice has rather to do with how and how much to use" (139). This spiritual predicament, Berry explains, is also a practical predicament, because it requires us to make choices. What makes these choices so difficult, and contentious, is that "the human and the natural are indivisible, and yet are different." The crux of the issue always comes down to this: How do we balance the domestic and the wild?

In another essay relevant to the question of agrarianism, "Getting Along with Nature," Berry explains that this predicament does not need to be viewed as a contest. In his essay, he contends that "nature and human culture, wildness and domesticity, are not opposed but are interdependent" (11-12). This idea echoes William Cronon's notion of the middle ground. Berry believes that "a human economy and wildness can exist together not only in compatibility but to their mutual benefit" (12). In another important essay collection, *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life*, the editor Eric T. Freyfogle highlights this aspect of agrarianism: "The agrarian aim is not to minimize effects on nature, as if human change were necessarily evil. It is to harmonize them: to craft ways of living in a place that are respectful of the land's long-term fertility and that accommodate, insofar as possible, the human penchant to err and make messes" (xxi).

In his book *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West*, environmental historian Mark Fiege applies Cronon's explanation of our misguided dualistic vision about nature to agricultural landscapes by examining the history of irrigation and farming in southern Idaho's Snake River valley. In many ways his study is based upon one simple experience Fiege has while driving through a vast tract of farmland west of Twin Falls. Fiege's attention is drawn to "the network of

irrigation conduits that delivered water to the fields" (3). There are big canals and moderate canals, both examples of significant feats of engineering to make farming possible in southern Idaho, what Fiege describes as "an ingenious, intricate, technological system." There are also small canals bordering individual fields. Eventually Fiege begins to see small ditches and canals that looked more like "little creeks, perhaps two or three feet wide and from several inches to a foot deep" (4). He wants to know the source of these creeks. Do they come from the Snake River like all the water in the irrigation canals and ditches? Do they have another source, despite the fact that this region is an arid, desert landscape? After some research, Fiege discovers that, "the creek was not really a creek, that it was not natural...It did not originate in a natural source" (5). This "creek" was named, simply enough, Lateral L and took water to fields from a "conduit called the Low Line Canal."

But what makes Lateral L so important to Fiege's study is that he also learns it isn't completely artificial either. When this vast system of irrigation canals and ditches was developed from 1905-1907, the Twin Falls Land and Water Company didn't just arbitrarily and abstractly formulate a grid of conduits for conveying water. It turns out that Lateral L "already existed in an incipient form: it was a draw, a crease made in the land by geological forces, by the earth's subterranean activity and the movement of wind and water over the surface" (6). Lateral L is both natural and artificial. And the more Fiege looked, the more he found "evidence of this ambiguous entangling of artifice and nature."

Fiege comes to an unconventional conclusion about agricultural landscapes, typically characterized as heavily used, and viewed as more artificial than natural. While

he acknowledges that one natural environment was transformed by settlements of farmers in the late 1800s, Fiege also asserts that "in its place stands a new, hybrid landscape that should be understood on its own terms" (9). His conclusion is important. It calls for understanding agricultural spaces on their own terms. These spaces are not pristine nature. But they aren't completely artificial or human spaces either.

Thanks to these ideas from Berry, Fiege, and others, I realized during my second year in Reno that fully understanding the human relationship to the natural world would not be possible without fully appreciating agricultural spaces. Academics had begun to transform my perception of the farm in Idaho, of my farming heritage, and of my potential future in farming. Instead of just an avenue for getting to the farm, graduate studies was becoming for me a passion, something I never imagined would happen. As I have continued to study the concept of agrarianism in the years since leaving Reno, agrarianism has become more than just a descriptive word for a type of physical labor or a way of making a living. Through the field of academics, agrarianism is being explained to me as an entire lifestyle, even a worldview or movement.

After a lengthy period of academic study I began to associate myself with this field of thought; and I began to perceive myself, even refer to myself, as an agrarian. But then about two months ago, in the Spring of 2014, over ten years after I first discovered Wendell Berry, he struck again as I found an essay new to me. After masterfully promoting agrarianism in his terrific essay, "The Whole Horse," as the only "countervailing idea by which we might correct the industrial idea," Berry warns how limited our efforts will be if we rely only on agrarianism as an idea (67). He explains, "[A]grarianism is primarily a practice, a set of attitudes, a loyalty, and a passion."

Early in his career Berry made the important decision to move back to rural Kentucky, a move which helps to demonstrate his notion of agrarianism as a practice and not just an idea. In addition to finding success and influence as a writer and teacher, Berry is an agrarian activist. Just as Berry has demonstrated his practical commitment and conviction toward agrarianism, others have argued for the value of agrarianism as a tool for promoting and engaging in change. Norman Wirzba and Eric T. Freyfogle both argue that agrarianism is the most important movement to respond to an increasing urbanization and industrialization. Wirzba calls agrarianism the "ideal candidate for cultural renewal," but only if it is understood as a "comprehensive worldview that holds together in a synoptic vision the health of land and culture," and not perceived as just something of import for our country's remaining farmers (5). Freyfogle is in agreement, explaining that too many explorations of agrarianism are too narrow. "A faithful characterization needs to cast its net more widely and fairly," he proposes (xviii). In order to promote a greater understanding and adoption of the movement, he summarizes the basic principles and concepts of what he refers to as New Agrarianism.

But there's something sticky about using the word "movement." In an essay titled, "In Distrust of Movements," Berry expresses his concern for movements, particularly when they have "lapsed into self-righteousness and self-betrayal" (35). Back when I was a new M.A. student in Hawaii, I viewed Berry as a successful, intelligent writer who provided me defense for making the family farm active again. Then he convinced me that keeping the family farm alive is about more than just farming and a bottom line. He persuaded me to consider this concept of agrarianism, and to understand it as something much more layered than just a fancy word for agriculture.

Now, deep into my Ph.D. program ten years later, I'm finally on board. I'm beginning to call myself an agrarian, or New Agrarian, and now I have to avoid movements? What's wrong with movements? Mr. Berry? "People in movements," he explains, "too readily learn to deny to others the rights and privileges they demand for themselves...They often become too specialized…they deal with single issues or single solutions" (35).

Well, is agrarianism a movement? And if so, do I sidestep the movement in order to avoid becoming too specialized? Because of Berry's comments about movements, I no longer refer to him as a New Agrarian as others have done. Berry asserts the need for adopting an entire lifestyle, and perhaps that makes any label inadequate. And yet I still feel compelled to find a label for describing the kind of tasks Berry achieves through his various forms of writing. Recently I refer to him, and others like him, as an Agrarian Revivalist. The word "revival" implies a spiritual awakening, maybe even a religious conviction, something that would echo Berry's words about the need for adopting an entire lifestyle.

What should I do with my label, Agrarian Revivalist, in regards to understanding literary works that examine or promote issues of agrarianism? As a fundamental aspect of his historic exploration, Mark Fiege reviews the language and metaphors farmers used in order to understand their relationship to nature. These metaphors were diverse and changed often when, in response to the forces of nature, the settlers "groped for more appropriate ways to define their relationship to land" (79). In particular, Fiege dwells at length on the importance of the garden myth, that "ancient tale, as old as Western civilization," through which "the inhabitants of the irrigated landscape made sense of the

material reality that surrounded them" (171). He divides the garden myth into categories of conquest, creation, the garden itself, what is grown in the garden (crops, livestock, even children), and finally disaster.

Fiege's discussion of language and metaphor in the context of humans and farms in the Snake River valley suggests the potential role of agricultural literature in helping reshape and redefine humans' understanding of, and relationship to, nature. Fiege believes myths and metaphors continue to serve a purpose, "to resolve imaginatively our contradictions, conflicts, and fears, and by doing so...give us hope and summon us to action" (204).

So, inspired by Fiege, rather than look for definitions of agrarianism that enable me to simply affix my conviction to a movement, I begin turning to creative literature to help me form a personal system of ideas, motives, and practical applications. Words, texts, and stories make the foundation for an Agrarian Revival.

Appropriately, I begin with my initial inspiration, Wendell Berry. More than any living author, Berry, through his writing and social activism, has been the source of inspiration for many who have seen the need for change in American agriculture and society. While I regularly return to Berry's nonfiction (which includes a lengthy list of personal essays and book-length nonfiction like *The Unsettling of America*) for its clarity and directness, his artistic breadth and depth—as demonstrated in his fiction and poetry—are equally impressive and significant. Since the publication of his first novel *Nathan Coulter* in 1960, Berry has published over fifty books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.

After earning a master's degree from the University of Kentucky, Berry spent time as a creative writing fellow studying under Wallace Stegner at Stanford University. Then, following a year in Tuscany as a Guggenheim fellow, Berry landed at New York University. He was on his way toward literary fame and prominence living in the commercial epicenter of American culture and art. But two years later Berry and his wife Tanya decided to leave New York and return to Kentucky. For a young writer with obvious talent, one might suggest that this was a poor decision; after all, in New York he was teaching and writing in the perfect location to build exposure for his work. At the time many of his associates felt this way. Berry recounts a conversation he had with one of his "superiors" in one of the offices at New York University after announcing he'd be giving up his faculty position and returning to Kentucky. His superior, as Berry puts it, made it clear his "intention...was to persuade me to stay on in New York 'for my own good'" ("A Native Hill" 173). Berry was left with "considerable difficulty and doubt and hard thought": "[H]adn't I achieved what had become one of the almost traditional goals of American writers? I had reached the greatest city in the nation...I was meeting other writers and talking to them and learning from them; I had reason to hope that I might take a still larger part in the literary life of that place" (173-4).

But as he writes in his essay "The Long-Legged House," published in 1969, he still felt one of his primary ambitions was to "belong fully to this place" where he was born and raised. In a modern society growing increasingly ambivalent about place of origin and cultural inheritance—while professional and financial success dominate our pursuits—Berry's choice demonstrates his conviction about place, about the place where we choose to dwell: "[A] place and a person can come to belong to each other—or,

rather...a person can come to belong to a place, for places really belong to nobody" (143). Berry's decision to return to Kentucky includes more than just renewing a personal connection to a physical location, however. Returning to his childhood home includes a struggle to gain understanding of the complexities of our human association with a place. As Berry explains, he had (like many of us) up to that time "thoughtlessly accepted the common assumption...that the world is merely an inert surface that man lives on and uses" (149). For Berry, returning to Kentucky enabled him to "think of myself as living within rather than upon the life of the place...to see how little of the beauty and the richness of the world is of human origin."

Berry realized that untangling his understanding about place and why he belonged in Kentucky must become a proactive task, rooted in "the power of attentiveness, of permanence of interest" (166). Not only did he belong in this place, he decided, but he also "belonged *to* it"; but he would only ever belong to it partially unless he began to "know the place fully, or even adequately" (150). This required mental and physical exertion that went beyond simply being born and raised in a place. Having returned as an adult, he now belonged "willingly and gladly and with some fullness of knowledge" to the place (166). This task, he explains, is "a spiritual ambition," requiring that we be "willing to be entirely governed by it": "The wild creatures belong to the place by nature, but as a man I can belong to it only by understanding and by virtue." Eventually, he writes, "I had begun to be born here in mind and spirit as well as in body."

Berry's personal examination of his motivations for returning to Kentucky begin to demonstrate a conviction about place that clearly influences the content of his writing: we belong to the place where we live and, if we allow ourselves to be governed by that

place, stand to gain much personal growth and spiritual insight. It should not be surprising, then, that essentially all of Wendell Berry's fiction (consisting of nine novels and multiple collections of short stories) is set in Port William, Kentucky, a fictional community of farming families that, like Berry's hometown Port Royal, is located near the convergence of the Kentucky and Ohio rivers. The central character in the pieces of fiction exploring "The Port William Membership" is never a person; it is a place.

In Berry's fiction, the reader not only becomes familiar with a lengthy list of Port William residents, but also with the place itself, a physical location that has grown and adapted with its residents since the days of its settling seven generations earlier. In this way, the setting takes on the significance of another character. At times the human characters who have farmed in and around Port William have taken great care of the land, and at other times they have not. In order to provide realistic examples of human interaction with nature and the consequences, Berry provides equal representation of a realistic array of farmers and the methods and care those farmers have taken when farming.

In his study of American farm literature within the context of the industrialization of agriculture, William Conlogue places Berry's Port William fiction within the literary tradition of Sarah Orne Jewettt's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Conlogue quotes from Sandra A. Zagarell, who calls this kind of genre a "narrative of community" (176). These narratives provide, Conlogue explains, "an alternative to the Western literary preoccupation with the 'individualized ego'" and "emphasize local daily life, community history, and community members' interdependence."

Most of the Port William fiction takes place in the first half of the twentieth century, when farm families stayed put and farmed for multiple generations. When I read Berry's stories of intimately connected families—like the Feltners, the Catletts, the Coulters—I find myself imagining the stories of Frank and Jenile, and multiple generations of Halls and Youngs. I convince myself that Berry's five-decade-long telling of the Port William story is something akin to the stories of my family that I want to know better.

My first reading of Berry's fiction, while still a student in Reno, made me feel nostalgic and sentimental. I began by scanning a list of his novels' titles. I felt drawn to his novel *A Place on Earth*, I think because the title describes the exact thing I wanted: a sense of rootedness for myself. For me, moving to the farm would engage me in a story that has been told for multiple generations. And hopefully my own life would be a continuance of that story. I would find personal meaning because of a connection to that place, gained through physical labor, the history of my family with the place, and the new stories I would create.

However, as one interviewer points out to Berry, this kind of "shallow reading" of Berry's fiction might convince someone that he intends the Port William fiction to be "regressive, a kind of nostalgic longing for a rural nineteenth-century ideal with horse drawn equipment" (Fisher-Smith 59). Berry responds by pointing out that "there's no way to defend yourself against a shallow reader" who, like me in Reno, is looking for scenes and stories of pastoral simplicity. And he defends himself against this kind of reading by explaining that "[i]f your work includes a criticism of history, which mine

certainly does, you can't be accused of wanting to go back to something, because you're saying that what we were wasn't good enough."

But if Berry's "narrative of community" is not regressive or nostalgic, just what is he trying to discover by exploring the residents and farmland of a fictional community over the course of so many novels and short stories? If Berry is speaking honestly to the interviewer above, that the farming community and residents he's writing about in his fiction were not adequate agrarians in regards to their relationships with the land, their community, their families, then perhaps he's really writing about the present and future and how as humans living with nature, and with each other, we can do better.

Living with nature successfully requires gaining a better understanding of agrarianism and making the deliberate choice to live like an agrarian. One literary scholar, Jack Hicks, demonstrates how Berry's fiction helps to broaden his readers' understanding. In an excellent examination of Berry's writing, Hicks points out that Berry's fiction and personal life are "nourished by an extraordinarily rich metaphor: man as husband, in the oldest senses of the word, having committed himself in multiple marriages to wife, family, farm, community, and finally to the cycle of great nature itself" (239).

Berry's metaphor of marriage—man as husband, committed in marriage to wife, marriage to farm, marriage to community, and marriage to nature—suggests the relevance of relationships that only succeed with serious commitment and sacrifice. When I began reading Berry's fiction I wasn't married yet, although I had begun dating the woman who would eventually become my wife. Suffice it to say, I had still not begun to think deeply enough about the qualities that make an ideal husband. But Hicks'

interpretation of Berry's fiction suggests that a contemporary agrarian is not simply a farmer, or not necessarily a farmer at all. An agrarian is a complete individual, one whose commitments are deep, and widespread. I would soon learn, after getting married, that being an ideal husband does not come simply through a ceremony. Over time, I began to focus on the word "husband" as a verb. An ideal husband is an active one. Some of the words and phrases I find used to describe the verb "husband" that stand out to me include "steward," "cultivate," and "make the most of" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

While the central character in Berry's fiction is a community rather than an individual, the character I find most prominent in the novel *A Place on Earth* is literally a husband, Mat Feltner. At the beginning of the novel Mat and his wife Margaret have not heard from their son Virgil, who is a soldier during World War II, for over three weeks. A government envelope addressed to Virgil's pregnant wife Hannah reveals that Virgil has gone missing in action. From this sober beginning we immediately begin to sense what kind of man Mat Feltner is and what it means to Berry to be a complete human, an exemplary husband, father, and farmer. Mat Feltner is the ideal agrarian.

Before passing the government envelope over to Margaret, Mat anticipates its contents. And while thinking of his son, perhaps reflecting on what he could possibly do that would bring him back alive, Mat looks through the window at another facet of life requiring his care: "Rainwater has collected shallowly beneath the maple trees...Across the fence in the chicken yard seven or eight hens stand together under the eaves of the tool shed...For a moment these things occupy his attention with his naming or thinking about them" (9-10). It's as if Mat's thoughts, his responsibilities and concerns, regarding

his family members, his animals, his farm are seamless. There is no distinction between human and nature for the ideal agrarian.

Hicks explains that the "ideal husband" is rare in Berry's fiction, and certainly just as rare in real life. I believe, though, that the ideal husband is equivalent to Berry's interpretation of the modern agrarian, the kind of farmer and/or citizen he hopes to inspire through his writing. And when ill fortune falls on Berry's characters, it seems to be because they fail to live up to the qualities of a modern agrarian. As Hicks observes: "Much of the tragedy and pathos in Berry's work originates in the failure—either willed or fated, conscious or unaware—of men to perceive a natural order or conduct their lives within it" (241).

But for Mat this natural order is part of his life, indeed part of himself: "The house and the land beyond it have become intimately the possessions of Mat's mind" (28). Just like he would be forever tied to his wife Margaret and to his other family members, Mat will always be intimately attached to the farm his father passed on to him. As Mat once taught his son Virgil: "'[A] man's life is always dealing with permanence—that the most dangerous kind of irresponsibility is to think of your doings as temporary. That, anyhow, is what I've tried to keep before myself. What you do on the earth, the earth makes permanent'" (180). This feeling of permanence about a place demands great patience of ideal agrarians like Mat. As Eric T. Freyfogle contends in his evaluation of Mat Feltner when he appears in Berry's short story "The Boundary," Mat does not perceive his farm simply through the "free-market view of modern culture. Although his land is his economic base, Mat doesn't perceive the farm simply as a commodity" (79).

For Mat the farm is, as Freyfogle notes, "an object of beauty, yielding aesthetic benefits that never show up on any balance sheet or tax return" (79). Mat's relationship with his farm is personal; it's a relationship that comes with a commitment. Mat has "wooed the farm with care. Married to it, he has forsaken all other lands; mixing his manhood with it, he has made it yield" (78). As the novel's narrator puts it, the land becomes "the wife of their race, more lovely and bountiful and kind than they have usually deserved, more demanding than they have often been able to bear" (303). Mat's relationship with his farm does not just bring him and his family financial blessing. The agrarian's relationship with the land requires significant effort, patience, and sacrifice.

Berry's success with fiction like *A Place on Earth* flies in the face of his senior faculty member who counseled him against leaving the literary world of New York City. Not only has Berry been remarkably prolific, but he has also had somewhat of a cult following of readers for decades. (In a review of Berry, the author Janisse Ray recounts listening to an interview with Berry on public radio when a listener called in to say that she and her husband gave their two sons the names Wendell and Berry.) Recently Berry has received especially prominent success. In 2011 President Obama awarded Berry with the National Humanities Medal, and in 2012 Berry was named the Jefferson Lecturer, considered the federal government's highest honor for achievement in the humanities. More important than readership and acclaim, however, the content of his work speaks against the common societal assumption Berry observed early in his career that "the life of the metropolis is *the* experience, the *modern* experience, and that the life of the rural towns, the farms, the wilderness places is not only irrelevant to our time, but archaic as

well because unknown or unconsidered by the people who really matter" ("A Native Hill" 175).

Although initially drawn to Berry's nonfiction and fiction, I find the title of one of his early collections of poetry particularly intriguing: *Farming: A Handbook*. Every time I see this title my thoughts return to that memorable interaction with my dad. Or, rather, to his stern counsel: "You can't learn to farm from books." Couldn't I learn to farm from handbooks, the kind with titles like *The Family Cow Handbook: A Guide to Keeping a Milk Cow*, *The Backyard Homestead: Produce all the food you need on just a quarter acre!*, and *Living with Chickens: Everything You Need to Know to Raise Your Own Backyard Flock*? The title to this book of Berry's poetry doesn't sound much different than these. Is this poetry collection Berry's attempt to write a farm handbook in a lyrical form? Could I learn to farm from a book of poetry?

When I first purchased *Farming: A Handbook* I kept looking for poem titles like "Composting on a Sunny Day," "Raising Egg Layers," or "Making Your Tomatoes Heirloom." All right, truthfully I wasn't really expecting to find poems about composting, chickens, or heirloom tomatoes. But wouldn't that be compelling, to combine such disparate genres as farm handbook and poetry? In this collection, though, Berry addresses the more overarching themes of work and husbandry, the cycle of the seasons, the universal processes of life and death, and the need for humans to find a balanced relationship with nature.

Farming: A Handbook is also the source of a series of distinct poems known as the "Mad Farmer" poems. In "The Mad Farmer Revolution," the farmer is no longer able to sit idly by while development eats up all the farmland. The Mad Farmer begins

cultivating spaces not typically reserved for farmers, including churchyards, graveyards, golf courses, the courthouse lawn. Like any good revolutionary, the Mad Farmer provides a voice that runs counter to the norm. In "The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer," the speaker states bluntly: "I am done with apologies. If contrariness is my / inheritance and destiny, so be it" (44). As part of this contrariness, the Mad Farmer "go[es] in at exits and come[s] out at entrances." The Mad Farmer plants "by the stars in defiance of the experts" and tills the ground "somewhat by incantation and by singing" and reaps "by luck and Heaven's favor, / in spite of the best advice" (44).

The Mad Farmer shares a spiritual relationship with the land. In "The Mad Farmer Revolution" the Mad Farmer is depicted as a saint, something akin to Saint Francis, as crops begin to follow him: "Pumpkins / ran out to the ends of their vines / to follow him," and "Ripe plums / and peaches reached into his pockets" (43). In "Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer," the Mad Farmer prays, "At night make me one with the darkness. / In the morning make me one with the light" (56). Later, in the same poem, the Mad Farmer explains how he achieves unity with the land:

> Sowing the seed,
> my hand is one with the earth.
>
> Wanting the seed to grow,
> my mind is one with the light.
>
> Hoeing the crop,
> my hands are one with the rain.
>
> Having cared for the plants,

my mind is one with the air.

Hungry and trusting,

my mind is one with the earth.

Eating the fruit,

my body is one with the earth. (57-8)

The life of the Mad Farmer is defined by direct, physical interaction with the land. And through this interaction, a kind of mystical, spiritual merging is achieved between the farmer and the earth.

Who is the Mad Farmer? In an age of megafarms and monstrous tractors worth more than the homes where farmers and their families lie down at night, Berry depicts the Mad Farmer as a visionary. The Mad Farmer is a little bit of crazy, and a whole lot of angry. He's become enraged while watching our society and market economy's preference for excessive development over sustainability. He finds great satisfaction, even spiritual identity, in the earth's natural beauties. He relishes in the independence afforded through working intimately with the land.

Who is the Mad Farmer? While it seems too easy to simply suggest Wendell Berry is writing about himself as the Mad Farmer, there are enough reasons to make the comparison. Just like the Mad Farmer, Berry has made several personal and professional decisions that go contrary to contemporary assumptions about careers and modern developments in farming. These include his decision to leave New York City just as his writing career was beginning, in order to return to the farm in Kentucky. These include his symbolic decision to never use a computer, to hand write his stories, essays, and

poems. And these include his effort to farm with work horses and horse-drawn implements.

In Berry's poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," a poem from *The Country of Marriage* (a collection of poems published three years after *Farming: A Handbook*) the Mad Farmer becomes more explicit about humans and their relationship to nature, perhaps as a reflection of the development of Berry's ideas. The voice of the Mad Farmer feels bolder and more deliberate. No longer a poem simply for explaining the character of the Mad Farmer, the "Manifesto" is spoken by one seeking believers and followers. Just as Berry has been referred to as a Prophet of Responsibility, the Mad Farmer calls out those members of a society whose lives are dominated by profit and loss, industry and development, fluorescent and digital. In the "Manifesto" the Mad Farmer declares his position and intentions and urges others to follow.

To begin, the Mad Farmer explains the necessity for such a manifesto. We live in a society where the system leads us to, "Love the quick profit, the annual raise, / vacation with pay" (87). We've evolved into an industrial economy where we, "Want more / of everything ready-made." Walls are raised, real or invisible, until we are, "afraid to know [our] neighbors and to die." And so, the Mad Farmer cries, be contrary: "[E]very day do something / that won't compute." Relish in the reality we cannot know everything: "Give your approval to all you cannot / understand. Praise ignorance...Ask the questions that have no answers" (87). Accept your role in the long term, as one part in many generations: "Invest in the millenium. Plant sequoias." And celebrate life: "Laugh. / Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful" (88).

In these poems Berry utilizes hyperbole and absurdity for emphasis. The hyperbole is what draws me to the Mad Farmer. But just who is the Mad Farmer calling on me to be? Is it even possible for the Mad Farmer's manifesto to become my own manifesto? Berry's writing has always been accompanied by personal activism. His is a voice for change. I believe the Mad Farmer poems suggest Berry's belief in the need for a growing group of people to adopt such a manifesto. And then to act. And the use of such hyperbole serves to imply how difficult a task the Mad Farmer's followers must accept. A willingness to adopt such contrary thought and behavior is necessary to enact such dramatic change. But what does this behavior, this Agrarian Activism, really look like, outside the lines of poetry?

Gene Logsdon, one of Berry's closest associates, uses the poem "The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer" as inspiration for his book *The Contrary Farmer*, part farm manual part meditation on the value of farm labor. Logsdon's book is a source of information and inspiration for a revolutionary kind of farmer, one who thinks and acts outside the mainstream. The Contrary Farmer perceives the work of farming as more of a calling than a job. The Contrary Farmer knows how to make "physical work...enjoyable and interesting" (4). The Contrary Farmer has an inborn "love of home": "People with a true vocation to contrary farming find so much fascination in the near-at-hand that they feel no need to wander the world in search of truth, or beauty, or amusement" (4). The Contrary Farmer has the "ability to see extraordinary beauty and drama in a farm landscape" (6). And, perhaps most distinctly, the Contrary Farmer views the activity of farming through the lens of "pastoral economics" rather than market economics, where finding enjoyment or satisfaction in a certain agricultural activity takes priority over

making money. Contrary Farmers who are founded upon this notion of "pastoral economics" live a frugal lifestyle, avoid taking on unnecessary debt, start out farming on a small scale, and do not attempt to make their "entire livelihood from the farm, at least not at first" (20).

The concept of the Mad Farmer (or the Contrary Farmer) is intriguing and inspiring. But the life of the Mad Farmer is not one that too many people can seek. Due to the expense of start-up costs—including land and equipment—and the lack of experience, farming is not a profession many can pursue, and if they do it's in the form of a hobby farm, based on passion and ethics but not economics. American historian Richard White compliments Wendell Berry for being "one of the few environmental writers who takes work seriously," for having the "impressive consistency of actually laboring in his own fields" (179). However, White also questions the realism of Berry's ideas about farming in the modern age:

> But Berry quite purposefully and pointedly makes his own labor archaic and unusual; he relies on animal power and urges others to do this same. It is advice best taken by literary farmers. It is only Wendell Berry's writing, after all, that enables him to farm with horses. Such work resembles gardening, a favored model these days for a reconciliation with nature. It is admirable; it yields lessons and insights, but it does not yield a living. (179)

White establishes an important distinction between professional farmer and literary farmer that many Agrarian Revivalists don't seem willing to acknowledge. He praises Berry as an environmentalist and an activist. But he also carefully points out that Berry's

success as a writer is the only thing that's enabled him to farm using traditional methods without concern for net profit.

Am I just on the path toward becoming a literary farmer? Is this journey rooted in ideas and metaphors for living, for family relationships, and interactions with nature? Is the Mad Farmer just a literary reference, without any real-world correlation? Is literary farming what my dad was telling me to avoid when he told me I couldn't learn to farm from books? Farmer and author David Mas Masumoto's official website refers to his 80 acres of peach trees and grapevines as a "literary farm." This suggests that to have the kind of success he has experienced—both financially and sustainably—requires an explanation that goes beyond the dollars and cents of a spreadsheet. "Economics and business," the site states, "will not adequately explain the work we do—it will take story and art...There is a type of art to our approach to farming—and the power of story captures the emotional and the physical nature of our work." Perhaps Masumoto's concept of the literary farmer demonstrates a method for farming that can be successful both artistically and economically. Perhaps a Mad Farmer can function in a market economy while also exploring new methods and ideas that go beyond the bottom line.

While Wendell Berry typically receives first mention in any discussion of contemporary agrarianism, Victor Davis Hanson, another bold voice and insightful commentator (alluded to in Chapters One and Two above) , is often overlooked. He deserves to be considered in comparison to Berry, because Hanson also comes from a multi-generational farming background and has continued to farm on his family's California orchards well into his academic career. As a writer Hanson is better known for his prolific publishing about military history (both ancient and modern) and Classical

literature, in addition to his political commentary. But this doesn't make his evaluation of agrarianism and farming in America any less valuable. One reason Hanson's agrarian writing receives less attention may be that his tone is less optimistic than other agrarian writers, including Wendell Berry and his colleagues like Gene Logsdon and Wes Jackson. In fact, referring to Hanson as an Agrarian Revivalist might be inaccurate.

While other observers continue to turn our attention to the agricultural cliff (the ageing of the farming population) and passionately promote a revolution in agriculture, Hanson bluntly states that we've reached the tipping point and if we haven't gone off the cliff, then we're teetering on the edge. "The American yeoman is doomed," he writes, insisting we are now confronting an "agrarian Armageddon" where farming "both as a way of life and a reassuring image of the mind—will be obliterated (*Fields* xi). Because of his harsh perception of reality, Hanson believes now is the time for brutal honesty, rather than romantic or naïve writing about agriculture: "[W]e are now ending a very old idea in this country…that a family inherited land, grew food, and was rewarded with a life that fed and clothed children and that such agrarianism had value to all beyond the confines of the farm" (xxi).

From Hanson we find a depiction of the farmer unlike any other, speaking directly from his own experience as a fifth-generation farmer from California's San Joaquin Valley. Despite success as a writer and professor at California State University, Fresno, Hanson continues to live and work at his family's farm and takes a keen interest in the family farm's success and future. We don't find any bucolic or pastoral depictions of the American family farmer in Hanson's writing, only straightforward descriptions and honest evaluations.

I don't remember how I discovered Victor Davis Hanson. But when I first read his bleak views about the end of the family farm, I resisted. He did not reflect my personal motivations for farming on Frank and Jenile's farmstead. My imagination lingered instead on romantic notions of a place apart from society's hustle and bustle, working surrounded by the beauties of nature, and sharing the satisfaction with family members. Then this Classics scholar, and fifth-generation fruit grower, was telling me that with the loss of the family farmer and agrarian landscape, we also lose "the insurance that there would be an autonomous, outspoken, and critical group of citizens eager to remind the rest of us of the current fads and follies of the day" (7). He was asking me to reconsider my motivations for farming, to re-envision the character and traits of the American family farmer. Suddenly I had to confront Hanson's ideas. My goal could no longer be just about farming; it had to include reconsidering, and possibly gaining a new understanding of, the American farmer.

As my reading in agrarian literature has broadened, however, I've come to realize that the very bold, blunt tone that initially put me off from Hanson is in fact one of the qualities that makes him so vital to the conversation. In the middle of her excellent analysis of Wendell Berry's body of work, literary scholar Kimberly K. Smith observes that Hanson's work in fact reflects a darker ongoing tradition of agrarian literature in America, one that echoes the work of "Hamlin Garland's bleak stories of the middle border, O.E. Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (recounting the misfortunes and hardships of Norwegian homesteaders in Dakota), and Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*" (16). Smith's analysis of Hanson's writing is accurate, and is validated by the ancient literary foundation he draws on for much of his writing about farming. While several authors and

scholars interpret farming and agrarian literature through Virgil's *Georgics*, Hanson believes a georgic interpretation is too soft or too romantic. To gain a clearer understanding of the contemporary American agrarian, Hanson turns to an earlier work, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, which provides "a more melancholy, more angry account of the necessary pain and sacrifice needed to survive on the land" (*Fields* x).

Hesiod's *Works and Days* is a didactic poem (presumed to be written in about 700 BCE), centered around the author's instruction given to his brother Perses who, having squandered his wealth, returns to the farm bequeathed to them both. It has been described as a sort of farmer's almanac or shepherd's calendar. Hesiod's central lesson to Perses is that work is the common lot of humankind, but that if achieved with good effort good things will come.

James A. Montmarquet, author of *The Idea of Agrarianism*, calls Hesiod's poem "a most curious epic as it is so highly personal" (64). First it can be read as a "diatribe, a prolonged argument that the poet's brother, Perses...should shun the way of evil and injustice." In this light, Hesiod invokes the "universal value and necessity of work." As work alone will not make a successful yeoman, the epic poem also spends considerable time providing practical advice for the farmer. Hesiod writes of rising, "Straight from your bed, without troubling to dress, plow, sow, and nude / harvest" (36). He acknowledges the reality of endless work: "Do not postpone your work till tomorrow and after tomorrow; / Men who are idle at work don't fill up their barns with abundance, / Nor do men who procrastinate. Industry benefits labor. / Someone who puts off labor will evermore wrestle with ruin" (37). Hesiod compares the farmer's struggle with the elements to another occupation: "Pass by the blacksmith's forge with its cozy and

comfortable clubroom." He writes about the consequences of constant, grueling physical labor for the yeoman farmer: "Stricken with poverty, scratching a swollen foot with a hand that is / skinny" (40).

Hanson's choice of Hesiod's *Works and Days* as an ancient symbol for the lot of the contemporary farmer reveals Hanson's philosophy about the reality of the farmer's life. As Hanson interprets *Works and Days*: "Hesiod's poem of agriculture is not merely a didactic treatise on agricultural technique, nor, like Virgil's, a paean to farming, but a case study in the agrarian profile, and hence an alternative paradigm of values of society itself" (x). In Hanson's view, this poetic case study reveals the brutal nature of the farmer's life. As he explains further, "Hesiod's soil is not kind, but unforgiving, and so must be mastered if it is not to master the farmer." We need this alternative paradigm, especially today Hanson insists, to the romantic and naïve, "one-dimensional agrarian genre that grew out of the *Georgics*."

In the introduction to his translation of *Works and Days*, Daryl Hine points out that "one can assume" that as a "part-time farmer and a part-time poet…[Hesiod] actually followed the plow" (6). Hesiod's real experience as a part-time farmer helps explain Hanson's emphasis on Hesiod and his disdain for the romantic and nostalgic qualities of Virgil's *Georgics*. Hesiod could adequately speak about the reality of the farmer's life. So too can Hanson, who spent his youth and many of his adult years contributing his labor to the family farm. This evaluation of a life of farm work (or at least part-time labor) also highlights a dramatic contrast between Berry and Hanson. While it is certainly true that Berry spends some time actually following the plow (in his case an antique plow pulled by work horses), Hanson does farm work with the added pressure of keeping the

family farm financially viable. Richard White's comment above about "literary farmers" suggests an important credibility to Hanson's writing. Hanson is no literary farmer. Rather, he has used literature to convey the lessons he has learned from the years he spent making a living from farming. And this helps explain why his perception of agrarianism is significantly different from Berry's.

In *The Land Was Everything*, perhaps his most literary (and least known) text, Hanson borrows his format and directive from one of America's earliest pieces of literature, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*. Published in 1782, Crèvecoeur's text consists of a series of letters written by an experienced agrarian "about the farmer's lessons to those who do not farm" (*The Land* 2). Hanson appears to have a sincere affinity for Crèvecoeur, not only for the content of his text—he attempts to discover "the relationship between the cultivated landscape of America and the nature of its citizenry"—but also for working under the "paradox of an ex-farmer writing about what he will not or cannot any longer do" (5). Two hundred years after the publication of Crèvecoeur's text, Hanson unabashedly sets out to "update and conclude his thesis" (6).

Hanson's thesis in this text reflects his main contention in all of his publications with agrarian themes: "[T]he decline of family farming in our own generation is symptomatic of the demise of [Crèvecoeur's] notion of what an American was" (6). Hanson's agrarian texts have an end-of-times overtone. The end to family farming is coming, if not already here, he says. Therefore, "just as [Crèvecoeur] held that the formation of freeholding yeomen created the American republican spirit," Hanson here seems to be taking on the role of doomsayer. The disappearance of the American family

farmer, he suggests in another text, will result in the degeneration of our society: "[Farmers'] complete absence from the American landscape will be the great legacy of the present generation...It is my simple contention...that the entire cargo of our current unhappiness—materialism, crime, spiritual emptiness—is in inverse proportion to the number of people who are both rural and agrarian" (*Fields* xvii).

Throughout his agrarian writing, Hanson is much more concerned with agriculture's influence on American culture than with the details of food production. His dominant message is that the family farmer is crucial for a healthy democracy. This does not, however, mean that the farmer is a democracy's most polished citizen. By losing the American family farmer we "are not always losing better people," he writes, "but simply different people" (*Fields* xii). And those different people often provide "the critical counter voice to a material and uniform culture…[say] no to popular tastes, no to the culture of the suburb, no to the urban enclave, no to the gated estate" (xii).

How does Hanson define the American family farmer? And why is the family farmer so important to society and democracy? "Farmers see things as others do not," Hanson contends (*The Land* 1). For one thing, farmers gain an understanding through constant struggle with the elements as they seek to make a living from the land. This kind of lifestyle—one hanging on the balance of a single hailstorm, a frost, drought, excessive rain—gives farmers a "radically different—often tragic—view of human nature itself" (1). In Hanson's interpretation of Crèvecoeur's America, the farmer not only provides the literal balance between wilderness and urban, but also provides a balance culturally: "To Crèvecoeur the dichotomy of the effete intellectual and the brutish thug...is solved by the emergence of the independent American farmer" (6). The American farmer represents a

balanced, middle perspective both physically and culturally. The farmer, as Hanson describes, “both conquers and lives with nature...practices both a solitary and a communal existence...is and is not one with the government at large” (9).

Despite his focus on the citizenship of the American farmer, Hanson does not completely ignore the farmer’s interaction with the land. What does he suggest farmers can teach us about humans’ relationship to nature? Hanson defines farming as, “the mean where man can cultivate the wild and neither destroy it nor be destroyed by it, the rare equilibrium between the work of the mind and labor of the back, the tough community where the autonomous and pragmatic create and then follow the law” (*The Land* 41). But Hanson certainly places emphasis on the human role in this equilibrium, as he describes agrarianism as, “an ideology in which the production of food and, above all, the actual people who own the land and do the farmwork, are held to be of supreme social importance” (*Other Greeks* 7).

In Hanson’s view the significance of commercialism, of production and profit, does not get overlooked. Despite this fact, however, he is careful to emphasize that “agrarianism in purely social terms is preferable to corporate agriculture” (*Other Greeks* 412). So what makes the agrarian preferable to the corporate farmer? He explains, “Agrarians’ great strength has always been their autonomy, their distrust of materialism, and the chauvinism of those with both feet on ancestral ground” (*The Land* 45). In Hanson’s view, the survival of the agrarian in this country is not just about preserving a particular form of agriculture conducted on a sustainable scale by families; it is also about maintaining a unique class of Americans, that “autonomous, outspoken, and critical

group of citizens eager to remind the rest of us of the current fads and follies of the day" (7).

Considering that Hanson's tone about the future of farming can be viewed as quite cynical, I've often wondered what motivates him to write so much about farming? Is this a case of I told you so*: You should have listened to me while there was a chance; Now you'll see the consequences*? Or is Hanson employing some form of reverse psychology, presenting his audience with the unavoidable and dire circumstances, hoping another generation will take up the cause?

In so many instances, Hanson's work has the tone of a jeremiad. When he isn't foretelling the brutal consequences of the disappearance of the family farmer to American culture, he is lamenting what's already been lost. "Family farming," he writes, "ancient and deemed inefficient, is gone" (11). And so, "[w]ith the loss of this country's agrarian...profile also goes a tradition of using agrarian life to critique contemporary culture" (18).

And yet, if one reads Hanson close enough, there are hints of hope. In an excellent concluding scene to *The Land was Everything*, Hanson describes standing "by the irrigation standpipe" at night where he makes "a vow to the memory of farmers past...that for the rest of my life I shall pass on something of the wisdom that they taught" (258). Indeed, in another of Hanson's agrarian texts, *Fields Without Dreams*, Hanson tells the story of his farming family and the other farming families he grew up around, most of whom are all now gone. Hanson's single-minded dedication to pass on wisdom to a society he sees as mostly without agrarians suggests he believes in a hope for the future.

I can't help but wonder how Hanson feels about the surge of interest in sustainable farming during the past decade. He gives credit to those "good souls [who] still bravely resist," the ones who have created farming communities, who have backyard homesteads, and tiny urban organic gardens. However, despite their best efforts, "something will bother us about many of them," Hanson writes. "We will in secret confess that they are a bit scholastic" (16). But what will be missing, exactly? What will be lost when these scholastic agrarians "are without the challenge and disaster of the past"? It's a reasonable question. While the efforts of scholastic agrarians are noble pursuits, they will not produce the kind of agrarian who contributes to American society the unique "bothersome, queer oddball" farmer who has provided "the critical counter voice to a material and uniform culture" for centuries (*Fields* xii). Indeed, too many of those who pursue the "alternate agriculture of the organic gardener and suburban homesteader" include those "whose daily survival and capital are really found elsewhere" (*The Land* 16).

But despite the cynicism, Hanson writes on. He teaches us how to understand the American farmer. He warns us what we'll miss when the American farmer is truly finally gone. But maybe, somehow, with Hanson's missives, his hope will find bounty through a new generation of American agrarians. Whatever they might look like.

Chapter Five

Agrarianism and Consumers:

Agriculture, Literary Journalism, and America's Foodie Guru

By the time I left Hawaii I had read a hefty portion of both Wendell Berry and Victor Davis Hanson and concluded that each of these two authors represents the perfect voice for each side of a needed conversation about the future of farming in America. (I also, of course, continued to have a conversation with myself about my prospects for becoming a self-sufficient farmer in the twenty-first century.) Berry and Hanson, I became convinced, are two farmer-authors who write from direct experience while providing divergent perspectives about the current state of agrarian affairs and the potential for the future of small-scale farming.

Soon thereafter I discovered another "perfect voice" in the conversation while living in the desert and working at the University of Nevada, Reno. In 2006, one year after completing my master's degree in Environmental Literature and beginning to teach for the English department as a faculty instructor, I began walking past Michael Pollan's book *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, prominently displayed in the university bookstore, nearly every day. At the time I'd only heard of Pollan in passing, although considering my recently-attained graduate degree in environmental literature, it seems perfectly plausible I would have discovered his writing earlier because he'd emerged as one of the most important voices in the field of environmental studies (in particular the subcategory where nature and humans converge).

In 1991, Pollan published his first major book, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, where, in a series of essays about gardening, he reconsiders humans'

relationship to nature (for gardeners and environmentalists alike). Pollan contends that his garden led him to question his "proper place in nature" and the "troubled borders between nature and culture" (1). In 2001, Pollan published *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-eye View of the World*, where he uses the mutually beneficial relationship of the honey bee and flower as a metaphor to evaluate the relationship between humans and the natural world. This premise, in many ways, has become a ground-breaking perspective for considering the choices humans make (based on desires) and how humans impact nature through those choices. Just as we utilize nature to fill our own needs, Pollan wonders whether it's possible nature is benefiting from humans by evolving to meet the needs of humans. Who is domesticating whom? he asks.

Despite the success of these two books (The American Horticultural Society chose *Second Nature* as one of the seventy-five greatest books ever written about gardening; *The Botany of Desire*, which became the subject of a PBS documentary in 2009, was a *New York Times* bestseller and received the Borders Original Voices Award for nonfiction), I had never read any of Pollan's writing when I overheard a conversation between two fellow graduate students about an earnest journalist who purchased his own feedlot steer in order to examine Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) and followed the steer through its lifecycle for his article "Power Steer," published in *The New York Times Magazine* in 2002.

As I listened in, I found myself sneering at the idea. Aw, c'mon. You're calling this journalist's move earnest? Inventive? Single-minded? Seriously, look at this wise guy. He buys a single steer from the feedlot and now he's an expert. Sounds crazy to me. Just who is this guy?

Even so, I couldn't get Pollan's book out of my mind. Each time I walked into the bookstore at UNR I glanced over the cover of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. I kept hearing people talk about this book and how innovative it seemed to them. During the intervening weeks I finally convinced myself I needed to read this book. But still I wondered: What does this urban-dwelling journalist have to tell me about agriculture?

Looking back I'm not sure why I responded so skeptically, other than the fact that at the time this journalistic maneuver felt somewhat audacious and cheeky. Was it just for show? How much can a journalist with no farming background really learn from buying a feedlot steer? I certainly felt no affinity for feedlots or any need to defend their practices. I do know I'd fallen into a terribly short-sighted habit of checking whether a text was written by a farmer, former farmer, or child of a farmer before considering reading a book. I'd come to perceive agrarianism as a subject only relevant to farmers. When I read the scholar William Major's contention that agrarianism requires a lifestyle approach "of integrating the agrarian experience into our everyday lives," I took that to mean no individual living away from a farm had anything to teach me about agrarianism (65). Certainly the typical life of the average American, I presumed, seems far removed from the agrarian lifestyle.

Reading Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* helped me gain insight into the crucial role of food as the intermediary between two increasingly disparate worlds, one inhabited by farmers and producers and the other by non-farmers and consumers. As professor of theology Norman Wirzba suggests: "Food is the most direct link we have between culture and nature, city and farm folk. It can serve as the point of interest that unites urbanites with farming concerns" (15). In Wirzba's comment I hear echoes of

Wendell Berry's statement, "Eating is an agricultural act," which, if true, suggests that each of us, every day, participates in our country's agricultural system ("Pleasures of Eating" 145). In many ways agriculture evokes a reciprocal relationship between farmer and consumer, one that revolves around the dinner plate. While few Americans actually grow and produce food directly, all of us can be agrarians in the kitchen and around the dinner table.

But food is only one facet of an agrarian lifestyle. As Wirzba contends, agrarianism is "a comprehensive worldview that holds together in a synoptic vision the health of land *and* culture" (5). This broadly imagined vision for agrarianism is reflected in the writings of Berry and Pollan, both of whom acknowledge the limitations of, as Wirzba puts it, "environmental approaches that sequester wilderness and portray the human presence as invariably destructive or evil." Instead, Wirzba continues, agrarianism "grows out of the sustained, practical, intimate engagement between the power and creativity of both nature and humans." Eric T. Freyfogle, scholar and author of multiple works on conservation, agrarianism, and land-use, suggests that a contemporary understanding of agrarianism should begin with "the land itself and how it is conceived": "Humans are special members of [a] living community...not onlookers from afar" (xviii). A contemporary agrarian lifestyle, as envisioned by Freyfogle (who calls it New Agrarianism) and Wirzba, is possible for those who don't live on a farm. But when human interaction with nature is limited, as is more often the case with modern lifestyles, it requires a greater self awareness and knowledge about how food plays a role in our relationship with nature (and the farmer) in order to engage in an agrarian lifestyle every day.

Pollan, it turns out, experienced his own kind of disconnect with nature, one he describes in *Second Nature* and in an interview, before reading Berry's statement about the role of eating in agriculture. As he shares in a recent interview, Pollan credits this declaration—taken from Berry's essay "The Pleasures of Eating"—for helping him form "a template for much of [his] work" (Fassler). In the context of reevaluating his own position about nature, farming, and food, Pollan describes the particular force of Berry's contention that "eating is an agricultural act": "It's a line that urges you to connect the dots between two realms—the farm, and the plate—that can seem very far apart." Pollan explains that "all [his] writing about food has been about connecting dots in the way Berry asks us."

As Pollan shares in the same interview, his introduction to Berry's writing "came in the garden," while Pollan was "trying, with great difficulty, to grow some food" at his family's former home in Connecticut. Drawing on the self-deprecating humor that helps make his writing so approachable, Pollan explains that this garden "was no pastoral fantasy: Weeds thrived and woodchucks attacked, ruining my crop and driving me to homicidal rages." Pollan felt confronted by a moral dilemma, one he first describes in his introduction to *Second Nature*. Here he was, trying to work with nature to grow a small portion of food for himself and his family, and some of nature's pests kept getting in the way. He asked himself: "How do you deal with pests without chemicals? Are there ways to do a jujitsu move on pests without carpet-bombing them?" (Fassler). He felt compelled to "look for another set of ethics to govern how one might grow some food in nature." As he describes this experience in *Second Nature*: "Before I firebomb a woodchuck burrow, I like to have a bit of theory under my belt" (3).

The problem for Pollan was that intellectually he'd been raised on a strong diet of iconic American nature writers from the "wonderful tradition of quasi-religious American writing about nature"—authors like Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Melville, and Muir—and none of them prepared him for his "war in the garden" (Fassler). Pollan describes a land-ethic based on nature as pristine or only wild as "well-intended" but eventually misguided since it "serves to disconnect us from the land—because it draws a hard line between people and the natural world." As an example, Pollan mentions Thoreau's chapter from *Walden* titled "The Bean-field" (a chapter Pollan describes as "amazing"), where Thoreau describes being "tortured by the fact that he's 'at war,' as Pollan reads it, with the weeds." Pollan explains that Thoreau's "romance of wild nature left him feeling guilty about discriminating against weeds...and he couldn't see why he was any more entitled to the harvest of his garden than the resident woodchucks and birds" (*Second Nature* 4). Thoreau decides to walk away from his bean field and, as Pollan puts it, declares "he would prefer the most dismal swamp to any garden." Pollan can't accept Thoreau's eventual decision to walk away from his garden, "because he can't reconcile the practical reality of trying to grow his food in nature with these radically egalitarian beliefs about the so-called 'wild' species" (Fassler).

As the Thoreau example demonstrates, drawing a hard line between humans and the natural world results in unhealthy consequences. As Pollan explains, "Nature's on one side of the fence; then, on the other side, there's us. This tends to mean we leave nature alone, or else drive for total mastery—and that's a very dangerous drive" (Fassler). While Pollan's reference to a number of iconic American authors with varying perspectives is certainly undeveloped, his point is that the development of early American literature left

no room for the gardener to interact with nature: "Everybody wrote about how to *be* in nature, what sorts of perceptions to have, but nobody about how to *act* there" (*Second Nature* 3). This limited, bifurcated view of nature (and its effect on his own relationship with nature) didn't work for Pollan. And this is when he began exploring Wendell Berry's ideas in detail.

From Berry's writings Pollan learned that "farmers," and gardeners like himself, "by necessity, must take a less utopian view of nature" (Fassler). Pollan summarizes Berry's position on the human relationship to nature through agriculture this way: "Berry says you have a legitimate quarrel with nature when it comes to weeds and pests. He's willing to intervene in a way that most American nature writers are not. Berry's argument for active, humane stewardship of land struck me as a value system I could use." This value system stands in stark contrast to the "set of values" Pollan learned from Thoreau "in the library."

For Pollan, becoming aware that "we're part of a food system, and [that] we need to think about our eating with this fact—and its implications—in mind," led to an eventual change in career path (Fassler). After working as an editor at *Harper's*, Pollan became determined to find success as a writer and now he had found a subject for exploration. "I kind of hit on the garden by mistake," he says. And writing about this subject began when Pollan began "engaging with my own agricultural struggle on a small scale": "I learned a way of thinking and living that I didn't know before. I wanted to write more and more about the agricultural and political realities I am joined to by my eating."

Pollan's writing about food and agriculture began with an assortment of articles for *The New York Times Magazine* (including "Power Steer"), many of them about the meat industry and genetically modified crops. His early efforts opened his eyes to industrial practices he'd never imagined as an "Easterner" who'd spent his life where "farms...are tiny and still kinda cute" (Fassler). He describes looking over a massive feedlot and "seeing a landscape that very few people in America have seen" and walking through a 35,000-acre potato farm where "regular showers of pesticide [are] so toxic that the farmer didn't enter his fields."

For Pollan this introduction to industrial farming practices proved to be just the beginning of a successful and influential career writing about humans, food, and culture. With each successive book, Pollan explores topics in an attempt to close the intellectual gap between the farm and the dinner plate. One of Pollan's distinctive traits as a writer is beginning his intellectual explorations by bluntly asking apparently simple, yet deceptively complex, questions. Pollan begins his expedition from farm to plate, documented in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, by asking just such a question in the first line of the book: "What should we have for dinner?" (1). Such questions prove successful because they are straightforward (on the surface they appear even overly basic), and readers have likely asked themselves similar questions. Even if we've never thought to find answers to these questions the way Pollan does, they are questions about which we actually want greater insight.

The Omnivore's Dilemma is a carefully-researched inquiry into the American food system. With that one question (a question that each of us asks ourselves every day)—what should we have for dinner?—Pollan examines everything we know, thought

we knew, or didn't know, about how we eat food in this country. I believe it's the obvious universality of this question, among other things, that has made the book so successful. (The book was named one of the ten best books of the year in 2006 by *The New York Times* Book Review and won the James Beard Award.) While on the surface the answer seems to require only a brief perusal of the contents of one's refrigerator and kitchen cupboards, Pollan uncovers a complexity to our food system that goes beyond what most of us have ever imagined. His exploration of our food system from farm to plate proves to be quite an odyssey in the twenty-first century. He demonstrates how our omnivore status as humans greatly influences our eating habits. And Pollan's strategy of actively engaging in the experience of finding an answer to such an apparently basic question, by making himself a character in his own narrative, allows the reader to join him for the intellectual ride.

In his quest to peel away the layers of what eventually proves to be an extremely complex question, Pollan divides the book into three parts, based on what he considers to be the "principal human food chains" (7): Industrial, Pastoral, and Personal. While examining the industrial food chain, Pollan travels to George Naylor's corn farm in Greene County, Iowa and demonstrates through extensive research how prevalent corn is in the American diet. In order to explore a lesser-known facet of the American food system, the pastoral section of the book documents Pollan's week-long stay with iconic "grass farmer" Joel Salatin, whose Polyface Farm in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley is an attempt to create a sustainable, productive farm based completely on grass. And finally, Pollan returns home to Berkeley, California to determine how personal a relationship one can develop with their food, during which time Pollan is compelled to learn how to hunt

and scavenge nearby his home with the help of Angelo, a fifty-eight-year-old Sicilian expert in local, seasonal foods.

Each of Pollan's journeys concludes with a meal that provides one type of answer to his original question—what should we have for dinner?—and that provides fascinating insight into the state of agriculture and food in our country. During his examination of each of these three food chains, Pollan helps his readers and fellow omnivores begin to piece together a visual image of the origins of their food.

Perhaps the most memorable images from Pollan's section on the industrial food chain are not from one particular farm or of one particular farmer, but a plant: corn (which he helps us to completely re-imagine). While this section of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* does include a visit to an industrial-scale corn farm, it's the scientific information about corn that proves most influential. We learn about "corn's conquest" in today's food system and in the diets of the average American (15). Corn is grown on 125,000 square miles in this country each year. Out of approximately 45,000 products in today's typical supermarket, over 25% of them contain some form of corn (65, 19). We learn how, thanks to corn's "unusual sexual arrangements, so amenable to human intervention," corn has adapted to many different environments, most significantly "industrial consumer capitalism" (30). In order to become an industrial-scale plant, corn has had to adapt in a variety of ways, including growing much closer together than in the past (30,000 plants per acre), becoming tolerant to chemical pesticides and herbicides, and becoming "a form of intellectual property," "something never before seen in the plant world." Corn is the model plant for modern industrial agriculture.

We also learn how, thanks to government subsidies, "the typical Iowa farmer is selling corn for a dollar less than it costs him to grow it" (53). And yet, more corn is grown in this country than ever before. As a result we have, as Pollan puts it, "a plague of cheap corn" (47). And thanks to so much cheap corn, Americans have become "processed corn, walking" (23). This is not the delicious and fresh sweet corn we associate with late summer picnics and backyard barbeques. This is commodity corn, sold and purchased on the stock market. Corn that becomes feed for livestock, ingredients for processed food, and high-fructose corn syrup, that wonderful and ubiquitous manufactured sweetener that replaced cane sugar back in the 1980s.

Thanks to so much basic information from the industrial section of Pollan's book about corn sex and corn farming, Pollan's readers began thinking twice about their grocery store choices. In particular, high-fructose corn syrup became almost a profanity. Incessant articles and blog postings appeared about the negative effects and consequences of the consumption of so much high-fructose corn syrup. In response, the Corn Refiners Association released a series of television advertisements to promote the benefits of high-fructose corn syrup. Corn, and processed corn, means big money. And for those industries that rely on cheap, government-subsidized corn, calling the benefits of corn into question was not taken lightly.

But despite any impact Pollan's industrial section may have had on the average consumer's perception of corn and products containing processed corn, it can be difficult to avoid such products. When Pollan takes his wife and son through the McDonald's drive-thru to celebrate his exploration of the industrial food chain, they are enjoying the benefits of corn with every bite. Their fast food meal is made possible by the corn feed

for chickens and steers, the corn oil for cooking French fries, and the high-fructose corn syrup for sweetening their sodas. Corn has shaped the contemporary diet in so many ways and, thanks to Pollan, consumers can be so much more aware of corn's role in their own diets.

During his second research project—detailed in "Pastoral: Grass"—Pollan immerses himself into an entirely new trend in local and sustainable foods when he visits Joel Salatin, a self-described "grass farmer" from Virginia. Before Pollan included Salatin in his book, Salatin was mostly known to supporters of local food and proponents of grass farming. But through Pollan's characterization, Salatin comes to life for a much wider group of people. In Pollan's description, Salatin (who refers to himself as a "Christian-conservative-libertarian-environmentalist-lunatic farmer") becomes a farmer minister who gives his sermons via an annual missive, "a long, feisty, single-spaced letter that could convince even a fast-food junkie that buying a pastured broiler from Polyface Farm qualifies as an act of social, environmental, nutritional, and political redemption" (241). Salatin's description of himself suggests he is extremely self-aware of the persona he adopts for writing these letters. He seems to view himself as a visionary, a farmer leading out toward a revolution in how food is raised in this country. Even in Salatin's farming attire, his "broad blue suspenders and...floppy hat," Pollan can see commentary: "It declared a political and aesthetic stance, one descended from Virgil through Jefferson with a detour through the sixties counterculture" (125).

Two winters ago I flew home to southern Oregon to join my family at the Medford Armory where Salatin was being featured as a speaker. I watched him wander the floor prior to his speech, where local farmers were displaying their locally grown and

produced products. Salatin was quiet. If you didn't recognize him as the featured speaker you'd see him as a reserved attendee in his slacks and sports coat, large glasses, and plaid tie. But put him on a stage and ask him to talk about farming in America, and instantly you had another person completely. If Pollan's minister metaphor is correct, then Salatin certainly has a flair for the dramatic, particularly for fiery condemnation of the adversary. Salatin seemed to be looking for new parishioners, the ones he refers to in his annual letters as "the non-Barcode people," or those who are willing to drive long distances and pay high prices for whole chickens raised and harvested at Polyface Farms (241).

Salatin drew most of his comments from his latest book, *Folks, This Ain't Normal: A Farmer's Advice for Happier Hens, Healthier People, and a Better World*. (Salatin has authored a considerable number of books—most of them self-published—that find a place on the shelf somewhere between self-help and practical agrarian philosophy.) Salatin knows how to work a crowd. This crowd consisted of an assortment of current small farmers, wannabe small farmers, and supporters of small farmers. He knows how to talk to a group like this. At times they were rolling from laughter. At other times he had them moving towards the edge of their seats, ready to stand and raise their fists in the air against the adversary, corporate farming and the government. Without question, Salatin is entertaining. His speaking persona comes across as intelligent and passionate, but also practical and realistic. While listening I began imagining what a summer working as an intern for him at Polyface Farms might be like. I know I'd like the work. When I read about Polyface Farms in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* I viewed my discovery of such a farm as a revelation. Look at this kind of farming people are doing, I thought, some kind of throwback to the kind of farming Frank and Jenile did, but updated

for a niche group of consumers looking for a certain kind of food. But could I listen to speeches every day from the rambling and evangelical agrarian? Pollan seems to find Salatin's rhetoric entertaining and insightful to his philosophical approach to farming. But the physical labor, that was something Pollan might not have been prepared for.

After his first day at Polyface Farms Pollan records in his journal: "The longest day of the year" (123). During his first day Pollan spends "the afternoon making hay...and throwing fifty-pound bales onto a hay wagon." This is no fly-on-the-wall research. Pollan makes himself a one-week intern for Salatin. He explains how he learned the hard way that hay is "sharp enough to draw blood and dusty enough to thicken the lungs. I was covered in chaff, my forearms tattooed red with its pinpricks."

After several days at Polyface Farms and enjoying "considerable beauty...following a food chain in which the sun fed the grass, the grass the cattle, the cattle the chickens, and the chickens us," Pollan accepts that there is one more "unavoidable link in the chain" he'll need to experience (226). Pollan joins Salatin and his son Daniel, and two farm interns, for a slaughter day. After waking at 5:30 AM and helping to catch the chickens, Pollan takes his place at one of the stations in the outdoor processing facility which, as Pollan puts it, "resembles a sort of outdoor kitchen on a concrete slab, protected from (some of) the elements by a sheet-metal roof perched on locust posts" (229). Pollan spends the first part of the morning removing chickens from the crates and placing them head first into killing cones that prevent the chickens from thrashing around while their throats are cut. Pollan acknowledges the difficulty of watching the process. But after several rounds of moving chickens from the crates to the

cones, Salatin's son Daniel hands Pollan the knife. Determined to participate in every facet of the process, Pollan helps kill about a dozen chickens.

Perhaps the most significant part of Pollan's experience at Polyface Farms comes while sitting at the dinner table with Salatin, his wife Teresa and daughter Rachel, and the two farming interns after another full day of work. Pollan describes the meal as "probably the all-time most logical meal I'd ever eaten" (203). Everything on the dinner table had been grown and raised on the farm. As Pollan says, "We were eating almost completely off the grid." This meal, as Pollan sees it, represents more than just a sustainable, autonomous effort by the Salatins to feed their family:

> The farm and the family comprised a remarkably self-contained world, in the way I imagined all American farm life once did. But the agrarian self-sufficiency that Thomas Jefferson celebrated used to be a matter of course and a product of necessity; nowadays that sort of independence constitutes a politics and economics and way of life both deliberate and hard-won—an achievement. (204)

This pastoral meal, taking place within sight of the pastures and outdoor chicken processing facility, represented a purposeful choice for this farming family. In an age where an industrialized food system provides greater ease and choice, the Salatins have found a much less convenient method for providing food for themselves. This is a significant point, because an increasing number of Americans are also giving up ease and convenience in order to obtain food with alternative qualities: local, fresh, sustainable.

After leaving Salatin's farm Pollan prepares a second meal based on the pastoral section of the book, combining whole chickens he helped harvest at Polyface Farms with

an assortment of vegetables purchased from an organic grocery store. In examining the pastoral food chain, Pollan finds it necessary to analyze the experience of shopping at organic grocery stores like Whole Foods. He describes shopping at these stores as literary experiences because the "evocative prose" found on the packaging at these stores "as much as anything else...makes this food really special" (134). This is "Supermarket Pastoral," he writes, and includes prose like "certified organic," "humanely raised," and "free range." It includes descriptions for the origins of a steer whose steaks you might purchase: "[A] steer that spent its days 'living in beautiful places' ranging from 'plant-diverse, high-mountain meadows to thick aspen groves and miles of sagebrush-filled flats.'" Pollan conducts a useful discussion on the organic food industry and how it has evolved from its pre-government certification days (details I will not delve into here). But it is worth noting that between the two pastoral meals Pollan enjoys—first on the Salatin farm and next prepared by himself for friends in Charlottesville—one includes foods that require a venture into the Supermarket Pastoral beneath fluorescent lights, and the other takes place within walking distance of each ingredient's source.

During the third section of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, titled "Personal: The Forest," Pollan shows his willingness to take on another task he'd never tried: hunting. To help him hunt and forage in the hills of northern California, Pollan introduces his readers to Angelo Garro, a fifty-eight-year-old Sicilian. Angelo is a fascinating character. Pollan's efforts to find wild mushrooms and shoot a feral pig would likely have been doomed to failure without the accompaniment of Angelo, who he describes as: "my own personal foraging Virgil, a fellow not only skilled in the arts of hunting and gathering

(and butchering), but also well versed in the flora, fauna, and fungi of Northern California" (282).

Thanks to the uncommon knowledge and sincere passion of Angelo for "re-creating the calendar of life in Sicily, a calendar that is strictly organized around seasonal food," Pollan gains the ability to recognize edible mushrooms and shoot a feral pig (283-4). He goes from having no confidence with a hunting rifle to not only understanding the passion of many for hunting, but in a completely unironic passage also describes experiencing a sense of the thrill and intensity of hunting with lines like this: "Walking with a loaded rifle in an unfamiliar forest bristling with the signs of your prey is thrilling" (334); "Everything is amplified. Even my skin is alert, so that when the shadow launched by the sudden ascent of a turkey vulture passes overhead I swear I can feel the temperature momentarily fall. I am the alert man" (335). In the same passage Pollan also describes how walking through a landscape while hunting completely changes the way a person interacts with that landscape under other circumstances: "Hunting powerfully inflects a place. The ordinary prose of the ground, the literally down-to-earth, becomes as layered and springy as verse" (335); "The drama of the hunt links the actors in it, predator and prey, long before they actually meet. Approaching his prey, the hunter instinctively becomes more like the animal, straining to make himself less visible, less audible, more exquisitely alert" (336).

For Pollan, hunting requires overcoming no small amount of anxiety and self doubt. Not only does it necessitate participating in something he's never tried before, but it also includes engaging in an activity with significant cultural implications. Included in those cultural implications is the debate about eating meat, a discussion he walks himself

through during the "Personal" section of the book, in a chapter titled "The Ethics of Eating Animals" (the most concise and thorough summary and evaluation of the debate I've ever encountered).

In the book's final chapter, "The Perfect Meal," Pollan acknowledges that "the meal was a conceit—an ambitious, possibly foolhardy, and, I hoped, edible conceit" (392). In no way is Pollan suggesting that a meal made from hunted and foraged foods could be a realistic solution or alternative to an industrial food system. "[L]ittle if anything about this meal," he writes, "was what anyone would call 'realistic.' And yet no meal I've ever prepared or eaten has been more real."

What made the meal so real? Based on a short list of rules he prepared for himself before his adventure, everything in the meal has been hunted, foraged, or grown by Pollan. He even finds a way to harvest salt from "salt ponds at the bottom of San Francisco Bay," although the salt's final quality is debatable (393). Pollan prepares the meal himself. And nothing from the meal is purchased. Pollan's perfect meal proves an enjoyable celebration of food and life with some of his closest friends. While the conceit is unrealistic, one that requires an impressive investment of time and energy, the experience allows him the opportunity to eat an uncommonly rewarding meal, his description of which suggests what he meant by referring to the meal as so "real." At least for that one evening, he knows a "few unremarkable things: What it is we're eating. Where it came from. How it found its way to our table. And what, in a true accounting, it really cost" (411). Most importantly, I believe the lesson he learns (and the lesson he would pass on to his readers) is that meals like this remind us that "we eat by the grace of

nature, not industry, and what we're eating is never anything more or less than the body of the world" (411).

But what about those of us who've never had the time, courage, or ingenuity to pursue just such a perfect meal? While teaching *The Omnivore's Dilemma* to several different groups of students, I've witnessed Pollan's ability to encourage greater thought from his readers while they imagine how they would answer that daily question for themselves: what should we have for dinner? Apparently the answer to this question is not just a choice between take out or eating in, pizza or burgers, frozen dinner or made from scratch. After reading *The Omnivore's Dilemma* most of my students express appreciation for a new, expanded understanding of the food we eat and our relationship to nature through the choices we make for dinner. But many of these students, after gaining so much insight into the path our food takes before arriving on our plates, have also expressed frustration, even dismay, about what to do next. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* provides so much knowledge about our food system, including many of its foibles, but what do we do now? What changes, if any, should we make in our daily food choices?

Since the publication of the *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan has evolved into a food guru of sorts. His ability to walk us backwards from the plate to the farm, and to provide new meaning and clarity for our diets, has given him credibility in the eyes of many. In 2008, two years after publishing *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan published *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, where he attempts to provide further direction to so many readers who became much more aware of their own eater's dilemma as omnivores. *In Defense of Food* reads like a response to readers who, after becoming convinced of their own omnivore's dilemma and the inadequacy of our modern food

system, don't know exactly what to eat, what to do next. The question he seems to be responding to seems like that of his readers: So what exactly should I eat? Pollan's answer is fairly basic and feels somewhat old-fashioned: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants" (1).

Pollan didn't seem to relish the title of food guru when he first began writing about food. He carefully points out in the introduction to *In Defense of Food*: "[I]t does seem to me a symptom of our present confusion about food that people would feel the need to consult a journalist, or for that matter a nutritionist or doctor or government food pyramid, on so basic a question about the conduct of our everyday lives as humans" (2). And in many ways, Pollan's effort in this book feels devoted to making his readers rely less on journalists, doctors, and nutritionists, and more on their own common sense. Most of the suggestions found in his chapter "Eat Food: Food Defined" can be described as basic common sense: "Don't eat anything your great grandmother wouldn't recognize as food," "avoid food products containing ingredients that are a) unfamiliar, b) unpronounceable, c) more than five in number, or that include d) high-fructose corn syrup," "avoid food products that make health claims," "shop the peripheries of the supermarket and stay out of the middle," and "get out of the supermarket whenever possible" (148-157). Perhaps the most basic piece of advice in the book—simply to "Eat food"—is an effort toward helping readers redefine food or to differentiate fresh and unprocessed foods from the thousands of supermarket products that, while completely edible, are only food-like after factory processing and the addition of long lists of chemical additives and artificial flavors.

With each succeeding book Pollan seems more comfortable in his role as food expert for the post-industrial eater. In 2010, Pollan followed his manifesto for eaters with a handbook for omnivores, *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*. This book is laid out as a series of rules for eating, one rule on each page along with a brief explanation. The rules are written to be clear, concise, and almost folksy, representing the wit Pollan has become known for. Case in point: "Don't ingest foods made in places where everyone is required to wear a surgical cap" and "Don't eat breakfast cereals that change the color of the milk" (41, 79). But the rules include more than snarky do-nots. Pollan also urges his readers to "Eat well-grown food from healthy soil" and "Spend as much time enjoying the meal as it took to prepare it" (67, 113). *Food Rules* is designed to serve as a quick and easy guide to answering that question Pollan spent so much time attempting to answer in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. These two books—*In Defense of Food* and *Food Rules*—which followed Pollan's groundbreaking success have continued to help shape him into something of a food expert for omnivores aimlessly wandering the aisles of supermarkets in the age of industrial food. These works imply that Pollan is not only capable of asking insightful questions, but that he also knows what we should do once we begin seeking new answers.

The New York Times Magazine published an article where Pollan simply answers readers' questions about food choices. Most of the questions reflect hesitation or uncertainty about food (omnivore's dilemma indeed): "Where should we direct our money to get the most benefit? Organic produce? Meats? Dairy?"; "What are the pros and cons of a vegan diet?"; "How much soy is too much? Can I eat tofu and drink soymilk every day?"; "What is the single best food we all should be eating every day?"

Whatever efforts Pollan has made to keep his readers from relying on journalists (like himself), doctors, or nutritionists in order to be healthy and happy eaters (his stated purpose from *In Defense of Food*), Pollan is now most definitely perceived as a food expert or food guru, answering readers' questions about how to eat, one specific question at a time. In another format, *The New York Times* brought Pollan together with journalist Michael Moss (*New York Times* journalist and author of *Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us*) for a tour of a typical supermarket where, on video, the two of them help viewers while "Navigating the Aisles." The language they use during their tour makes the supermarket feel like a foreign landscape, one we've never fully seen for what it truly represents.

In 2013 Pollan published *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*, a book I consider to finally be an adequate follow up to *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. I say this because after asking, What should we have for dinner*?*, and then providing food consultation with a manifesto and manual, Pollan finally suggests a way for his readers to find their own answers to their food questions by taking them into the most likely place—their kitchens. Even if on the surface spending an entire book in Michael Pollan's kitchen sounds less than riveting, as he's proven himself capable of doing Pollan works to demonstrate that the simplest of questions, and the most mundane of activities, can come with complexity and significance we don't often take the time to recognize.

As Pollan has proven himself apt to do, he begins this book with a seemingly basic question: "Why cook?" (1). On the surface his question doesn't seem complicated enough to hold a reader's interest (or Pollan's exploration) for an entire book. But as Pollan points out, we are cooking less and less in this country. Despite trends in local

food and an increase in those who would call themselves "foodies," Americans don't seem to be spending more time in their kitchens. A 2011 study conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (composed of thirty-four nations) found that Americans spend less time per day preparing their food than any of the other nations (Barlow).

Pollan's answers to this question, "Why Cook?," are personal (so he could spend more time with this family in doing something that will "improve our health and general well-being"), political (could cooking possibly be the answer to that question he is often asked?: "[W]hat is the most important thing an ordinary person can do to help reform the American food system, to make it healthier and more sustainable?"), and even philosophical ("How, in our everyday lives, can we acquire a deeper understanding of the natural world and our species' peculiar role in it?) (1-2).

Why cook? Pollan's *Cooked* contends that our effort to cook in the kitchen can help us understand ourselves, nature, and our relationship to nature. After spending so much time considering our role as consumers, as omnivores, in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, in *Cooked* Pollan asks us to explore the transformation our food makes after we bring it home but before the food makes its way to our plates. In his own exploration of food's transformation, Pollan provides a healthy balance of intellect and direct experience. *Cooked* is divided into four sections—fire, water, air, earth—chosen because each represents one of the "key transformations we call cooking—grilling with fire, cooking with liquid, baking bread, and fermenting all sorts of things" (11-12). Readers follow Pollan to North Carolina to learn the art of real barbeque from southern pit masters (fire), stay in his own kitchen for lessons in the slow-cooked methods of stewing

and braising from a local chef while learning a "recipe in seven steps" (water), join Pollan as he learns how to make his own sour-dough culture and master baking bread (air), and experiment with Pollan in the variety of ways different cultures have come to ferment (earth).

Pollan's personal narrative describing his study of the human transformation of food proves refreshing. Without his personal narrative it would become easy, I believe, to let *Cooked* become too much of an intellectual experience about food. Pollan describes his diverse and experimental culinary exploration with intensive (almost exhausting) detail. Learning about bread leaven and fermentation in microscopic detail proves insightful to a degree, but goes beyond anything I ever thought necessary to learn. Thankfully, for Pollan the value of the experience comes from the "deeper kind of learning that can only be had by doing the work yourself, acquainting all your senses with the ins and outs and how-tos and wherefores of an intricate making...a first-person, physical kind of knowledge that is the precise opposite of abstract or academic" (407). In order to keep *Cooked* from becoming too academic and in order to help prevent his readers' experiences from becoming merely second-hand, Pollan includes an appendix of recipes. He encourages his readers to make cooking their own first-hand encounters with food—"[t]o make it yourself once in a while"—because by doing so "[t]he world becomes literally more wonderful (and wonderfully more literal)" (408).

As implied above, Michael Pollan's writing is heavily journalistic and, through the inclusion of personal narrative, in many ways participatory. Pollan regularly fields questions from interviewers about the format and genre of his writing. Is Pollan's writing

merely journalism? Or can Pollan's writing also be called literary? In one of his replies to this query, Pollan's response feels quite utilitarian:

> Well, look, it's journalism because it's reported and it's contemporary and a lot of it appears in newspapers. But I just think writing is writing. And I use many tools when I write. I use some tools of the journalist. But I use tools of the historian; I use tools of the literary critic. When I walk through Whole Foods in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, I use the tools of the literary critic and then I start using the tools of the investigative journalist and I use all the tools of the literary writers as well. (Demory)

Pollan acknowledges how gratifying it feels that *The Botany of Desire* has been read widely in books clubs, which often limit themselves to works of fiction. "I don't see these really hard distinctions between fiction and nonfiction," Pollan confesses. "That's a dangerous thing for a journalist to say," he continues, "but as reading experiences, it's all storytelling, and nonfiction has the additional virtue of being true" (Demory). If Pollan's writing can be viewed as literary nonfiction, and I believe it can, then it's worth considering some of the qualities of the genre and its current status in order to gain more insight into Pollan's writing.

In recent decades creative nonfiction has gained considerable ground on the three traditional genres of literary writing: poetry, fiction, and drama. Lee Gutkind, who is the founder of the literary journal *Creative Nonfiction* and viewed by many as the foremost authority on creative nonfiction (James Wolcott maligned Gutkind as "the Godfather behind creative nonfiction" in a *Vanity Fair* article before Gutkind adopted the appellation as praise), contends that the biggest publishers are seeking manuscripts of

creative nonfiction before fiction and poetry (*You Can't* 4). "Creative nonfiction," he writes, "has become the most popular genre in the literary and publishing communities" (9). About ten years ago, an article from *The New York Times* described this trend in magazines. In 2005, *The Atlantic Monthly* stated it would cease publishing regular fiction, and the editor of *The Paris Review* explained his intentions for featuring more nonfiction. At the time of the *Times* article, *GQ* hadn't published fiction for two years and *Esquire* had significantly shrunk its inclusion of fictional pieces (Donadio).

But while creative nonfiction's visibility in publishing has recently superseded fiction, the attention given to creative nonfiction in academia has taken considerably longer to gain momentum. Creative writing programs are now offering entire specialties devoted to various forms of nonfiction. But at times literary scholars continue to be reticent to offer the same status to creative nonfiction as they give to the traditional genres. In particular, many are skeptical of literary journalism. While the personal essay and memoir have considerable literary and historical precedent (such as the essays of Michel de Montaigne or *The Confessions* of St. Augustine), literary journalism is a much newer form of creative nonfiction and has often been neglected in scholarly studies. This scholarly neglect is a common theme in the inaugural issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* from 2009, as well as acknowledging the publishing success of literary journalism during the past recent decades, promoting the future of literary journalism, and analyzing the reasons literary journalism is a crucial element in the future of literary studies (Hartsock 5).

Gutkind calls literary journalism the "public side" of creative nonfiction (61). He explains the difference between personal and public nonfiction like this:

> [T]he memoir is *your* particular story, nobody else's. It's personal. You own it. In contrast, the public side of creative nonfiction is mostly somebody else's story; anybody, potentially, owns it, anybody who wants to go to the time and trouble to write about it. Or, conversely, it could be your story in that you have a theory or an idea or a larger point to make about the world. A bigger and more universal idea. (61)

The benefit of this form for writers like Pollan, "when authors write about something other than themselves"—something Gutkind also calls "big idea stories"—is that it allows them to reach a wider audience (62). Because memoirs are so personal, Gutkind suggests, they "have a limited audience." Considering so much recent commentary on the commercial popularity of memoirs, this may seem like a strange statement. I believe Gutkind was speaking in the context of individual texts. While memoirs, as an entire subgenre, have proved extremely successful commercially, the potential audience for individual memoirs may have a limited text based on topic. But works of literary journalism, because they often pursue topics with interest to a more general public, are often able to reach a larger audience. Consider *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, where Pollan pursues understanding to questions and issues relatable to every human being: the origins of food for consumption.

Gutkind's observation about the potential readership for literary journalism certainly holds true for Pollan, who has certainly gained an extensive audience. Four of his books have become national best-sellers. In 2010 Pollan was named to *Time* magazine's annual list of the world's most influential people. Prominent chef and author Alice Waters explains how, "when he speaks live, [I've] seen thousands grip their seats

as they realize what our food system has become and how badly we need to fix it." As Walters describes it, Pollan has received "rock-star status," and in the process has helped the conversation of "our bodies, farms and food" become a national movement.

But while "public" nonfiction gives writers access to larger audiences, Gutkind also contends that "big issue books" (even if they "entertain, surprise, and inform you") "won't move you in the way a short story or a poem or a memoir may" (57). However, writers of nonfiction about big issues also have the ability to take a general topic and make it their own, to personalize the subject until it seems more than just a public issue. "The ideal creative nonfiction piece," Gutkind contends, "is one where the pendulum stops somewhere around the middle—a public subject with an intimate and personal spin…a 'universal chord'" (62).

One aspect of Pollan's books that makes them so appealing and engaging, and that enables him to establish this "universal chord," is his ability to create an approachable narrator with an obviously personal and invested interest in the subject. Pollan portrays himself as a sort of everyman, just like one of us, who is seeking answers to questions important to everyone around him. His narrative is clever and witty. And in the process of seeking answers to his questions Pollan maintains an attitude of open-mindedness and self deprecation. For Pollan, narrative identity has a peculiar ability to combine a warm, self-effacing demeanor with an impressive intellect. In the process, he becomes relatable and more than just a narrator. He also becomes the main character, one with a peculiar passion for food and agriculture, who walks his readers through his own process of discovery. He asks questions that seem obvious enough to make us feel surprised we never thought to ask them ourselves. And then he demonstrates that finding

answers to these questions is much more complicated than we imagined, while completely relevant to our daily lives. He describes this part of his writing process this way:

> In everything I write you will see me beginning as something of an idiot in the first couple paragraphs, because I like to write about things I don't know the answer to and it's true, it's somewhat coy cause sometimes by the time you sit down to write you do know the answers but you have to recreate that state of not knowing...that's your questions not your answers and then rehearse the process of your education." ("Botany of Desire")

While Pollan's books reveal his intellect and ability to pursue information on a subject from a diverse number of angles, he finds a way to make his readers feel like they are seeking answers to his questions at the very same time. Pollan has a unique ability to make his readers feel like peers. By not speaking down to them from some position of higher intellect, he avoids pretension and seems completely approachable.

In crafting his narrative persona Pollan obtains a successful balance between public nonfiction and memoir. Pollan describes his approach in *The Botany of Desire* as a "writer, an essayist, someone who follows a thread of his curiosity, and combines what he's reading with whom he's talking to, with what he's feeling" (Philippon and Nichols 89). As he explains further elsewhere: "The most interesting nonfiction layers many different lenses. I don't think the scientists have the last word, I don't think the journalists have the last word, I don't think the academics have the last word, I don't even think the poets have the last word" (Demory).

Pollan uses the technique of "immersion," a technique that, as Gutkind explains, "allows [writers] to own" a public story, "to make it their story" (71). Pollan's willingness to completely immerse himself into new landscapes, new lifestyles, and new philosophies helps earn him the respect and the trust of the reader. He goes into these places with no experience and a palpable energy to discover insights into the American food system that might help him answer his original questions.

Once a writer like Pollan gains his readers' confidence and convinces them that by completely immersing themselves into a topic they can trust his narrative of the experience, they become avid, trusting listeners. As Gutkind continues, "A faithful immersion will ultimately lead to intimacy, and the deeper writers immerse themselves, the more targeted, all encompassing, and intimate the immersion will become" (71). (Gutkind lists Thoreau's two-year stay at Walden Pond as an early example of a writer's immersion, an ironically appropriate example considering Pollan's comments regarding Thoreau's role in his development as a thinker and writer.)

Pollan explains further how the technique of "immersion" gives literary journalism value beyond traditional methods of journalism. When a journalistic writer describes his or her motivation "out of some personal quest to answer the question or solve a dilemma," it does two things. First, it helps to gain a reader's trust and second, by providing a sense of motivation for "the narrative, [it] creat[es] a certain amount of suspense—'how is it going to turn out?'—and indicat[es] that there was a character here, a human who had questions and preconceptions and prejudices" (Philippon and Nichols 92). Instead of a journalist feigning objectivity, this form of literary writing allows "the consciousness of the writer" to engage "with the story and the characters he meets in the

place he is" (Philippon and Nichols 93). "You construct a first person in this kind of nonfiction," Pollan says, "and as those words suggest, it's a created thing" (Philippon and Nichols 94). This might seem contrary to any form of traditional journalism but, as he explains, "That's not to say that it isn't truthful…we all have so many different first persons we can draw on…We have all these identities, and we simply choose the ones that are relevant to that story."

Establishing Pollan as a creative writer is one thing, but how does a professor of journalism and prolific author known for his particular passions for food and gardening achieve status as an agrarian? Pollan is not a farmer. He makes only occasional visits to farms as a journalist and researcher. I've never come across any examples where Pollan directly refers to himself as an agrarian. But when he describes his purpose to an interviewer, he suggests that his "set of ultimate questions have to do with man's relationship to the natural world" (Philippon and Nichols 89). This theme is never more clear than in Pollan's work *The Botany of Desire* where Pollan asks, essentially, Who's in charge in nature? After doing some reflecting in the garden about why he makes certain choices about what to plant, he began to view garden plants as "subjects, acting on me, getting me to do things for them they couldn't do for themselves." Pollan extrapolates his newly gained perspective of the natural world as a whole: "What would happen if we looked at the world beyond the garden this way, regarded our place in nature from the same upside-down perspective?" (xv, xv-xvi).

I believe these are questions for an agrarian. While Pollan describes one of the purposes of *The Botany of Desire* as exploring "the complex reciprocal relationship

between the human and natural world," he is also describing the perspective an agrarian should seek for understanding his or her relationship to nature (xvi). More specifically, Pollan explains that by asking his readers to reconsider plants and their relationship with them, he hopes they will also gain a new understanding of themselves:

> Seeing these plants...as willing partners in an intimate and reciprocal relationship with us means looking at ourselves a little differently, too: as the objects of other species' designs and desires, as one of the newer bees in Darwin's garden—ingenious, sometimes reckless, and remarkably unselfconscious. (xxv)

As stated earlier, Pollan's work has been significantly influenced by Wendell Berry, whom many consider to be agrarianism's most prominent voice. Pollan describes Berry as a "constant source of inspiration," particularly for his "prose and the way he constructs his arguments" (Philippon and Nichols 90). Pollan also acknowledges their obvious differences, such as the fact that Berry is more intensely rooted in the tradition of the American jeremiad. In an article he titled "Wendell Berry's Wisdom," Pollan gives Berry much of the credit for getting the national conversation about food and agriculture started in the 1970s, a conversation that has blossomed since the publication of Pollan's books *The Botany of Desire* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*.

While Pollan gives Berry credit for establishing the fact that "we are all implicated in farming"—consider again Berry's contention that "eating is an agricultural act"— it's Pollan who, more than any other contemporary writer, demonstrates to the average American just how what we put on our plate connects us to agriculture. And Berry publicly affirms Pollan's influence and the importance of what Pollan has

accomplished through his writing. In a recent on-stage event held in Louisville where Berry conducted an interview of Pollan,, Berry began by giving Pollan credit for so much recent growth in the public's interest in agriculture and food issues: "I got into this [interview]...out of gratitude for you because...you've articulated the connection between us and our land far better than I ever could and in greater detail...You've really followed it through and I say that with an immense sense of relief."

I've spent some time trying to decipher Berry's comment here. Berry's words drew extensive laughter from the audience. But he certainly meant what he said. Wendell Berry said he could not accomplish what Michael Pollan has achieved. My hunch is that Berry's comment refers to the kind of hands-on research and writing that Pollan's form of literary journalism requires. Listening to Berry interview Pollan gives one the feeling that significant respect is shared between the two writers. Clearly their paths have crossed many times as they each seek to accomplish similar goals for the American food system. But the work produced by these two writers is vastly different. It's more natural to give Berry the label of literary author (as he's written so extensively in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction), and his literary explorations of humans and place give Berry an obvious position in the history of American literature.

Pollan's writing is inspired by Berry and enters into a conversation about how all humans, through their relationship with food, can be agrarians. Berry helped Pollan get over his "Thoreau problem," "providing [him] a sturdy bridge over the deep American divide between nature and culture" ("Wendell Berry's Wisdom"). Pollan believes Berry "marked out a path that led us back into nature, no longer as spectators but as full-fledged participants." And for most of us, this participation is through food. We are all "farming

by proxy," as Berry describes it, every time we make a choice about what to eat (qtd. in Pollan "Wendell Berry's Wisdom"). This national conversation about food and agriculture is really about agrarianism.

One necessary quality for the agrarian is self-awareness—the need for individuals to recognize their role in a relationship with nature. As Pollan argues in his epilogue to *The Botany of Desire*, practitioners of agriculture, those "figures of the margins, moving between the realms of the wild and the cultivated," "have been actors in a coevolutionary drama, a dance of human and plant desire that has left neither the plants nor the people taking part in it unchanged" (242, 243). Accepting this, agrarians are those who recognize and accept the absence of complete control. Agrarians accept the "dialectical process," the "give-and-take between human desire and the universe of all plant possibility" (244). The agrarian accepts the "necessity of wildness and the value of multiplicity over monoculture." Michael Pollan helps a larger and broader audience "imagine a very different kind of story about Man and Nature, one that shrinks the distance between the two" (245). This is a story we all play a part in, whether farmer or consumer.

Currently I'm a consumer. But what kind of agrarian am I? Pollan's works have begun to impel me toward a greater sense of self-awareness, particularly in regards to what I eat. His ideas about the industrial food system leave me finding fault with my choices. Far too often I settle for the fare of fast food restaurants and service stations. Pollan's narrative description of his own experiences discovering our food system leaves me wanting to emulate a farmer like Joel Salatin, to establish my own grass farm and become a pioneer farmer for a new age of food in this country. Making comparisons from my own life to the "Industrial" and "Pastoral" sections seems obvious enough, based on

my current food choices and my desires for becoming a farmer. But what about the "Personal"? Would I have the knowledge, experience, ingenuity, or assistance to make a single meal from only products produced near my home? More important, would I be daring and determined enough to even try?

Chapter Six

Agriculture and the Dinner Plate:

Locavore Narratives

"Honey, I think I need to become a locavore."

I try to sound confident, but I'm certain my voice reveals my reservations to my wife Brianne. For starters, I'm not sure I even want to be a locavore. And second, I'm worried my wife will just roll her eyes and add this comment to her ever-growing list of my hare-brained ideas. But despite my efforts at surety, as soon as she turns toward me I can detect that facial expression—not quite confusion, not quite aggravation—she reserves for my not irregular declarations of agrarian exploration. Recent examples include: "By the way, I'll be working every Saturday this entire summer for a farmer in the upper valley, okay?"; "I'm going to be volunteering for a local CSA, weeding and harvesting produce"; "I need to drive up to Grandpa's farm and just walk around for a while."

Finally, she responds: "Huh? Loca-what?"

"You know, when you only eat food produced locally, within a predetermined number of miles from your home. Loca-local. Vore-eat."

I'm beginning to sound overtly pretentious. Brianne hates it when I talk like I know everything. Especially if I imply surprise or shock that she's not keeping up on current news or trends. After I read Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* I began to discover other texts about food consumption, written by locavores writing about what feels like their attempt to answer Pollan's question—What should we have for dinner? I

read dozens of articles and blogs by or about locavores, and about local food trends in general.

Now I'm starting to sound like I know everything about the subject. And even though I'm sure my tone is becoming unpalatable to Brianne, I keep going.

"'Locavore' was the New Oxford American Dictionary word of the year from 2007. Didn't you hear?" Oops. Bad move. This might cost me.

Expecting her to brush my comments off as just another one of my crazy ideas—or worse, to be irritated or made upset by my self-righteousness—I'm surprised when Brianne looks me in the eye and says simply, "Okay. That sounds fun. I really like a good challenge like that. When do we start?"

I'm so taken back by her eagerness to participate that I feel completely incapable of answering any of her follow-up questions. "So, why are we doing this? Why do you want to spend an entire month eating nothing but local food, forgoing any processed foods, tropical and warm-climate treats like pineapples and oranges, and luxuries like chocolate?" To be honest, I don't know. I find the activities of locavores intriguing. Their complete dedication and passion for something as mundane as daily meals is impressive. It makes me want to know more, at least if only out of curiosity. What makes someone so willing to give up all food items that don't originate within the general proximity of their home? But do I want to know more enough to actually try it myself? Am I just hitching a ride on the latest tidal wave of social food trends? In addition to my apparent ambivalence, perhaps my biggest misgiving is that I only want to become a locavore so I can cross it off some bucket list of popular culture fads. And certainly eating like a

locavore can be included under the umbrella of local food, which is beginning to look like one of many such trends.

Admittedly the unceasing regimen of obtaining our daily bread can become mundane in its perpetuity, but these days food has obtained celebrity status. Head chefs like Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsay are garnished with accolades normally reserved for rock stars, complete with their own TV programs, cult followings, and brand name kitchen sets. Organic food, once a social movement under the radar, has gone mainstream retail, marketed by the largest retailers, including Walmart and Costco. Technorati.com (a blog search engine) noted in May of 2012 that 16,588 food blogs existed. Once a snobbish group of quirky gourmet self-indulgers, foodies have expanded via TV and digital media (consider the Food Network, *Iron Chef America*, and *Top Chef*) to become mainstream food fanatics on all fronts, including amateur foodies in the form of blogs, celebrity chefs on cooking shows and in specialized cookbooks, and even culinary tourism (which can be taken in person or enjoyed indirectly through programs like the Travel Channel's *No Reservations*). Just a few years ago, Pollan attributed the omnivore's dilemma, in part, to our country's lack of any recognizable food culture. Without any obvious comprehensive cultural dietary traditions, Americans have long resorted to fast food items like pizza, hamburgers, and an assortment of processed foods. But now the pendulum has clearly swung, and swung hard.

In addition to Americans' growing interest in food culturally, our country is experiencing a food revolution regarding the quality and safety of our food, the origins of our food, even the genetic makeup of our food. In 2012 the Organic Trade Association reported the previous year's total sales for the organic industry had reached $31.5 billion.

One facet of the heated debate surrounding GMO (genetically modified organisms) foods includes the call from consumers for requiring labeling for GMO products. In a USDA report from May 2010 it states that "direct-to-consumer marketing" reached $1.2 billion in sales in 2007, up from $551 million in 1997. The total number of farmers' markets across the United States grew to 5,274 in 2009, an increase of over 2,500 since 1998. The number of CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) increased to 1,144 in 2005; only 400 existed just four years earlier in 2001 (Martinez, et al).

Much of the interest by consumers for locally grown foods can be attributed to a small group of people who set out to determine how many months they could survive while eating only local foods. The locavore movement began in 2005 when four women from San Francisco selected August as the first month to challenge people from all over the Bay Area to eat only food grown within a 100-mile radius of their home during the entire month. Inspired by prominent environmentalist Gary Paul Nabhan's book *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Food*, where he documents his yearlong attempt to eat nothing but foods from in and around his home in Arizona, they launched the website locavores.com to promote their movement and to encourage others to make their own kitchens a site for activism. (While Nabhan makes no direct mention of Wendell Berry, his narrative and his eating experiment closely resemble the ideas and suggestions made by Berry in his essay, "The Pleasures of Eating," published over ten years earlier. Even without direct reference, Nabhan's subtitle clearly echoes the title of Berry's essay.) Locavores.com reads like a how-to guide for the non-believer. Why should I become a locavore? You should become a locavore because "our food now travels an average of 1,500 miles before ending up on our plates." Why should I become

a locavore? You should become a locavore because since "uncounted costs of this long-distance journey (air pollution and global warming, the ecological costs of large scale monoculture, the loss of family farms and local community dollars) are not paid at the checkout counter, many of us do not think about them at all." Why should I become a locavore? You should become a locavore because the "distance from which our food comes represents our separation from the knowledge of how and by whom what we consume is produced, processed, and transported…the quality of a food is derived…from how it is prepared and cared for all the way until it reaches our mouths."

Shortly after the first locavore challenge, approximately sixty bloggers joined the movement by establishing the group weblog Eat Local Challenge and in 2006 decided to raise the bar for the locavore challenge by choosing the month of May, one far less bounteous than August. Over 1,000 hopeful locavores took the challenge (Roosevelt). Today any self-professed year-round locavore can add his or her name to a list of thousands at locavores.com. Dozens of websites and blogs now exist in regions all over the country, dedicated to the challenge of a locavore diet based on the seasons and resources of each location. Even smart phone apps now exist to support individuals attempting to take the locavore challenge.

The locavore movement gained significant momentum with the critical and commercial success of Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* following its release in 2006. Pollan's book is not about eating a locavore diet; rather, it is a thorough examination of America's food system through Pollan's attempt to answer one basic question: "What should we have for dinner?" (1). One approach Pollan uses for understanding our food is to place emphasis on the origins of our food. In each of the

book's three sections (Industrial—Corn; Pastoral—Grass; Personal—The Forest) Pollan explores vastly different avenues for obtaining our sustenance, and at the end of each section he partakes of a meal obtained from each of the three classifications. His chapter, "The Perfect Meal," most closely resembles the efforts of locavores to eat food from within personally defined boundaries. In this chapter he outlines six guidelines for his meal, including that, "Everything on the menu must have been hunted, gathered, or grown by me" and that "I would cook the meal myself" (392). In many ways Pollan's perfect meal is like trying to be a locavore amped up on speed. But the structure and the purpose bear resemblance.

While *The Omnivore's Dilemma* does not use the word "locavore" or refer to the concept of a locavore challenge, the growth of the locavore movement has led to the release of a number of memoirs chronicling each author's year-long attempt to eat only local foods. I call these texts Locavore Memoirs.

The typical plotline of a Locavore Memoir is fairly uninventive. Frankly, each time another Locavore Memoir is released I am surprised. What began as an interesting literary phenomenon—one I felt confident would quickly run its course—has developed into its own mini subgenre. To date, the following locavore memoirs have been published: *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods*, by Gary Paul Nabhan (2002); *Plenty: Eating Locally on the 100-Mile Diet*, by Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon (2007); *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, by Barbara Kingsolver with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver (2007); *The Feast Nearby: How I lost my job, buried a marriage, and found my way by keeping chickens, foraging,*

preserving, bartering, and eating locally (all on forty dollars a week), by Robin Mather (2011). Famed environmental writer Bill McKibben also wrote what could be called a locavore short story, published as the chapter "The Year of Eating Locally" (even though his experiment focused only on the winter months) in his book *Deep Economy* (2007). More recently guides to eating as a locavore and locavore cookbooks have appeared, apparently determined to ease the experience for readers. One could also argue that locavore literature has been developing for decades—moved along by the likes of Wendell Berry and other farm and food activists—long before the word had even been coined. But the purpose here is to acknowledge the specific form and content of one category of writing about local foods. Early in each memoir, the author(s) reveal their motivation for taking on the experiment of locavore eating. Either as an individual or in union with their significant others, the hopeful locavore sits down to think through their requirements for eating as locavores. What will be our physical boundaries? 100 miles? 150 miles? Where will we obtain our food? Will we make any exceptions for ourselves? How much, if any, of our food will we attempt to grow for ourselves?

Almost without exception the locavore experiment lasts for a calendar year and the typical organization of the locavore memoir into chapters by months or seasons reads like a literary nod to the pastoral tradition. The rest of the memoir reads like some sort of unique quest narrative. While the narrated experience mostly takes place in the kitchen—along with frequent trips to local farms and markets—the locavore experiment proves to be a test of creativity, of determination, and cooperation. In the end, after a long year of eating according to extremely specific guidelines, locavore memoirists express a certain amount of relief. But more than anything, they describe a sense of conversion, or an

enlightened understanding of the possibilities for eating more connectedly in a contemporary system where we've become so disconnected with our food.

Is this why I explained to Brianne my "need" to become a locavore? Am I looking for a similar kind of conversion about food? A quick glance over the websites created by the founders of the locavore movement begin to sound like any other environmental activism. I should become a locavore to save the planet.

But would it be unwise to admit here that I feel greened out? That I struggle to meet the standards of some environmental mold? I try to be conscious about what I throw away (or don't throw away), what I drive, where I shop, and so on; now I have to think twice about the food I put on my plate? It's exhausting. And I'm constantly asking myself, is my small symbolic contribution going to really matter? Or, even worse, am I just keeping trying to keep up with the environmentalist Joneses?

In contrast, much of my original curiosity about locavores came from personal convictions about the role food and eating should play not only in our daily lives, but in the culture we share with those we hold dear, whether it be family, friends, or others. My parents raised me and my siblings to believe cooking is a community effort and that meals are something to be shared around the dinner table, without any distractions from TV, internet, or cell phones. Our dinner menus were typically rooted in family tradition and history, and my dad commonly welcomed guests to our dinner table by describing for them our family's typical menu, with a reference to his agrarian upbringing: "We eat 'farm food' here." This most preferred explanation for our meals, dominated by meat and potatoes, reflects his youth spent on a small farm in southeast Idaho where the family's diet came almost entirely from the farm. His father raised crops and milked cows, his

mother baked bread, and both parents raised the family's produce and meat. Extra food was traded for items like cheese and butter. Although he'd long moved away from the farm by the time my siblings and I were born (as I've noted earlier in this work we did not grow up on a farm), my father, with my mother, maintained an expansive produce garden that provided fresh fruit and vegetables for our daily summertime meals. Family activities during the harvest season included canning peaches and pears, processing strawberry and blackberry jam (made from berries we collected from wild patches growing along the banks of the creek running through our property), and pickling beets and cucumbers.

While I no longer live close enough to enjoy the benefits of my parent's "farm food" menu, I still like to consider myself a farm food consumer. (Considering today's trends in food, would it be inappropriate to call myself a "farm foodie"?) Even though current living circumstances as a graduate student rarely allow me to plant a garden, I've made a hobby of baking my grandma's bread to go with meals like roast beef or whole roasted chicken, complete with mashed potatoes and gravy. My favorite food choices remind me of the meals enjoyed around the family dinner table, especially the summer meals with boiled red potatoes and sautéed summer squash, picked and washed of soil just minutes before mealtime. My dad still calls it "farm food," but for me it's more like "family food."

Perhaps my attachment to this family food culture helps explain why I've often been so reticent to let activists and food writers tell me how to eat. I've already made up my mind about the ideal diet. And some day, when time and space allow, I'll grow an

expansive garden, raise an assortment of farm animals, and the family kitchen will become a cannery, creamery, and restaurant all in one.

But living, or eating, in the future seems too easy, like an excuse for today's lazy choices. Today I'm getting by as a typical food consumer, using fast food as a quick fix for lunch between teaching a class and attending a meeting. As a graduate student, time and money are short. Proximity, expense, and convenience make eating a daily decision of expedience and, thanks to the fast food row across the street from the English department, the only decision I make is which book from my mountain of research materials to carry with me.

Thus, despite any personal convictions about farm food or family food, I can also put Fast Food Junkie on my food C.V. I know all the arguments about fast food. Several years ago I responded so intensely to Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* that I incorporated it into several of my freshman writing courses. I watched Morgan Spurlock's health decline and body morph while he ate McDonald's menu items three times a day for an entire month for his documentary film *Supersize Me*. But something about the consistency of the fast food restaurant menu, composed from the same items made from the same ingredients in whichever city or state I find myself in, feels reassuring. Something about the anonymity of the food appeals to me. Every morning Sysco trucks deliver food to those restaurants in brown cardboard boxes, employees reheat precooked items or place them in deep-fat fryers, and I exchange payment for the food. It seems like a simple enough transaction. Origin of food? McDonald's. Taco Bell. Wherever. Beyond that? Don't know, don't care. What do I get? Convenience and consistency, expedience and efficiency. For me, the answer to Pollan's simple question—

What should we have for dinner?—is resolved and fulfilled in a grand total of fifteen minutes. No preparation. No clean up. No problem. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

But now that old coot Wendell Berry, that iconic figure for environmentalists, agrarians, sustainable farmers, and now devotees of the local food movement, begins echoing in my ear: "Eating is an agricultural act." Hard as I try, with each bite of burger, with each French fry, all I can hear is that line: "Eating is an agricultural act." The source for these words—Berry's essay "The Pleasures of Eating"—first appeared in 1989, the same year a group of eco-gastronomics devoted to countering fast food and fast living founded Slow Food in Europe (it would take eleven more years for Slow Food USA). Berry's argument is that each individual—whether producer or consumer—belongs to the "annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth" (145).

That first conversation with Brianne about a locavore experiment took place over a year ago. It's been much longer since I first read Wendell Berry's compact explanation of how food and farming are related. After declaring that "Eating is an agricultural act," Berry goes on to describe the qualities of the typical American eater: "They think of food as an agricultural product…but they do not think of themselves as participants in agriculture. They think of themselves as 'consumers.'" These many months I've reflected on the differences between being a passive consumer and a participant in agriculture. That's what I've wanted to do for well over a decade now—actively participate in agriculture—and Berry is telling me I can do that as an eater. And yet here we are, finally sitting down at the kitchen table to plan our official month of locavore eating. I've come

up with my own improvised How-to Guide for the Would-be Locavore, including multiple printouts from locavores.com, the "Getting Started Guide" from the 100-Mile Diet, the Locavore Memoirs *Plenty* by Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon (the founders of Canada's 100-Mile Diet movement), and Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (written with her husband Steven L. Hopp and daughter Camille Kingsolver).

I'm not sure why it's taken me so long to officially begin this experiment. In the interim since I first suggested the idea, Brianne has regularly asked me to be definitive about beginning, expressing increasing doubt about my sincerity through her word choice—"So, when do we start?"; "I'm ready for our locavore month when you are"; "So are we doing this or what?"—and each time I respond that I just want to make sure I pick the right month: "If we choose July, August, or September wouldn't that seem too easy? I want this to be a challenge. The real thing. But are we really prepared to be locavores for the first time during the months of December, January, or February, especially in Idaho?"

An experiment needs some ground rules: "Brianne, I guess we're supposed to start by talking through this locavore experiment." As with every other time I've tried to initiate a conversation to determine the form of our own experiment, however, it feels forced. Like I'm just mimicking the authors I've been reading. But in a strange way, it also feels like we're having a relationship talk: "We need to, you know, set some rules for ourselves."

Despite my resistance to simply repeating what I've read in Locavore Memoirs, I find myself instinctively turning to literary examples. "Okay, so this really famous writer Barbara Kingsolver gathers her husband and two daughters around the table to make a locavore's version of a grocery list. First they cross 'exotics' off their grocery list, only to

discover that, ‘All snack foods come from the land of Oz’: Cucumbers or carrots (not in April). Pre-washed salad greens (origin: California). Bananas and pineapples (Please. The ‘humvees of the food world’)” (33).

I explain to Brianne that things started to immediately look bleak for the Kingsolvers. And that’s when the family adjusted their approach. Instead of crossing food items from their list, they began outlining food they already knew could be found locally. Farmers they had met or knew about were raising pastured turkeys, chicken, beef, and pork, as well as fresh produce. So meat and produce came only from their home county. Fresh honey and eggs. No problem. And a local dairy would suffice.

Then they began acknowledging reasonable exceptions. With no substitute for local olives, they would make an exception for olive oil. Although a local mill could provide ground corn, wheat, and flour, the mill purchases its grains from other states. And, in addition to these few exceptions, each family member could have one indulgence. For Barbara, spices like turmeric, cinnamon, and cloves; Steven, coffee; Camille, dried fruit; Lily, hot chocolate.

Brianne’s eyes begin to reveal a stupefied appearance. I’ve been rambling off names of the Kingsolvers as if they were my own family. As if Brianne knows who I’m talking about. As if she has read the book with me. I hesitate for just a moment. I’ve been reading about locavores for months and months now. In memoirs. On blogs. Websites. Newspaper and magazine articles. Maybe I’m overwhelming her.

But without giving her a chance to say so, I just keep going. “And then there’s this young couple in British Columbia. They’re the ones who coined the term 100-Mile Diet. But that distance wasn’t arbitrary; it was based on the boundaries of their region.

They have the Fraser River, 'the most productive salmon river in the world,' to the west they have the Pacific Ocean, then some town called Pemberton, 'famous for its potatoes…'" (9).

"Whoa," Brianne says, finally stopping me. "Hold on for a second."

Intercepted mid-sentence, I realize I didn't want to stop talking because I don't really know what to say next.

"This is all fine and interesting," Brianne continues. "But what about us? Let's make a plan that works for *us*. Where's that map? Show me our boundaries again."

"Sure, sure," I say, almost nervously, as I dig the map out of my drawer and smooth the wrinkles out on the desktop. "Great idea."

"This map shows our locavore boundaries Brie," I point out. "Anything outside this line is off limits." I printed the map with the help of locavores.com. It includes a small circle drawn around the region of southeast Idaho and northern Utah with Pocatello, our home city, at the center. Every point on that circle is 100 miles from our home.

"Okay…what else," Brianne inquires.

"Well, that's it I guess. We just eat inside that circle," I reply lamely. You'd think I hadn't been reading about locavores or thinking about this for months, even years.

The awkward silence in the room suggests Brianne expects more substance.

"Well, then I guess we'll have a purging," I continue feebly. "That's what everyone else does. We'll go through our kitchen and throw away anything that originated outside this circle. Like a ritual. The official start of our experience." At least that's how the locavores do it in their books.

"That sounds like a dramatic event," Brianne says. She's right. Especially since our experiment is only for one month. Throwing out all our non-local food might be a bit rash. "But we're not even close to that yet," she adds. And so, as usual, Brianne intervenes and uses her strength for planning and details to get our experiment moving forward.

We agree that, like my literary examples, we should make some realistic exceptions for ourselves. The only wheat available locally comes from industrial farms. Rather than grind our own flour from that wheat, we'll buy sliced sandwich bread, baked daily by Harper's Homemade Bread, a small, locally-owned bakery located in the old warehouse district just a few blocks west of the university. While all of Harper's ingredients do not originate within our eating boundaries, its bread includes no preservatives. Even if the ingredients aren't local, the final product is produced locally, by a local business.

How about exceptions for distance? Buhl, Idaho, near Twin Falls, is located about thirty miles outside our boundary. But on the map it looks like it's almost touching. I can't stop looking at Buhl, because it's the location of CloverLeaf Creamery, a small dairy and creamery that sells its milk, butter, and ice cream all around the region. The milk is pasteurized but not homogenized, leaving a delicious layer of cream on top of the whole milk. It's bottled in vintage-style glass bottles and it's the best milk I've ever tasted. The only reason I don't already buy it consistently: its cost. A one-half gallon bottle of CloverLeaf Creamery whole milk costs $3.79, versus around $2.00 a gallon for whole milk at a typical supermarket. In addition, purchasing CloverLeaf Creamery milk requires putting down a $2.50 deposit for the glass container.

Beginning this experiment might be a great opportunity to visit the creamery in Buhl to show Brianne that the milk is worth the extra cost, and not just for the quality of the milk but for supporting the local family who runs the dairy and creamery based on a sustainable model. (Once again, I find myself following the model of the literary locavores, who regularly visit local farms looking for undiscovered products or to observe the quality of the farms' products up close.) While we've made a substantial list of fresh fruits and vegetables we'll be able to find at the farmers' market, I want to see CloverLeaf Creamery up close.

Bill Stoltzfus stands in front of his open-air barn, Idaho's brisk, dry winter wind passing through, surrounded by his herd of registered Holstein dairy cows. Before I can ask him about the ins and outs of operating a dairy, Stoltzfus begins introducing me. Not to the dairy industry, but to his cows. "That's Deborah. She's kind of a special little girl," he says, nodding in one cow's direction. His knowing eyes seem to fill with stories, as a parent's might do. I look closely, straining to distinguish Deborah from his eighty-one other dairy cows. Before I realize it, another cow has poked her neck through the feeding bars to sniff me out, her long, dexterous tongue stretching toward me. "That's Amber, by the way," Stoltzfus explains with a grin, pointing behind me. "She's a pet."

Stoltzfus is compact and energetic, constantly moving from one task to the next. But he seems most at ease among his cows. Born and raised on a small dairy in Pennsylvania, dairy farming is what he has known his whole life. "It's kind of been my hobby and business together," he explains. Stoltzfus prides himself on the care he provides his cows, demonstrating a motivation beyond dollars and cents. And it shows. While the typical dairy cow on a conventional dairy is culled after just three, four, or five

years (before being slaughtered for hamburger), his herd is full of eight, ten, and twelve year old cows.

As his herd makes its way to the milking shed, Stoltzfus points toward several cows at the rear, moving a bit slower. “This cow’s going on thirteen. I just lost her mother, a little over a year ago. She was eighteen.” Currently his oldest is seventeen. Some dairy farmers find the extra attention ridiculous, but Stoltzfus maintains twelve separate spaces for his older cows—complete with fresh straw and individual care—or for any with a sore foot or illness. During warm months all of his cows, young and old, are pastured, given constant access to fresh grass through his careful system of rotational grazing.

Stoltzfus and his family came west to south-central Idaho’s Magic Valley in 1992, just in time to witness the complete transformation of the local dairy industry. Beginning in the early nineties, the Magic Valley became enticing for California dairy farmers looking for cheaper land and looser environmental regulations for an industrial scale of dairy farming. Dairies milking between one and two thousand cows—some upwards of five to eight thousand—slowly began pushing out smaller dairies, many operated by families for multiple generations. With the influx of these massive industrial dairies, farmers often had two choices: “Get big or get out,” former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz’s 1970s mantra still echoing down the decades.

Bill Stoltzfus chose to do neither. Through the years, Stoltzfus continually maintained a smaller herd (between 60 and 90 cows) and balanced his milk sales with breeding and livestock sales. Then two years ago, when the owner of Smith’s Creamery—a seventy-year anchor on Buhl’s short main street—retired and offered to sell

the small plant, Stoltzfus went for it. “It’s been in the back of my mind since we were supplying Smith’s with milk,” he explains. He knew operating his own creamery would be a gamble. He was a dairy farmer. What did he know about processing milk? About marketing? About commercial sales?

“None of us knew what we were doing,” Stoltzfus admits with a chuckle. “We had no customers starting out.” He sold no more than half of the 2,000 pounds of milk bottled on the first day. But now, almost exactly two years to the day he began bottling his own milk, business is booming and Stoltzfus isn’t sure how he’s going to meet the growing demand. Local customers and independently-owned food stores from Boise to Sun Valley to Pocatello are “just chomping at the bit for products like this,” he says. So his new challenge is meeting customer demand while maintaining the qualities of a local product through sustainable methods: “We want to stay small, to market our own product, have that direct connection with the customer. There’s more and more people looking for the small, sustainable, simpler life, you know. On and on.”

The increased demand isn’t surprising. In an age of mega-farms, processed foods, and widespread food recalls, local and fresh products like those sold by Stoltzfus’s CloverLeaf Creamery seem special. For one thing, as he explains, his entire process is completely open to customers: “You can come and see how we do it, what we feed them. The whole operation—from growing the feed, to milking the cows, to processing the milk—is done within a six-mile radius of the creamery and the farm. It’s pretty transparent. I can’t hide too much of what I’m doing.” And while the creamery has recently added ice cream, butter, half-and-half, cream, and buttermilk to its list of products, it’s the rich, flavorful milk—bottled in those traditional glass containers—that

continues to bring them so much success. It's the milk that prompts daily comments from customers—such as, "I haven't tasted milk like that since I was a kid" or "My two year old daughter won't drink any other milk"—that for Stoltzfus feel so gratifying. "It's been a fun ride," he says with a gleam in his eye, looking back over his cows, each waiting a turn in the milk shed.

After our successful locavore planning session and an enjoyable visit to CloverLeaf Creamery, I'm beginning to feel encouraged about our one-month experiment. But I'm also worried that I'm making the process sound formulaic. Just because the locavores approach the challenge this way in their memoirs, that's how we'll do it too. For some reason it feels cheapened to simply follow their lead. But similarities between the experiences of locavore memoirists and our own experience up to this point shouldn't be too surprising I suppose, considering each memoir represents a separate attempt to achieve a similar goal: eat only local food for twelve months. The 100-Mile Diet website says becoming a locavore is simple. Locavores.com says it's easy. And with the "Getting Started Guide" from the 100-Mile Diet and the "Guidelines for Eating Well" provided by the Eat Local Challenge group weblog in hand, I'm starting to envision this experiment as some kind of puzzle, where all I have to do is place the pieces together in the correct order. I'm beginning to see the locavore movement as a game of numbers and a solution of lists and charts.

Recently I've also been rereading the locavore memoirs (*Place* and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*) from the same perspective. Each is organized in chapters dedicated to each of the twelve months. So, like reading a how-to list for locavores, I've begun to interpret each chapter as a how-to guide for a particular month and season. If it's

September then do this. February's a tough one, but if you're going to try it then here's what you need to do. In addition to *Plenty* and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, every other Locavore Memoir published to date utilizes the months (or seasons) for chapter (or section) divisions. This configuration is a natural fit for a memoir about a one-year experiment, but this division by months or seasons also reflects a long tradition of literary works with agrarian themes, including iconic works like Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* (1579) with its twelve poems titled after the twelve months. This seasonal structure is significant for the way it reinforces the Locavore Memoir's attempt to establish eating as an agricultural activity based on the seasons and climate of the local region.

In addition to similarities in organizational structure, each memoir begins by introducing the author's motives for conducting a local food experiment, followed by a formal creation of general ground rules. This approach is necessary, considering that each narrative documents an experiment that alters the patterns and rhythms of daily living for an entire year. We need to know the writer's motives and methods for such a lengthy undertaking. And, as much as the authors, readers need to formulate their own motivations for locavore eating if they are going to be able to undertake their own self-made eating experiment.

Perhaps because in addition to outlining what motivates their experiment the authors of the Locavore Memoirs also include a heavy dose of hands-on information in various forms, I also began to read the memoirs like guidebooks to eating locally. In fact, I believe the Locavore Memoir takes its basic form from the almanac tradition. And like the almanac form that emphasizes the "inclusion of useful information, especially for farmers," the Locavore Memoir is typically full of practical information for any reader

who decides to attempt his or her own eating experiment (*Handbook to Literature*). In *Plenty*, Smith and MacKinnon include recipes between each chapter for the benefit of readers trying to follow their example. The family effort led by Barbara Kingsolver in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* feels interactive. Each of Kingsolver's narrative chapters is followed by instructional mini-essays on food, food science, and food culture by Camille Kingsolver, including multiple recipes attuned to the seasons. Blended into most narrative chapters is a short, informative exposition by Kingsolver's husband Steven L. Hopp, where he sometimes waxes technical ("Hungry World" makes a statistical case for the efficiency of small-scale farming as opposed to industrial farming) and occasionally waxes pragmatic ("How to Impress your Wife, Using a Machine" promotes the health and cost benefits of using a bread machine). The end of the Kingsolver text provides a lengthy list of organizations and textual resources intended to aid the reader with his or her own locavore experiment, as well as provide increased knowledge on issues of food and agriculture in general.

These additions risk giving a work of contemporary creative nonfiction the feel of a reference book, or a didactic tone. However, while these memoirs may reflect the almanac tradition with the inclusion of helpful information, it's the personal and family experiences of living a local food experiment that distance them from the almanac tradition or a how-to manual. There are other literary influences that clearly shape the Locavore Memoir.

Thoreau the Locavore. Laying so much motivational groundwork for a personal experiment has echoes of Henry David Thoreau and his two-year experience at Walden Pond. While Thoreau never states a pre-determined length for his experiment living alone

in his one-room cabin, by combining two years of experiences into one literary year *Walden* reads with a clear sense of a beginning and end, motivated by his desire to "live deliberately." In the process he examines what he calls the "necessaries of life," which includes food (267). He says that "not till we have secured these" necessaries of life "are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life." But I would argue it's in this very process of obtaining life's necessaries that Thoreau leads his readers to find knowledge.

Before Thoreau finishes construction of his one-room cabin, he begins planting approximately two-and-a-half acres of beans, potatoes, corn, peas, and turnips. His small farming efforts are designed to "earn ten or twelve dollars by some earnest and agreeable method, in order to meet my unusual expenses" (308). Thoreau weighs his time, and what his time can accomplish, as greater than money. So, by his second year he plants only one-third acre, determined that if one would "live simply and eat only the crop which he raised, and raise no more than he ate," then more time could be devoted to other endeavors (310). And so Thoreau eventually lives off a simple and meager diet. This includes purslane, a plant commonly perceived as a weed. He claims to have "made a satisfactory dinner, satisfactory on several accounts" from purslane, by simply gathering if from his cornfield, and eating it "boiled and salted" (315). We must adapt ourselves to our local environment, Thoreau counsels. Indeed, we are "an animal who more than any other can adapt himself to all climates and circumstances" (317). By adapting to the resources found in the woods surrounding his cabin, Thoreau is able to "avoid all trade and barter" (318).

Scholar of American literature Gioia Woods uses Thoreau to demonstrate that a "yearning for a local food culture that celebrates vernacular American flavors has a long

tradition in our literature" (275). Woods suggests that in Thoreau's later, and lesser known, writing found in *Wild Fruits*, we find a Thoreau "who had moved from a lively interest in natural history to a deep, expert familiarity in his local flora and fauna borne of hours of close observation" (263). Woods goes on to describe Barbara Kingsolver as "literary progeny" of this later Thoreau, particularly in her Locavore Memoir *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, where she demonstrates her own experiences becoming intimately aware of and in tune with the beauties and flavors of her natural surroundings. Gioia's comparison of Kingsolver to Thoreau is a useful one, considering how Thoreau was so encouraged by food experiments in his time, including his description from *Walden* of a young man who "tried for a fortnight to live on hard, raw corn on the ear, using his teeth for all mortar" (319). As he continues, "The human race is interested in these experiments," and the growth of the locavore movement, demonstrated by the steady appearance of new websites and blogs devoted to the challenge online and Locavore Memoirs in print, demonstrates this is still the case.

Thoreau's motivations, as well as literary form, can be seen in Kingsolver's Locavore Memoir. Bradley P. Dean, the editor of *Wild Fruits*, explains, "After reading John Evelyn's *Kalendarium Hortense, or Garden's Almanack* (1664) in the spring of 1852, Thoreau occasionally referred to this large project as his 'Kalendar.' Apparently he intended to write a comprehensive history of the natural phenomena that took place in his hometown each year" (xi). And as Thoreau writes early in *Wild Fruits*, his determination was to learn about his local biosphere and to persuade his readers to recognize the value of their own local biosphere: "[T]he fruits of New England are mean and insignificant while those of foreign lands are noble and memorable. Our own, whatever they may be,

are far more important to us than others can be" (5). Accordingly, Kingsolver explains how becoming familiar with our local produce should not be an abstract affair, but a participatory experience, one where people will "crave orchards where their kids can climb onto the branches and steal apples" (271). As Woods puts it, "It is within the embrace of the apple tree, not in the viewing it, where one finds beauty" (276).

Each of these statements is reflective of a concept used to describe how food can be the basis for our interaction with the environment. "Foodshed" implies, like the term "watershed," that interacting with the environment through food can best be served by focusing on a bioregional framework. In "Coming in to the Foodshed," a compelling article published in *Agriculture and Human Values* (1996), the authors (Jack Kloppenburg, Jr., John Hendrickson, and G.W. Stevenson) suggest a disconnect between humans and the environment is created by the global food system that typical consumers rely on in this country. To counter this system, the authors indicate the potential for "self-reliant, locally or regionally based food systems comprised of diversified farms…to supply fresher, more nutritious foodstuffs to small-scale processors and consumers (34). Mirroring the watershed analogy, the authors state: "How better to grasp the shape and the unity of something as complex as a food system than to graphically imagine the flow of food into a particular place?" And finally, they sum up what they see as "the most attractive attribute of the idea…that it provides a bridge from thinking to doing, from theory to action." When the founders of locavores.com imposed a 100-mile boundary on their diets, this is precisely what they were doing, moving from thinking to doing, from theory to action. If attempted, our southeast Idaho locavore experiment will be our own,

shaped by the realities of this bioregion, unique in its own challenges and solutions, failures and successes. My task is to stand firmly in my own place, in my foodshed.

The truth is I can't begin to recreate the experiences described by Kingsolver and Smith and MacKinnon in their Locavore Memoirs. Unlike the Kingsolver clan, I don't live on a farm. Unlike Smith and MacKinnon, I won't have the bounties of the Pacific Ocean to draw from. I don't even have a garden. At the most, maybe I'll plant an herb garden and place it in the kitchen window. Our current situation—renting a small home with no space for a garden, chickens, or bees—will require our experiment to consider what a consumer experiences while attempting a locavore diet. The average consumer, like ourselves, must become a locavore by participating in the market and in the kitchen. But we won't be growing any of our own produce or raising any of our own animals.

Further, our motivations for engaging in a locavore experiment are likely to be different from those found in the memoirs, based on our own experiences, resources, and goals. Despite successfully establishing some broad guidelines and rules for ourselves—and perhaps even broader exceptions—I still feel personally hung up on motives. Apparently all Brianne needs is the motive of accomplishing a challenge. Do my motives go beyond simply trying to recreate, in some abridged form, the experience of the Kingsolvers and Smith and MacKinnon?

For Kingsolver and her family eating locally includes more than merely changing their eating habits. Their experiment really begins when they decide to pull up their Arizona desert roots and move back to the South, their place of origin. The echoes from Thoreau are obvious: "We had come to the farmland to eat deliberately" (23). The family had anticipated this return for years, in part for the opportunities it would afford to grow

their own food. They had also become increasingly concerned by what Kingsolver calls America's "three-ring food crisis," including poor health and obesity, a food system based on fossil fuels, and the struggle of farmers and rural communities to remain economically viable. And so, they finally decide to try something different.

For Smith and her partner MacKinnon, the decision to embark on a year-long local food experiment comes about more organically. It doesn't begin with a move to a family farm. They simply begin with "one beautiful meal and one ugly statistic" (1). The meal takes place at the couple's 80-year-old cabin in northern British Columbia where they frequently escape the urban bustle of Vancouver for the peace and beauty of nature. Without the convenience of a grocery store and with guests to feed, MacKinnon attempts to make use of his only resource: a three-week-old head of cabbage, its "outer layers…deep with rot." MacKinnon's brother David takes a mountain hike to the source of Fiddler Creek and reels in a fish, a Dolly Varden char. Friends Kirk and Chandra lead a search in the forest and bring back pounds of chanterelle, pine, and hedgehog mushrooms. MacKinnon brushes aside grass from an overgrown garden bed and digs up neglected potatoes and garlic. Smith cuts baby dandelions and her mother harvests apples and sour cherries from an ancient orchard. This all comes together to create a meal—cooked on a wood stove—that MacKinnon calls transcendent: "We knew, now, that out there in the falling darkness the river and the forest spoke a subtle language" (3). Shortly thereafter, back in their city apartment, MacKinnon sits reflecting on a statistic released by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, that food eaten by the average American each day travels between 1,500 to 3,000 miles from farm to plate. For MacKinnon the pressing question becomes about how to recreate this transcendent food

experience: “Was there some way to carry this meal into the rest of our lives?” (3). For both families, the motivation for a year-long experiment of eating local food is rooted in a desire to make change, a desire to find alternatives to the industrial food system most of us currently rely on.

Two weeks after our first conversation Brianne brings me back to the question of motives. And what she says catches me off guard. Just as I am starting to feel comfortable with the vagaries of my own motives, she briefly states something offhandedly that would become our statement of purpose.

“You know what sounds good to me about this experiment?” she asks rhetorically. “It’s the idea that we will become, through our food choices, more intimately attached to the physical place where we live. With our place’s soil. Its weather. And seasons. Our food makes us feel at home. Makes us feel human. And maybe this will help us finally understand where we’re from.”

Something about her comment strikes me as significant. And then it hits me. She doesn’t just mean we will gain an understanding of being from southeast Idaho. I’ve heard that concept before, from locavores on their blogs and in their memoirs. Other than my family’s “farm food” culture, is it possible I’ve been learning about another food culture for years without recognizing it?

As a practicing member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I live a law of health commonly known as the Word of Wisdom. It’s the doctrine responsible for the choice of Latter-day Saints to abstain from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea. And for most of my adult life this is how I’ve viewed it, as a list of avoidances, a “do-not” law of health. I doubt I’m alone in this perception of the teaching. In all the classrooms where

I received instruction on this law of health as an adolescent, the emphasis was always on what substances we should avoid taking into our bodies. (Certainly, the food culture in the Mountain West [source of the United States' most concentrated population of Latter-day Saints] is better known for green jello and beef than for its fresh grains, fruits, and vegetables. And I-15, the main corridor running North-South between Idaho and Utah, has no shortage of fast food restaurants.) But after Brianne's comments I began rereading through the scriptural source for the Word of Wisdom, recorded by Joseph Smith in 1832, and now found in Section 89 of the *Doctrine and Covenants* (a collection of revelations received by Joseph Smith and esteemed as modern scripture by Latter-day Saints).

More than just a list of do-nots, the passage includes subtle but straightforward direction about the human diet: it should be determined by the cycle of the seasons ("every herb in the season thereof, and every fruit in the season therof" and the flesh of beasts or birds should be used "only in times of winter"), it should be fresh and clean ("all wholesome herbs God hath ordained for the constitution, nature, and use of man"), it should be heavy in grain, fruit, and vegetables ("grain is…to be the staff of life"; all grain is good for the food of man; as also the fruit of the vine").

The passage also promises that by selecting a diet based on these guidelines, men and women "shall receive health in their navel and marrow to their bones…shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge…shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint." Without truly realizing it, I've subscribed to a law of health for my entire life that, if closely followed, would lead me away from processed foods and directly to local grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, and occasional meat, all in their proper season, the proper season of my local residence. And my benefit would not only be to help shrink

my carbon footprint or to improve my health. My food choices would give me knowledge.

A theme of spirituality is not uncongenial to the authors of Locavore Memoirs. In an interview, Kingsolver calls her family's year of local food a "deeply enjoyable conversion" (Questions about *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*). And thanks to the conversion, her family continues to organize meals based on "what's locally available, when it comes into season." One critic describes Kingsolver's style as, "a scriptural prose style, almost jeremiad, exhorting readers to change their attitudes and their lives" (Woods 265).

And now, with a motivation rooted in my own religious knowledge and in search of my own locavore conversion, I turn to Brianne with new resolution in my voice: "I'm finally ready now. Let's get started."

I'd been looking for a sign. Or a ritual. Something to say: It's official; I'm now trying to eat like a locavore. In the beginning I suggested we take a large black garbage bag and sort through every inch of the refrigerator and kitchen cupboards. If we could find any sign that the item originated outside our established boundaries, we would throw it out. And now that I've found my own motivation to begin, this garbage bag ritual has become an almost uncontrollable urge. We pre-determined that our experiment would only last for a month. But something in me needs some physical, visual demonstration that we are really in this thing, that we've held our breath and are ready to jump into the water. All in. But four weeks from now we might need many of these non-perishable items that would be disposed of: spices, flour, sugar, baking powder, yeast, soy sauce,

ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard. And so on. One garbage bag is beginning to look insufficient.

It's the first day of August, one year and four weeks since our initial conversation, and I wipe sweat from my brow while working to put dinner together. The first meal. If I can't pull this off, what will the next thirty days be like? But I'm not sweating from standing over a hot stove or from bending over a waste basin peeling potatoes or carrots. It's just past six o'clock and I'm not in the kitchen yet. I'm not even home.

While I couldn't talk Brianne into throwing out essentially every edible item in our kitchen, planning, purchasing, and preparing our first locavore meal is beginning to provide me a sense for the reality of what we've gotten ourselves into. At 3:00 PM this afternoon Brianne and I set out to shop like locavores. Today is Wednesday and it's the pick-up day for LadyBird Farms, source of a local CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) whose owners I've become friendly with, Jessica and Jeremy. The deadline for purchasing a share in the CSA this year is long past. But when I explain to Jessica and Jeremy our locavore experiment, they're thrilled by the idea and allow me to purchase a special one-month share. They fill a reusable grocery bag with fresh tomatoes, summer squash, cabbage, broccoli, carrots, and purple potatoes.

The pick-up is in the back of the Pocatello Co-op. From the co-op I buy baguette bread (baked in Sun Valley) and milk (farmed and bottled in Buhl by CloverLeaf). A full plate of farm-fresh vegetables from local farms would probably be enough for a refreshing, healthy meal. But I insist on finding some local beef, to demonstrate our ability to prepare a diverse, balanced meal without simply relying on summer's bountiful produce. The co-op doesn't have any beef right now and so we head to Del Monte Meats.

But they're closed. Next we're off to the warehouse district and to the Kinport Junction, which houses a fresh seafood shop called A Fish Off the Old Block. The small shop's fishmonger carries a few cuts of beef and we buy a sirloin steak. The owner bought her product from a local butcher and promises me it's from a local farmer. Tonight's dinner menu: Sirloin steak with sautéed summer squash and fresh sliced tomatoes.

After our first delicious meal I find myself dwelling on the total cost (including the milk): $12.00 per plate. At first glance, it sounds like a lot. While I begin doing the math, counting the cost of meals for an entire month, Brianne interrupts my train of mental calculations when she observes: "Not bad when you think about how much a meal at a place like Jack in the Box costs you these days." Okay, I can accept that. Point well made.

I reread the first meal prepared by Smith and MacKinnon. It takes place earlier in the year, in March. Finding enough local food for a meal proves a stressful experience, requiring a "comprehensive search of [their] district's grocers and specialty shops" (14). The bill for their first meal: $128.87. I'm not sure how they accumulated such a hefty bill. They did invite two guests over to share the start of their new experiment. Perhaps their ritual resembled more of a celebration, one with a much wider spread of food than ours, including "fritters of organic, free-range eggs…and grated potato…and turnip…each one slathered in organic yogurt…and sprigs of anise" and a dessert of "warmed organic brie…topped with frozen blueberries…drizzled with a cranberry juice…and honey…reduction" (14-15). Even so, before they ever calculate the total cost, Smith and MacKinnon keep their focus on food miles. They tally the miles for each ingredient, and the "average distance from farm to plate for the entire meal." The average

food miles for their first meal: about 43. This sounds like quite an "improvement," considering the Leopold Center's statistic of average miles traveled by our food. Sounds pretty good. So I begin calculating our average distance from farm to plate.

Beefsteak Tomato:	8 miles (Ladybird Farms)
Summer Squash:	8 miles (Ladybird Farms)
Baguette Bread:	167 miles (Sun Valley)
Milk:	133 miles (Buhl)
Sirloin Steak:	20 miles (Estimate, based on meat seller's comment)

Our average distance per item is slightly higher: 67.2.

Maybe I'm dwelling too much on statistics like price per plate and average miles per plate. This is all an attempt by me to be quantitative I suppose. But it's the qualitative, the less measurable, that eventually became the most memorable part of the experience. All of a sudden that ever-present question—what should we have for dinner tonight?—could no longer be solved by take out, delivery, or microwave. From the moment I finished breakfast (which I simplified) on the first day, I began thinking about, and planning for, the next meal. It starts to feel like the entire day is devoted to planning meals, searching for local food, and finally cooking meals.

This first day's dinner is typical of what our dinners have looked like this entire month so far. Many more dinners have passed now. For every breakfast of the month I've been eating toast and jam, using the locally-baked Harper's brand sandwich bread with jam I made earlier in the summer, from apricots purchased at an orchard in northern Utah and plums given to us by our neighbors, grown on trees in their front yard.

My main exception, or perhaps indulgence, has been the lunch meals. I found the time available inadequate to prepare lunch meals in the morning or during the noon hour. My biggest frustration—and personal struggle—has been with beverages. Nobody even mentions beverages in Locavore Memoirs. Other than milk, does that mean water is to be my only option? There is no citrus available here in Idaho. And so, on many days dominated by the hot temperatures of this summer month, I've been giving in. I've been giving in to that beverage we find surrounding us everywhere in this country. In vending machines. At gas stations. Next to the checkout line of the grocery stores. Carbonated soda. I keep finding it. And I keep giving in to it.

Our locavore month will end soon. What are we supposed to do next? Six months after their year of locavore eating has ended, Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon find themselves "rowing for the open ocean" off the west coast of Vancouver Island (256). Their task: harvesting salt. They acknowledge an irony I keep confronting while reading about their various travels and adventures to find local food: "We can't ignore the irony, all these hours of travel in the name of local eating, but it is, above all else, symbolic. We have attempted to reinvent our way of eating" (256). Six months after the end of their twelve-month locavore experiment, clearly Smith and MacKinnon are still going strong. While a "few favorites have slowly made their way back into the kitchen—lemons, and rice, and beer. Many others, like bland bananas and white sugar, haven't yet" (259). For them an experiment essentially becomes a way of life, one where "the balance of global versus local food has been reversed." As they explain simply, "It comes down to this: we just like the new way better."

After their own twelve months of locavore living have passed, Barbara Kingsolver and Steven Hopp walk through the pasture they call Old Charley's Lot, leading their friends Joan and Jesse on a search for mushrooms. Kingsolver keeps telling their friends they should go back to the house for a rest if they need it. Their friends have spent a long day of traveling to get there and now Kingsolver is leading them "all over a slick, pathless mountainside with cat briars" (344). But she reminds herself, "This was the original human vocation: finding food on the ground. We're wired for it. It's hard to stop, too."

For Kingsolver and her family, their locavore experiment became surprisingly normal. As she explains, "If our special way of eating had seemed imposing at first, gradually it was just dinner" (341). Their effort to make as many things from scratch as possible results in a number of intense growing experiences. Making "daily bread, soft cheeses, and yogurt had become so routine we now prepared them in minutes" (342). Harvesting the Thanksgiving turkey, while somewhat emotional and dramatic, made that year's feast particularly memorable. But they also learn some less obvious lessons about local eating: "In some cases, what we learned was that it was too much trouble for everyday." For example, while "homemade pasta really is better…the big pasta-cranking" was only worth it for big events. Also, "Hard cheeses are *hard*." As Kingsolver explains, "Altered routines were really the heart of what we'd gained" (342).

The most important lesson learned by Kingsolver and Smith and MacKinnon, it seems, is expressed by reviewer Susan Wiggins as simply, "a greater sense of intimacy." This includes intimacy with "your family, partner, fishmonger, farmers, and foodshed" (85). Walking down certain supermarket aisles became unnecessary: frozen foods,

canned foods, soft drinks. Kingsolver describes it this way: "The point of being dedicated locavores for some prescribed length of time, I now understand, is to internalize a trust in one's own foodshed" (343).

Brianne and I have engaged in a few random informal conversations about our experience so far. Both of us feel it has been rewarding and agree that during the warm months, when local produce is in abundance, there is no reason we shouldn't continue. During the experiment, Brianne and I have shopped for groceries and cooked together even more than normal. We met Bill Stoltzfus and his wife at their farm and toured CloverLeaf Creamery. I became well acquainted with the owner of Desert Wind Farms, who in the past year has begun raising chickens, hogs, and a single milk cow on his small pasture in the desert, west of Blackfoot. We've become regulars at the Pocatello Co-op. We've become beneficiaries of the generosity of Jessica and Jeremy and the beautiful produce from Ladybird Farms. We've seen more of southern Idaho and northern Utah. We've spent more time in our kitchen, preparing meals from fresh and flavorful foods. I've even shed a few extra pounds. And I feel refreshed. Physically. Mentally. Even spiritually.

Thanks to the Locavore Memoirs and the locavore movement in general, a greater number of Americans have become more intimate with their food by becoming more aware of the source of their food. These self-conscious consumers and eaters demonstrate one way for individuals to live as agrarians without being farmers themselves.

But for myself, despite the lessons I've gained from our locavore experiment, I'm not satisfied with being a self-conscious, agrarian consumer. I need to go further. I will stay completely focused on my goals for becoming an American farmer in the twenty-

first century. None of the locavores featured in this chapter are farmer. Perhaps becoming a farmer automatically incorporates the activities of a locavore. Curiously, the increased interest by consumers to follow their food from farm to plate (while placing them in close contact with local farms) has also been contributing to an increase in new, young farmers in our country. Perhaps the locavore movement will contribute to my own efforts to become a successful farmer.

Chapter Seven

The Ramparts People:

First-generation Farmers, Personal Narrative, and Farming Revitalized

Farming is in. A quick glance at the magazine racks in the supermarket or local bookstore seems to reveal as many covers featuring farm animals as fashion models or actors. There is no lack of material for the beginner or experienced small farmer: *Hobby Farms*, *Urban Farm*, *Organic Gardening*, *Backyard Poultry*, *Mother Earth News*, *Acres USA*. The list goes on. And now, with the appearance of *Modern Farmer* in the spring of 2013, farmers, or those interested in food and farming, have their own lifestyle magazine.

One reviewer compares the cover of *Modern Farmer*—"matte-printed on thick paper stock" and an "arty photograph of a rooster so close as to appear life-size"—to that of a design publication (Crawford). Another review describes the experience of looking through a copy of *Modern Farmer*—with its "glossy pages and stylized photos"—to looking at a copy of *Vogue* ("*Modern Farmer*"). This review contends that *Modern Farmer* isn't a publication aimed at farmers, but at an ever-increasing number of urban residents interested in America's agriculture and food supply: "[P]eople who have an interest in farming, who might secretly wish to give up their glam jobs in the city to reconnect with the land, or...those who just want to know more about where their food comes from." These observations of physical appearance and content suggest that modern-day farming is becoming a brand all its own. The press release for *Modern Farmer* touts the magazine as the torchbearer for the "new generation of farming," one where greater numbers of people "have the desire to be closer to…the food on their plates." In the release the magazine's founder Ann Marie Gardner, former journalist for

The New York Times, is quoted describing *Modern Farmer* as a "consumer-focused agriculture brand" for leading the conversation of individuals concerned with "where their food is coming from, who grows it and how that affects their personal health and the environment" ("New Farming and Lifestyle Publication").

Documentary films examining the realities and controversies of contemporary agriculture have become common enough to form their own subgenre. The most prominent of these, and easily the most commercially successful, *Food, Inc.*, takes viewers into the nether regions of America's industrial food system (including its massive factory farms and processing facilities, where thousands of chickens, pigs, or cattle are processed each day) before suggesting sustainable options for the future. Thanks to *Food, Inc.* (as well as Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*), Virginia-based grass farmer Joel Salatin, who raises cattle, chickens, and hogs on pasture in a system designed to replicate nature, has become a cult hero and farming celebrity. In another widely-distributed film, *King Corn*, friends Curt Ellis and Ian Cheney leave Boston and return to their ancestral roots in Greene, Iowa in order to grow a single acre of commodity corn before attempting to follow their corn to its final destinations in the American food system. The public's response to this small-budget film—particularly the portion on high-fructose corn syrup—was enough to put a billion-dollar industry on the defensive. In an effort to improve the public image of their product, the Corn Refiners Association spent tens of millions of dollars running a series of television ads and even attempted to change the name of high-fructose corn syrup to "corn sugar" (despite being rejected by the FDA) (Burkitt; Parker-Pope).

In a number of other recent farm documentaries, including *Grow* and *The Greenhorns*, viewers gain access to the farms of a number of young, first-generation farmers. While these documentaries do not attempt to cover up the distinct challenges of farming for first-generation farmers, they are certainly an attempt to promote the progress of a new kind of farming and a new generation of farmers. As the director of *The Greenhorns*, Severine von Tscharner Fleming, contends, "Young farmers are an emerging social movement" (qtd in Salkin).

In the last five or more years, sustainable farming and first-generation farmers have been a frequent topic for articles in mainstream, non-farming newspapers and magazines, and online news outlets. In her article from *The New York Times*, "In New Food Culture, a Young Generation of Farmers Emerges," Isolde Raftery draws a link between the expanding sustainable and local food culture and a dramatic increase in interest for farming from young people. And while the average age of farmers continues to rise, her article suggests hope in the future for a revitalized generation of farmers, who appear willing to take farming into a new era. As Raftery quotes Garry Stephenson, the coordinator of the Small Farms Program at Oregon State University: "They're young, they're energetic and idealist, and they're willing to make the sacrifices."

Allen Salkin helps define a new category for young farmers in his article, "Leaving Behind the Trucker Hat": the hipster farmer. While at least one respondent, Tom Philpott, claims Salkin tries too hard to force young farmers into the hipster definition, Salkin's article helps articulate this youthful trend in farming:

> Steeped in years of talk around college campuses and in stylish urban enclaves about the evils of factory farms…the perils of relying on

> petroleum to deliver food over long distances…and the beauty of greenmarkets…some young urbanites are starting to put their muscles where their pro-environment, antiglobalization mouths are. They are creating small-scale farms near urban areas hungry for quality produce and willing to pay a premium.

Although Philpott finds fault with framing all young farmers as hipsters, he agrees with Salkin that this is a "new age for farming" and so we need "capable young folks to want to be farmers, and farming has to provide a viable living. Farming *should* be fashionable; hip, even."

Indeed farming has established a strong foothold in popular culture, in some cases through a particularly unexpected format: online games like "FarmVille," "MyFarm," and "FarmTown." Within six months of Farmville's release in June of 2009, over 62 million people had signed up to engage in virtual farming (Quenqua). Through FarmVille urban dwellers can close the gap between themselves and country living without leaving the comfort of their computers. Plowing ground, planting and harvesting crops, and raising farm animals are just a few clicks away.

Wait a minute. Am I really saying this? Farming is in? Farming is hip? And modern? When did this happen? Just over ten years ago, when I first started talking to family and friends about farming after graduation, I felt completely solitary in my endeavor. Nobody, it felt, wanted to talk about farming. Especially not young people.

The responses from my family and friends typically fell into one of three categories.

Disbelief and scorn: “You’re not going to be a farmer.” “Don’t be ridiculous.” “People don’t *become* farmers or *go into* farming these days.”

Quizzical confusion. “So…you mean…like move to a farm…and actually plant stuff and raise animals?”

Awkward silence followed by a polite attempt to show interest. “Well, that is something, isn’t it?” “Huh. Good luck with that then.” “I hope it goes well for you.”

Whatever the response, each typically left me full of doubt, and feeling frustrated and misunderstood. No one seemed willing to take me seriously. At times I could hear myself the way others must be hearing me, like a naïve daydreamer, and this left me feeling embarrassed. What am I going to do with my degree in English? Well, sir, that’s an easy question: I’m gonna be a farmer! Okay, sure.

All I needed was a graduate degree, I kept telling myself. Something to provide financial security. And then one graduate degree turned into a second graduate degree. Meanwhile all these other people have started jumping into farming head first, with nothing but passion and devotion to get themselves started. Why didn’t I just close my eyes and go for it, all in, like them? That’s what I ask my mom now and then, particularly on those occasions when I’m feeling convinced I’ll never finish my latest degree or worried my farming window has already closed: “Mom, ten years ago people thought I was a joke. They told me you don’t graduate from college to become a farmer. And now, now there’s a call for young farmers. Can you believe that?! They’re actually saying we need more young farmers. Now people are leaving white-collar jobs to become farmers. They’re out there completely changing the game. And I’m not there yet.”

The strange part is that all I've really wanted to do from the beginning is farm the way my dad was raised farming and to sustain his father Frank's 40-acre farm for members of the extended family. The farm I envisioned would be something simple and old-fashioned. I never wanted to reinvent farming, only hold onto something our family seemed to be losing. I would write cheesy poems and essays with titles like, "Should've been born 100 Years ago." That's how I wanted to define myself, as a throwback, whose purpose would be to maintain, preserve, or salvage the American family farm. At least for one family.

My desire to farm, inspired by my dad's farm stories and formed from cultural definitions of the American farmer, became a running narrative in my head. In this narrative I'm a young farmer making it successfully on 40 acres of family land. At dawn, with the sun just creeping over the Tetons, I allow myself a few moments of rest after several hours of physical labor. I've just finished morning milking. After hefting six milk cans out to the road for pickup, sweat drips from my brow. I remove my straw hat and pull the back of my wrist across my forehead. Leaning against the doorway of the milking shed I take one quick glance at the lower Menan Butte before releasing the Jerseys back into the pasture.

It's a busy day ahead. Planting season is here again and two of the cousins are driving in from the city to help get strawberry starters in the ground. After some success the past few years, it's time to expand. Growing five acres of strawberries seems perfectly reasonable, and will meet the increasing demand. How much work can I expect to get from the city cousins? I'm not sure. Regardless, they like coming for the way the

farm helps them remember their grandparents, Frank and Jenile. So I'll have to help them enjoy their experience and try to get as much work from them as possible.

Before they arrive I'd better get the broilers and laying hens fed, eggs collected, steers transferred to a fresh pasture, plow the south field, and purchase seed. But first I'll see if I can figure out why the old Massey-Harris tractor isn't turning over.

But despite such frequent mental wanderings, the truth is I have no farming experience. My dad told great stories of the potato harvest, irrigating with his father Frank, joining neighbors to thresh wheat on all the farms in the area. And having been raised off farm with the entitlements of a suburban boy—youth sports, wakeboarding, piano lessons—I can hardly fathom the wide arc agriculture has made since our family's farming stories end. The few farmers remaining in Annis today (a tiny rural community of just a few hundred) farm 10 to 100 times more acreage than Frank ever did. They use massive and expensive equipment to replace the labor of children and neighbors.

I attempt to make myself feel better by doubting the seriousness of the new American farmer. This won't last, I often tell myself. There are too few first-generation farmers to make a difference. But something keeps nagging at me each time I pick up another farming magazine or see the release of another farming documentary or read an article online or in a national newspaper. These documentaries and articles should be about me. I wanted to reinvent farming long before anyone thought farming was cool. Have I missed my chance?

I need to see up close what these young farmers are doing. I try to tell myself that my interest in their farming efforts is simply out of curiosity. Or to see what I can learn from their various approaches to agriculture. But I know it's really so that I can convince

myself I can make my future farm better and more successful than theirs. But only if I ever get the chance.

The approach to LadyBird Farms makes me wonder if I'm in the right place. I've known the owners of the farm since soon after moving to Idaho, but this is my first visit to their place. And, after four years of living in southeast Idaho I've been culturally programmed to associate particular images with the word "farm"—towering grain silos, mammoth potato storage facilities, lumbering tractors and grain combines. LadyBird Farms is located in the Portneuf Gap—a narrow, short canyon that cuts across the mountains in the south valley—a spot known more for folks who work in town but want to tinker around in small horse pastures than for row crops and commercial farms.

The farm I'm looking for is just one acre in size. And the average farm in Idaho is 465 acres ("2013 Idaho Agricultural Statistics"). Whenever I meet native Idahoans who grew up on a farm, I like to ask the size of their families' farms. A typical answer goes something like: "Oh, it's pretty small really. Only about 1,000 acres." Farms between 5,000 and 10,000 acres are not uncommon. Idaho potato growers typically harvest upwards of 40,000 pounds of potatoes per acre, but growers generally only recoup about one cent per pound ("Idaho Potatoes"; Idaho Farm Bureau). So what can someone do with just one acre?

I locate the house number on the mailbox and check my hand-written note again. The numbers match. The house is plain, with nothing to indicate it's the residence of a farmer. But the property includes an unimpressive, rickety old barn. Even so, extensive open space for farming isn't apparent. I turn in and realize I've found the right place

when I park behind a dusty, forest green Subaru station wagon with a bumper sticker reading, “Be a Local Hero; Buy Locally Grown.”

Walking toward the fence I see a young woman bent over at the waist, working in the opposite end of the field picking summer squash. She is wearing men’s Levi jeans, faded at the knees and rolled up to around mid-calf. A red handkerchief protrudes from her back pocket. Her leather sandals reveal dust-caked and calloused feet. And a short-sleeved t-shirt—bearing a happy, cartoonish root vegetable with the phrase reading “Local Food is RADish”—shows off her dark, sun-baked skin.

This is Jessica McAleese, founder of LadyBird farms. I met Jessica during my first winter in Idaho when on a whim I convinced my wife Brianne to join me for a documentary film screening of *Dirt* at the Pocatello Co-op. Jessica hosted several similar events that year, using the non-growing months to get the word out about small farms and sustainable, local foods. But it’s the way she introduced herself before the film that most caught my attention.

“My name is Jessica and I’m a…Well, I’m a farm…a farmer.”

Something about the word “farmer” made her falter. Having finally used the word to describe herself, she went on, apparently compelled to explain her hesitation: “So my farm is only one acre, but it’s still a farm right? I grow food and that makes me a farmer.”

I can’t really fault Jessica for her reluctance to refer to herself as a farmer. Only about a year earlier she was working for Portneuf Valley Medical Center, running the patient advocate program. She was just months removed from her first growing season on a single acre of land leased from a grumpy retired gentleman she met through a family friend. Even in her own mind she must have still been wrestling with a definition for the

word "farmer." Do I work enough ground to be called a farmer? And does it matter that I don't own the land where I farm? Have I been growing food long enough to be a farmer? If I'm not making a living yet from growing fresh produce, does it count as farming?

Novella Carpenter finds herself asking similar questions in her memoir *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer*. In a play on Isak Denisen's first line from *Out of Africa*, Carpenter's memoir begins with an equally gripping—as well as witty, ironic, and self-deprecating—statement of place: "I have a farm on a dead-end street in the ghetto" (3). Despite her use of the word "farm" in the first line and in the title of her memoir, however, Carpenter doesn't use the designation of "farmer" for herself without hesitation.

First in Seattle and later in Oakland, Carpenter is an avid and skilled keeper of honeybees and laying hens, and a grower of fresh vegetables. After a number of years Carpenter decides to take her backyard efforts one step further because, as she says, "as a poor scrounger with three low-paying jobs and no health insurance, I usually couldn't afford the good stuff" (13). Carpenter only begins referring to her place as a farm on the day a special package arrives in the mail from Iowa—the "Homesteader's Delight" from Murray McMurray Hatchery containing two turkeys, ten chickens, two geese, and two ducks (13). For Carpenter, raising meat birds represents "taking it to the next level" (12). This addition to her labors makes her feel confident enough to begin calling her tiny apartment in Oakland next to a vacant, overgrown lot, her farm.

Interestingly enough, the USDA's definition for a farm (as outlined in the Economic Research Service's "Farm Household Well-being" glossary) turns to economics to provide the easiest and most direct method for defining a farmer. Simply

stated a farm is, "any place from which $1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the year." In 2012, Jessica's Ladybird Farms sold twenty-five full shares and twenty-five half shares (for $375 and $275 respectively). (LadyBird Farms is a CSA farm—Community Supported Agriculture—which is a system of subscription farming where a farmer sells shares of the future harvest directly to the consumer in advance of the growing season.) So according to the Department of Agriculture, $16,250 of produce sold makes LadyBird Farms an official farm. And Jessica—as the founder and proprietor of LadyBird farms—a farmer. At least in the ledger books.

So why the hesitation from young modern farmers like Jessica and Novella Carpenter to call themselves farmers? The average American doesn't rely on terms of finance or levels of income when thinking about the word "farmer." Despite an increasing awareness by Americans about industrial agriculture and the origins of their food from books like *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and documentary films like *Food, Inc.*, we still like to envision farms situated in sweet pastoral scenes of rolling, verdant hills dotted with grazing sheep and cattle. An assortment of crops—corn with golden tassels, waves of grain moving in the wind—nearly ready for the harvest. A small, pleasant farm house with a devoted farmer's wife in an apron, and an apple pie in the oven. The American farmer is a cultural icon. Even as the size of the average farm grows larger (planted with patented GMOs and doused with heavy doses of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides) and the total number of farmers shrinks, we hold onto our traditional notions of the American farmstead.

From the edge of the field at LadyBird Farms I wait for Jessica or her partner Jeremy, who is running around getting everything watered, to look up. I don't want to interrupt what appears to be such a busy morning; both seem so focused and deliberate in their actions. For the moment I just look around this single acre of rented land and try to imagine what it's taken to turn it into a productive and profitable farm. Up close one acre doesn't feel like very much space. When I asked my dad for his approval to farm just three to five acres of produce at the family farm, he told me that the project sounded less like farming and more like growing an oversized garden. Now that I'm looking at a one-acre farm I can't help but wonder if I'd feel comfortable calling myself a farmer growing a single acre of produce.

"Steven, you made it!" Jessica hollers to me from across the field, interrupting my thoughts. "We're almost ready to start organizing packages for our subscribers. Come help us pick a few more items first."

As we make our way around the farm to pick carrots, broccoli, and an interesting dark-purple variety of potato, Jeremy talks me through the operations of the farm. He tells me how the irrigation provides a big challenge. The owner never created a very efficient system of outlet pipes and won't let Jessica and Jeremy improve his system. He walks me over to the greenhouse where they grow their starter plants. He tells me how they planted "green manure" on the farm, around the border and in between rows. Instead of walking over dirt or weeds we're walking over mixed grasses like clover and orchard grass. The space feels ready to burst, like every possible square foot is being utilized. Despite the limited space, Jessica and Jeremy grow nearly one hundred varieties of vegetables, herbs, and flowers here.

While Jeremy talks I notice a hand-made three-sided shelter where Jessica and Jeremy store hand tools and lawn chairs. Near the shelter they've stacked some loose rocks into a fire pit. And near the fire pit they've spread out a dusty blue tarp, on top of which sit two slept-in sleeping bags. They're sleeping here at night in between workdays.

This willingness to do whatever it takes—to rent land, abandon secure employment, camp out at the farm—reminds me of a memoir written by another young farmer. *The Dirty Life: A Memoir of Farming, Food, and Love*, by first-generation farmer Kristen Kimball, reflects what's becoming an increasingly common story in agriculture: young, educated, city-dweller leaves the city for a country residence and a new life on a farm.

Like many similar young, single urban dwellers, Kimball worked hard to find a successful career. For Kimball life in the city had developed into a haphazard assortment of work—"writing ad copy, teaching a class, cobbling together freelance jobs, just scraping by"—and social life—"dating in a way that can best be described as haphazard, shuffling drinks and dinners and movie dates with a filmmaker, an art collector, a political writer, and an ex" (22, 21).

That's when she meets Mark, a first-generation farmer from Pennsylvania who Kimball travels six hours from Manhattan to interview for a freelance article about young, alternative farmers. When she shows up to interview Mark she is wearing "a vintage Cheap Trick T-shirt, tight jeans, and a pair of ironic-chic Dingos with chunky little heels" (11). In her estimation, while this outfit "worked well in the East Village," she looked "strange and slightly slutty in a field in Pennsylvania." On the first night, instead of interviewing Mark, Kimball helps him slaughter a pig. In the morning, before

giving her an interview, Mark leaves her in the hot July sun raking rocks into piles between tomato rows.

Between slaughtering a pig and raking rocks into piles, Kimball sits in a cheap hotel thinking about her first impression of Mark: "[T]his is a *man*," she writes. "All the men I knew were cerebral. This one lived in his body" (10). I'm sure in that moment, Kimball could never have imagined her article about this young, organic farmer who smelled of "warm skin, diesel, and earth" would eventually make her into a farmer herself (9). But something about Mark, and something about farming, left her feeling calm, an exception to the restlessness she'd been feeling in the city: "I wanted to learn everything I could about what he did" (22). And apparently, Mark shared the sentiment. After a speedy romance, Mark asks Kristin to leave the city and begin searching for a new farm, a place where they "could build a home and a farm together" (31).

Early in the memoir, Kimball shapes her eventual transformation by demonstrating how far removed her city life was from that of a farmer. At first the idea is overwhelming to Kimball. It means leaving everything behind: her friends, her sister, professional opportunities, and the "only bridge that could lead…back to Manhattan"—the lease on her affordable apartment (31). Kimball reveals some of the reasons why the possibility of farming with Mark also seems so attractive, reasons that certainly reflect the willingness of other young, inexperienced, farmers to leave an uncertain life behind. She explains feeling like her current life "teetered" somewhere between an adventure (having left behind the "conventions…rules and tastes and predictability" of a middle-class lifestyle) and disaster (32). To her, Mark represents a new notion of home, complete with "fifty acres of good soil, a farmhouse with scrubbed wooden tables in a big kitchen,

a pretty orchard, cows and horses in the pasture, and chickens running around in the yard," that feels so clear to Kimball she "could almost touch it." Falling in love with Mark also means falling in love with an entire lifestyle. She describes her memoir as "the story of two love affairs…one with farming…and the other with a complicated and exasperating farmer" (5).

After a long search for land, Kristin and Mark begin the process of building Essex Farm around the CSA model. LadyBird Farms and Essex Farm represent a growing trend in the United States. Both are CSA farms. Under this system farmer and consumer see each other regularly, on delivery or pick-up days. There is no middle buyer. CSA farmers often write weekly or monthly newsletters to keep their subscribers informed of the progression of the season, including the availability of more varieties of produce. Some even host potluck meals on their farm or invite shareholders to join in the farm work. The activities of the farm are intimate and transparent, promoting a sense of community between growers and consumers. CSAs in the United States have grown incredibly during the past decade. Since the year 2000 the number of CSAs has expanded from 1,000 to an estimated 6,000 to 6,500 (McFadden). Clearly there exists a very strong desire to close the widening gap between farm and plate, for both the farmer and the consumer.

Farmers like Jessica and Jeremy, Novella, and Kristen and Mark belong to a busy group of young Americans working to reshape the face of American agriculture. Most of these farmers are first-generation farmers. They are young and educated. Many of them have left other professions to pursue farming. They are often single and they are just as

likely to be female as male. And friends often combine their efforts and finances in order to farm together.

This agrarian revival comes at an interesting time. As stated above, the American farmer is getting older. The 2007 Census of Agriculture indicates the average age of the American farmer to be 57. For every farmer under the age of 25, there are five farmers over the age of 75. It's been called the Agricultural Cliff. But these young people aren't just filling the holes in the industry. They are taking their energy and education and seeking to redefine methods of farming, and this makes it useful to reflect on how we refer to these young farmers.

"Greenhorns," the name for one of many non-profit organizations that have sprung up around the country to support the wave of new, young farmers, provides one usable nickname. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a greenhorn as, "a raw, inexperienced person, esp. a novice in a trade." The Greenhorns organization deliberately adopted the word to refer specifically to the young, inexperienced farmers they strive to support. On the inside cover of *Greenhorns: 50 Dispatches from the New Farmers' Movement* (a collection published to accompany the documentary *The Greenhorns*), a greenhorn is defined as, "a novice or new entrant into agriculture." Rather than hide the general inexperience of many of these farmers, the organization highlights and emphasizes the fact, and in the process seeks to promote and educate new farmers. The word "greenhorn" suggests an awareness of self. And perhaps such awareness helps explain the abundance of written material produced by, for, and about these farmers.

Partly because of the age range of so many of these farmers and mostly for the characteristics and skills these young people bring to farming—young, activist, educated,

tech savvy—I'm fond of referring to them as Millennial Farmers. A variety of monikers have been coined to describe the Millennial Generation (those born between the late '70s and the mid-'90s) that reflect cynicism for their future. Generation We. Generation Lost. Generation Eff'ed. Millennials are often described as an entitled and whiney group who are well educated but trapped by a failing economy.

But I recently came across an alternative title for Millennials that at first appeared incongruent in a piece written for *the New York Times* by essayist and critic William Deresiewicz titled, "Generation Sell." He begins by briefly reviewing previous youth cultures—beatniks, hippies, punks, slackers—and characterizing each of them through two related qualities: "the emotion or affect they valorized and the social form they envisioned." For example, hippies valorized love ("love-ins, free love, the Summer of Love, all you need is love") and they visualized love through utopia ("the commune, the music festival, the liberation movement"). In Deresiewicz's view, the common quality of previous youth movements was "countercultural opposition," expressed in various forms of "rebellion, rejection, or dissent."

And that's what makes his definition for the Millennial Generation—or Generation Sell—so startling and appealing in the context of revolutionary farmers trying to work against an entire industrial system. He contends that the "millennial affect is the affect of the salesman" and their ideal social form is the small business, expressed through "food carts, 20-somethings selling wallets made from recycled plastic bags, boutique pickle companies, techie start-ups, Kickstarter, urban-farming supply stores and bottled water that wants to save the planet." Former youth cultures would view starting a business as "selling out," but today, thanks to the "heroic age of dot-com

entrepreneurship" and the recent economic collapse, millennials have a "distrust of large organizations" and a sense that "it's every man for himself."

In many ways farming seems like a perfect fit for young people grown cynical about job security, men and women who've been forced to reevaluate what they really care about and would like to get away from urban centers as their only choice for employment. At least that's how I felt. Although I completed my undergraduate degree years before the current economic downturn, my first office job left me convinced people were chasing something unrewarding, some kind of success based only on financial gain and societal rank. After working at a desk for one year managing the office for a small civil engineering firm, I asked myself how people make a living for a lifetime at a desk, beneath fluorescent lights, with nothing to get excited about except 5:00 PM and Fridays.

The author Gene Logsdon, while not a first-generation farmer (he is a contemporary of Wendell Berry), describes having similar feelings when he was just twelve years old while hunting morel mushrooms with his father. He reported triumphantly to his father that he would "build a cabin on a mountainside by a clear running stream, and live out [his] days happily on broiled trout, fried mushrooms, and hickory nut pie" (*Contrary* xiii). He would gain "advanced degrees in the art of living, bestowed…by Nature." Like me, Logsdon thought his father would approve. And why not? His father regularly retired to the "solitude of woods and river bank and farm field." But like my dad, Logsdon's father responded with a certain disappointment, urging him to think about "making [his] way in the world and contributing something to it."

It took Logsdon until he was forty-two to dismiss his father's advice and return to his childhood home in order to seek the "peculiar kind of freedom [he] had tried to

articulate that day," when he was just twelve. By then he believed Americans had mostly "lost the desire of independence—the kind of independence that defines success in terms of how much food, clothing, shelter, and contentment I could produce for myself rather than how much I could buy." But then Logsdon began to discover others seeking for a similar kind of freedom. As he puts it they were, "even more independent than I dared to dream," and included people "deliberately removing themselves from the protection of the great god, Grid," people "turning ghettos into edenic gardens," people farming with horses, people recycling waste into profitable businesses (xiv). People like the newest generation of young farmers. These are, as Logsdon calls them, the Ramparts People.

Nobody really knows how many young, first-generation farmers are out there. The Greenhorns organization claims to have a network of over 6,000 members from all over the country (Greenhorns). Whether actual members of Generation Y or just youthful in energy and inspiration, whether known as Greenhorns or the Ramparts People, this expanding group includes those who are, as Logsdon describes them, "pioneers, seeking a new kind of religious and economic freedom" (xiv). These young farmers, in age or spirit, are willing to try ideas and methods outside the norm, beyond the boundaries of conventional. Logsdon's lyrical mission statement for the Ramparts People suggests a need for creativity and courage:

> In all ages we have camped on the edges of the earth, the buffer between our more conventional and timid brethren and those nether regions where, as the medieval maps instructed, "there be dragons and wild beestes." It is our destiny to draw the dragon's fire while the mainstream culture hides

> behind its disintegrating deficit and damns us for shattering its complacency. (xv)

It's worth ruminating on monikers for a bit. This new generation of farmers excels at self-branding, but also at self-reflection. Memoirs abound. In addition to those written by Novella Carpenter and Kristen Kimball, a significant number of memoirs by new farmers has been released in the past five years.

In her second farm memoir, *Barnheart: The Incurable Longing for a Farm of One's Own*, Jenna Woginrich coins a new word to describe her complete obsession for life on a small farm. In her cleverly written introduction, "How to Tell if You're Infected," Woginrich describes some of the symptoms she and other young people are experiencing, symptoms strong enough to make her leave the city and rent a small farm in New York, while struggling to learn how to farm, make ends meet, and accommodate to small-town politics. Barnheart disease, apparently, typically affects those from the city:

> It's a sharp, targeted depression, a sudden overcast feeling that hits you while you're at work or standing in the grocery-store checkout line. It's a dreamer's disease, a mix of hope, determination, and grit. It attacks those of us who wish to God we were outside with our flocks, feed bags, or harnesses instead of sitting in front of a computer screen. (8)

What at first appears to be an incurable disease may in fact be something else. As she concludes her introduction, Woginrich takes the opportunity to state her problem to her reading audience as if to a room of addicts at a recovery meeting: "We'll get there. In the meantime, let us just take comfort in knowing we're not alone. And maybe take turns

standing up and admitting we have a problem. Hello. My name is Jenna. And I have Barnheart" (10).

In his memoir *Growing a Farmer: How I Learned to Live Off the Land*, Seattle restauranteur Kurt Timmermeister describes how his decision to purchase a home on 4 acres of land on Vashon Island in 1991 completely changed his life, both ersonally and professionally. Originally his desire was simply to find a home near his restaurants where he could find rest and escape from the city. Adapting to his new life—including keeping bees, buying a milk cow, and tending an apple orchard—Timmermeister gradually becomes more aware of the origins of the food he eats. He describes the unexpected series of events that leads him to leave the restaurant business and focus completely on food production through his small farm (that eventually grows to 13 acres).

My Empire of Dirt: How One Man Turned His Big-City Backyard Into a Farm by Manny Howard began as an award-winning cover story for *New York* magazine. As part of his effort to examine the locavore movement, Howard asks what happens when we try to eat only what we can produce ourselves. For five months Howard works to plan, build, and plant his "lonely little farm," 800 square feet in his Brooklyn backyard, in preparation for the month of August, when he'd eat only what he had grown. After a series of farming lessons learned from mistakes—including a severed pinky finger, a strained relationship with his wife, and a tornado striking his house (the first in Brooklyn since 1889)—Howard begins making his way through one month of farm eating. (The beginning date is postponed to August 15 due to an inadequate amount of fully ripened vegetables and pre-weight chickens.) Building his tiny urban farm costs $11,000 and during his month of eating Howard loses 29 pounds. "Eating local," he writes in his

original magazine article, "is expensive and time-consuming" and "requires a willful abstinence from convenience and plenty." But in the end, Howard takes great pride from preparing plates of farm-fresh food—all the result of his hard work—and realizes "the importance of valuing all the time and energy and care that go into producing good food."

More than most of the memoirs in this subgenre, Brad Kessler's *Goat Song: A Seasonal Life, A Short History of Herding, and the Art of Making Cheese*, reaches beyond his own direct experiences with farming. In addition to documenting the year spent by Kessler and his wife on 75 acres in Vermont raising Nubian goats, Kessler lyrically explores the more fundamental relationship humans share with pastoral landscapes through raising herd animals. This is an ancient relationship and Kessler's memoir of life as a goat herder not only follows his experience learning the tasks of breeding, feeding, milking, and making cheese, but it also takes him into a diverse array of subjects: the human diet, our alphabet, religion, poetry, and economy.

There seems to be no limit to the number of farm memoirs the market can handle. Or the number of young, first-generation farmers ready to tell their stories of moving from city to country, bringing agriculture to the city, transitioning from white-collar to blue-collar, and the personal transformation that comes with all of these. In a recent survey of contemporary memoirs and nonfiction texts on agricultural themes, Evelyn I. Funda of Utah State University reviews sixteen separate texts. Some informal searching on a site like Amazon.com reveals over five times that many. For every one of these farm memoirs, dozens of blogs are being written by fellow small farmers, hobby farmers, and backyard beekeepers and chicken growers. A search for farm blogs on Technorati.com uncovers no fewer than 729 blogs about farming.

After giving me the grand tour of LadyBird Farms, Jessica and Jeremy put me right to work. We make a stop at the carrot patch where I am to selectively pull carrots no shorter than six inches long. Next a quick visit to the broccoli. The big crowns of broccoli have been mostly picked already, so it requires some searching for pieces large enough to harvest. (I get distracted while wondering whether I've ever actually seen a growing broccoli plant.) Finally, before getting to the cleaning and sorting that's required before we can prepare bags of produce for shareholders, I help make piles of potatoes as Jeremy digs them free and shakes loose the clods of rich, black soil. The flesh of this variety is a dark, rich purple. I've never eaten a purple potato before.

At the cleaning and sorting station I figure I'll take the opportunity to ask Jessica and Jeremy some questions. But this part of the process is no less rigorous than any other. It's almost noon and today is pick-up day, which leaves them about four hours until everything must be cleaned, sorted, bagged, and loaded onto Jeremy's truck before setting up at the Pocatello Co-op where shareholders will arrive between 4:00 and 6:00 PM. One acre might not sound like very much. But it certainly makes enough work.

Farm City and *The Dirty Life* are successful, in part, because of the authors' willingness to acknowledge the constancy of work and trial that accompany farming. For Kristen Kimball, those challenges aren't just from being a new farmer, but from Mark's decision to create a whole-diet CSA, something that would require them to become adept at a long list of skills, including raising "six different types of livestock and integrat[ing] them with the vegetables and grain rotations" and figuring "out cash flow and labor" and repairing and cleaning the defunct farm (58). All this before the first spring.

The long process of becoming a whole-diet CSA all begins with one Jersey milking cow named Delia. The first time Kimball squats down onto a homemade milking stool she is, as she describes it, "almost embarrassed by the intimacy of it" (63-4). After five days of successful milking Kimball is feeling confident in her ability to milk Delia. But then, "the effects of Delia's letdown reflex would wear off, and no matter how much I squeezed at her the milk would come only in little drips and I'd send her back to her stall with her udder still half full, teats chapped from all my yanking" (64-5). It takes an entire month before Kimball can milk Delia efficiently and with confidence. And by that time Kimball's physical transformation has begun: "my engagement ring no longer fit and my forearms had taken on the heavy look of those of a sailor" (65). Milking Delia is only part of the job. Without a milk strainer, the two of them "filtered the milk through an old T-shirt tied with a bungee cord to a stainless-steel funnel."

But the real challenge has nothing to do with milking. Before Kristen and Mark can move into the farmhouse they live in town waiting for the current tenants to move out. One of them, Roy, has two large dogs. The others, Lisa and Troy, own a pit bull named Duke. One night Roy is driving into town to tell Kristen and Mark something has happened to Delia. They find her in the corral they'd built for her, "standing still, her head drooping nearly to the ground. Her soft ears were tattered, bloody ribbons hanging limp next to her head. Her eyes were swollen almost shut, and the blood from two dozen wounds dripped from her face onto the frozen ground" (69). To Kimball's surprise, the vet does not recommend putting her down. Even so, recovery won't be pretty. The vet shaves the hair away from all of her wounds. Her ears can't be repaired and so he uses scissors to remove what remains of them, "leaving a pair of raw and waxy nubbins that

stood out from the sides of her head like the hard blooms of some strange topical plant" (70). Delia survives the attack. But will Kimball's new passion for farming survive?

More specifically, can Kimball survive the constant reality of physical labor? Kimball describes this reality in wonderful, lyrical language. And perhaps this is appropriate for a freelance writer attempting to describe her new reality and the constancy of physical labor on a farm:

> A farm is a manipulative creature. There is no such thing as finished. Work comes in a stream and has no end. There are only the things that must be done now and things that can be done later. The threat the farm has got on you, the one that keeps you running from can until can't, is this: do it now, or some living thing will wilt or suffer or die. It's blackmail, really. (150)

Kimball's acceptance and open description of farming is important to the value of her memoir. First, it makes her memoir brutally honest. Too many of the first-generation memoirs never get past the city-dweller's romanticism (something Kimball had at first). Second, by addressing the farm so directly, Kimball essentially makes the farm a character in her story. This isn't a stretch. The farm is a living, breathing thing. It changes with the seasons. It flourishes or falters based on the farmer's ability to take proper care of it. And by addressing the farm this way, it doesn't become a creature of constant beauty and bliss, but something requiring constant struggle and work. Finally, the constant presence of responsibility speaks to the realities of farm life. If Kimball doesn't milk Delia, nobody will. If Kimball doesn't feed the chickens, they won't eat. If Kimball

doesn't get the harnesses on the work horses and plow the fields, they won't be ready for planting.

Curiously Kimball grows to relish these realities. "I was in love with the work," she writes, "despite its overabundance. The world had always seemed disturbingly chaotic to me, my choices too bewildering. I was fundamentally happier, I found, with my focus on the ground. For the first time, I could clearly see the connection between my actions and their consequences" (158). And because of her daily devotion to this labor Kimball begins to recognize more transformation in herself: "I could lift the harness onto Sam's back without asphyxiating myself. I could carry two full five-gallon buckets with ease."

It's just as she begins to acknowledge these physical and mental transformations that Kimball asks: "But why, oh, why, does passion always spawn conflict?" (158). Perhaps a relatively new romantic relationship forced into the demands of establishing a new farm and a whole-diet CSA is bound to fail. With great wit, Kimball describes this phase in her new marriage as "what it would feel like to forge a relationship at boot camp or be marooned together, albeit on a very fertile island" (128). Everything in their daily lives, including their relationship, revolves around the demands of the farm. Pillow talk involved waking up and falling asleep, "talking about stock, seeds, drainage, tools, or how to eke another minute out of the day by streamlining a chore, saving steps." And this begins to lead to tension: "Mark and I argued fiercely over everything. We discovered that we had different desires, different fears, different visions for the farm" (158). And a physical relationship? Not likely: "Our bodies were so tired. Sometimes, in the brief

moment between bed and sleep, we'd touch our fingertips together, an act we cynically called farmer love."

Perhaps the most consistent and overwhelming challenges faced by this wave of first-generation farmers come from finding enough land and capital to get a farm started. With one of these, land, Kristen and Mark get lucky. Their requirements for land, especially if they were going to succeed with the full-diet CSA, are significant: big piece of land, a house so they could live on the farm, and the potential for ownership. Oh, and Mark "wanted it to come for free" (42). For Kimball the process of finding the right land becomes exhausting and stressful. But Mark feels entirely confident that the right land will come, "because he has had around him, since childhood, this thing he calls a magic circle, a kind of aura of luck that attracts the right thing at the right time." And, just as the stress of the long search seems enough to challenge the future existence of their young romance, "a generous and enthusiastic man named Lars Kulleseid wandered into Mark's magic circle" (43). After meeting with Kristen and Mark just once, Lars offers them a free lease on 500 acres on Lake Champlain in upstate New York.

After fortuitously securing land with a free lease, Kristen and Mark have to deal with the other barrier for new farmers: capital. Starting a new farm, especially one requiring livestock, is not cheap. When I asked Jeremy and Jessica what they thought of *The Dirty Life* they both expressed frustration. To them, it feels like Mark and Kristen's experience is starting to sound like a common storyline: urban dweller leaves high-paying job, moves to the country, and starts a farm with their extensive capital. Without question, examples of this scenario do exist. But Kristen was working as a freelance writer. And Mark had been farming for years, putting money away until he could buy his

own place. Mark spent $20,000 while starting his first farm, money he secured with a loan. Based on her fear of debt, Kimball makes Mark agree to no debt during their first year of farming. By the end of planting season they've already burned through their savings. As Kimball puts it, they are "bootstrapping" (168). They make do without basic necessities, things like a garden cart, a requisite tool for hauling heavy items. Hoses are limited and so they spend valuable time moving them from one area of the garden to another, in order to keep the vegetables watered. To get through the first year, they rely on the generosity of others. Starter plants are offered freely after their own starters freeze. The vet charges them less than his normal rate. Their neighbors let them use space in their greenhouse. Without this "generosity over and over again our first year," Kimball observes, "…I don't think the farm could have survived" (169).

But the farm does survive. Proving themselves determined to make their new farm a permanent operation, Kristen and Mark press on until one year has become two years and then two years turns into three. By the end of the memoir Kimball has six years of farming under her belt. They have purchased 80 acres of the farm, its barns and the house. And Kimball has learned some valuable lessons about farming, expressed aptly in the context of their new neighbor who purchases a second home near the farm and says, "'In my retirement, I just want to be a simple farmer. I want…*tranquility*'" (265). In response Kimball thinks to herself, "What you really want is a garden…A very, very small one." Farming, Kimball learns, is quite different from the way most urbanites (or maybe even most Americans everywhere) imagine it. "In my experience," she continues, "tranquil and simple are two things farming is not. Nor is it lucrative, stable, safe, or easy."

Perhaps it's due to the challenge of obtaining land and capital for farming that so many urbanites are bringing the farm to themselves by building farms right in the middle of their cities. City councils across the country are reevaluating the laws restricting their residents from keeping bees and laying hens. In 2010 the editors of *Backyard Poultry*, a popular magazine for chicken enthusiasts, reported their paid subscription total had climbed from approximately 15,000 to 80,000 in just four years (Seltz). On the Internet, BackYardchickens.com boasts over 235,000 members who generate about 6,000 posts per day (over 2 million each year). William-Sonoma, known for the quality of its high-end kitchen and housewares, even sells a backyard beehive starter kit.

But as discussed above, Novella Carpenter is not satisfied with using the word "farmer" to describe many backyard activities, including beekeeping or growing a few tomato plants in pots. As she explains:

> The term "urban farm" had become part of the popular vernacular, and many people—especially real, rural farmers—took umbrage at it. They were especially annoyed when the self-proclaimed urban farmers had only a few heads of lettuce and a pair of chickens. My definition of "urban farming" involved selling, trading, or giving the products of the farm to someone else. There couldn't just be a producer; there had to be a separate consumer. A real farm also had to involve some kind of livestock. (205)

To undertake these kinds of activities in the heart of an urban jungle requires real bravado, of which there's no shortage for Carpenter. She's also an opportunist. When she and her partner Bill decide to move out of their rented house in the more suburban Oakland Hills into a neighborhood known as GhostTown ("for all its long-abandoned

businesses, condemned houses, and overgrown lots"), it's the empty, weed-infested 4,500-square-foot lot next door that "sealed the deal" and helped her relieve concerns about living in a ghetto (11). On the day they move in a man is shot and left dead at a Carl's Jr., just a few blocks from their new place. "[T]he neighborhood had a whiff of anarchy," Carpenter observes, "real anarchy" (12). And amidst this "laissez-faire environment…anything went," whether it be drug dealing on the corners, pick-up soccer games in empty lots, her neighbor Buddhist monks making "enormous vats of rice on the city sidewalk." And so, Carpenter finds her own role in GhostTown: "squat gardening on land I didn't own."

Carpenter begins her squat garden "in fits and starts," and so, with the typical challenges of land and capital out of the way, she finds a home for the baby chicks inside the apartment and begins clearing the lot for planting seeds (18). But turning an overgrown lot with a "cracked concrete foundation where a house had once been and a large, circular patch of dirt" into a verdant, working garden in the middle of a ghetto does not come easily.

The first, and most unexpected, struggle for Carpenter eventually becomes her most common challenge. Not many weeks after planting seeds, Carpenter sits inside reading the paper when she sees a man "wearing a black skullcap and a leather jacket" enter the garden and pull an adolescent carrot (22). The garden becomes almost like a neighborhood u-pick farm, but for free: "There's Lou, a stooped man who helps himself to the lush crop of greens in the winter; a mute lady who carries a plastic sack into the garden and doesn't stop harvesting lettuce until that bag is swollen—or until I open the window and call down at her, 'OK! That's enough! Leave some for everyone else!'"

(22). Carpenter puts up with the harvesters as a part of urban farming, especially considering she's a squat farmer on someone else's property.

Carpenter discovers a way to grow vegetables in a lot with a concrete foundation by building planter boxes out of stray material Bill finds throughout the ghetto. The only items they purchase are wood screws and a drill. But keeping livestock in the city proves to be a little more difficult to accommodate. Carpenter raises two turkeys for Thanksgiving: Maude and Harold. Maude becomes too curious and flies over a ten-foot chain-link fence where two large dogs—a pit bull and Rottweiler—keep guard over an automotive shop: "Feathers were literally flying" (72). Carpenter scales the fence, metal cutting into her hands. When she drops to the other side the dogs back off, much to her surprise: "On the asphalt, Maude lay torn and dead, her white and black feathers dotted with blood" (73). The Rottweiler looks up and Carpenter pats his head—"He didn't know what he had done."

The opossum would not be so lucky. Not many days after the death of her turkey, it's 3:00 AM and Carpenter is standing over an opossum with a rusty shovel and begins the beating: "Over and over, I chanted, 'Don't.' Clang. 'Kill.' Thud. 'My.' Wump. 'Ducks.' My chant was instructional but also moot, as the opossum I was beating had already killed a duck and a goose" (75). After a few hits the decapitated opossum lay limp and lifeless. Just a few months after receiving her box of chicks in the mail with anticipation, "the mangled bodies of some members of the poultry package lay in a heap" and Carpenter is "seriously contemplating putting [the opossum's] head on a spike and posting it in the garden as a warning to all other predators" (76). Carpenter's passion for creating a garden in the city, one providing plant and animal life in the midst of the

ghetto, has turned into a fit of rage and an obsession for gaining her "bloody revenge." "How far I had fallen," she acknowledges.

Things like stolen carrots and mauled chickens are certainly difficult challenges for any urban farmer attempting to sustain oneself in the city. But life in the city for anybody, especially in neighborhoods like GhostTown, presents unique challenges Carpenter isn't prepared for. Eventually Carpenter feels like she understands this neighborhood, the one where she had "at first been reluctant to walk around…gathering weeds for the chickens" (96). She grows to become a part of GhostTown: "I liked to think I understood our 'hood's dynamic and my place in that dynamic as the resident, slightly batty, urban farmer." That is before a group of teenagers circles her on her bicycle one night. One of them kicks her tire and then reveals a hand gun. In that instant Carpenter must have wanted to run. She admits that, "I had nearly pissed my pants with fear." But instead she "began a strange oration, which at its heart was motherly" (97). By the time she finishes telling them how easy it would be to get themselves killed in their neighborhood, Carpenter is in tears, but filled with love. "You have to be careful…I care about you," she tells them (though she'd never met any of them). "Please be careful or you'll end up dead."

Upon arriving home she rehearses the experience for Bill. She seems to be worrying less about herself than about the realities of a world where things like that happen: "I cried in the steamy bathroom about the stupidity and injustice in this world, the cycles of violence that seem like they will never end, and my inability to change anything" (97). Bill asks her if she wants to move. She tells herself that she doesn't have to live in a place like this. But then she looks at her hands, her fingers covered in dirt, and

she can't "imagine any other neighborhood where I could have turkeys and chickens, bees and the squat garden. That lot, that verdant place, destined to become condos. If I lost the lot, if the bulldozers came, that would force us to move on" (98).

More than just narratives about the foibles of first-generation farmers, *The Dirty Life* and *Farm City* are really tales of personal transformation. Near the end of her epilogue, in her blunt, yet lyrical, voice, Kimball writes, "And this is the place where I'm supposed to tell you what I've learned" (269). And reflecting the dominant theme of physical labor, she continues, "Here's the best I can do: a bowl of beans, rest for tired bones." And she's not just trying to be witty or clever. These things, she writes, "have comforted our species for all time, and for happiness' sake, they should not slip beneath our notice. Cook things, eat them with other people. If you can tire your own bones while growing the beans, so much the better for you."

In addition to the physical transformation—calloused hands, swollen fingers, muscular arms—Kimball gains a new emotional perspective. Reflecting back on her transition to farm life, she believes it was the chance for gaining "something knowable" that drew her to Mark and to farming (269). If she moved from the city—"grasping out of chaos, personal and general, at the cliff end of blithe youth"—to a farm and small town where she "could chart and understand every person and his connections, every acre, each plant, each animal," well that would naturally lead to the ability to know and understand "the trajectory of each thought, emotion, and action" (269-70).

But the realities of her life on the farm with Mark prove quite the opposite. Instead she learns that, "The town is unknowable, marriage unknowable, the farm—just a single tablespoon of its soil—is a confounding mystery" (271). But Kimball becomes

comfortable with the inability to know. And despite that inability she explains how, "as the weeks ticked into months, into seasons, as I slowly became a farmer, something else emerged, and it was something to hold on to, something less slippery than knowing" (271): "Unknown outpaces known like to do outpaces done. These acres are a world. What answers has the ground offered? Only the notion that there are answers. Underlying soil is bedrock, and if you dig deep enough, you'll hit it. That's the closest I've come to surety, and it is enough for me" (273).

Carpenter's attempt at farming in an urban landscape also results in unexpected personal transformation. Farming an empty lot without ownership comes with its own unique challenges, such as the inability to know the future. All of her hard work to turn that empty lot into a verdant oasis in the midst of a ghetto can be taken away from her at any time. It takes some time, but eventually Carpenter comes to terms with that reality. Looking over what she'd worked so hard to create she realizes how interconnected she and that farm have become, regardless of legal ownership:

> The body before me was that of an urban farm. Before long, I imagined, I would leave it, with more nutrients, more plants in the soil for the bulldozers to unearth. But in leaving it, I would take it with me, too. Not just in my body, which had ingested its riches and grown strong in the working of the farm, but in my spirit—all the things I had learned, my singing heart, my smile lines, my aching bones. I hadn't truly owned any of this place. It had owned me. (267)

It seems that for both Carpenter and Kimball personal transformation from living the life of a farmer—whether in the country or city—involves not only physical change but

mental and spiritual growth as well. For Carpenter part of that includes having the confidence that whatever becomes of her empty lot she will continue her journey as a farmer: "I knew that wherever I went I would continue to grow my own food, raise animals, love and nurture life in places people thought were dead" (269). Perhaps most important, after a long road that began with a shipment of chicks in the mail she can say, "[I]f anyone asked, I could say: I am a farmer."

Two years after the day I first helped Jessica and Jeremy on their farm I meet up with them to help braid garlic. It's nice to see them again, especially doing something they love so much. Jessica gives me, and the others who've come to help, a quick tutorial on braiding garlic. We are to select eight strands of garlic and place them in a line of four pairs. Jessica likes to have bare feet so she can hold the bulbs down with her feet while she braids the strands behind them. She says to think of it like doing a French braid. I'm trying to stay optimistic, but as soon as she compares this to braiding hair, especially the more complicated French braid, my fear is that I'll be of no use this evening.

But I give it a chance. And slowly I begin to produce a few examples of braided garlic, though my braids appear to be somewhat loose and lopsided. It's a muggy August evening and beads of sweat are rolling down the sides of my forehead. I thought this would be more relaxing. But I'm enjoying the experience. Jessica and Jeremy's friends are here and Jessica's mother and father have joined us. In fact, we're at her parent's house, where Jessica and Jeremy are currently living. Money is tight this summer, and the pleasure of this evening is dulled somewhat by the reality everyone here recognizes but doesn't want to talk about.

This is the only farm activity Jessica and Jeremy will engage in this growing season. The garlic was actually planted the previous winter. Their lease ended after last year's harvest and they were not invited to renew the contract. They didn't seem particularly eager to continue their relationship with the owner of the place anyway. In an attempt to soothe her disappointment, Jessica has been referring to this as their Farm Sabbatical. They spend as much time as possible backpacking and river rafting, staying away from the valley, presumably to help them think about other things than all the farm work they should be doing. But one thought continues to linger, weighing them both down. Where do we grow next year?

Their situation, trying to farm without land ownership, makes me return to the questions I've asked ever since meeting them, and ever since reading about this wave of young farmers. Will these young farmers have the stamina to turn their efforts into something more than a trend? Is this truly a social movement? Or just a fad? Are these farmers just going to be the inheritors of a long line of failed agrarian movements?

Whether this will also be the case for this new generation of agrarians that seeks to farm using sustainable methods, utilizing small-scale operations, and working to narrow the divide between farmer and consumer remains to be seen. A recent article for the *New York Post* reveals that there are plenty of "hipster urban farmers" who aren't prepared for what they're getting into. Apparently, animal shelters are "inundated with unwanted hens" (Blaustein). I'm reminded of a secondary meaning for greenhorn: "a naïve or gullible person; someone who is easily tricked or swindled" (*Dictionary*). For every article I read about a successful first-generation farmer, I find another about someone who gave it a run and finally had to call it quits after failing to make enough

profit. Or I read about others, like Eva Teague, whose fate remains undetermined. She continues to pursue her dream of farming and she even found a lease for 15 acres beneath the mountains in Colorado. Someday she hopes her farm will be enough to support herself financially. But so far she's still working evenings as a waitress (Runyon). Clearly the obstacles for these farmers are significant. But are they insurmountable?

In a way this question is just part of the larger, long-contested debate between supporters of industrial agriculture and supporters of small-scale farming. Eventually, the fate of first-generation farmers will be determined by consumers. But curiously the debate, and the choices of consumers, will continue to be influenced by the written word. As quoted in a previous chapter, literary scholar William Conlogue contends that the "literary response" to this debate, "is the place where the debate is most fully alive and where the arguments are most clearly framed" (4). I agree. And I believe the increasing amount of new creative writing from purveyors of this new movement represents one of the strongest arguments for small-scale farming in the twenty-first century and should provide confidence for this millennial generation of farmers.

One of the most passionate defenders of the American family farmer, Victor Davis Hanson, can also be the most cynical about the future of farming (although he would probably call his view realistic). Hanson contends that we have entered a "third wave of American agrarianism," precisely an "agrarian Armageddon" (quoted in an earlier chapter) (*Fields* xi). Hanson can also be extremely critical of certain contemporary attitudes about or approaches to farming. If he were to have a problem with young, first-generation farmers it would be that their movement came from some notion of "a romantic hideaway of the mind where folks can return to childhood innocence and the

security of clapboard house, cornfields, and baseball." But I believe the memoirs of Kristen Kimball and Novella Carpenter demonstrate a complexity of understanding for farming that goes beyond simple nostalgia or romanticism.

One of Hanson's arguments for the importance of agrarianism to the history and culture of America suggests that language, ideas, and culture are what make a group of people—such as young farmers—valuable to our country: "[O]f all the bequests that agrarianism has given America, in its eleventh hour it has offered up its penultimate and most precious treasure, the preservation of its language" (*Fields* 31). While their numbers may still be few, these young farmers are making themselves heard. And thanks to their creative voices, in addition to their innovative farming, they are extending the eleventh hour of agrarianism in this country.

And even if the momentum of food production never shifts away from the industrial, stories from the likes of Carpenter and Kimball signify the need for a new examination of and discourse about farming. Their memoirs indicate that a new generation of farmers is gaining the kinds of experiences and insights unique to agrarians, the absence of which in our country makes Hanson so concerned about the disappearance of the American farmer. While the American farmer is "perhaps not inherently noble," he writes, "he is different, vastly different, from almost all other types of citizens…He is distinct because he is shaped solely by the growth of plants, his success dependent on his degree of skill in coercing food from the earth" (*Fields* xvii). While the likes of Kimball and Carpenter, Jessica and Jeremy, may not ever produce more than a fraction of our country's food, their presence in the field demonstrates a new energy and passion for farming among younger Americans. Further, the presence of Kimball and Carpenter (and

other young farmer-writers) on the page reveals the inseparability in this country of farming and stories and the influence of those stories on our perception of agriculture, farmers, and food.

Conclusion

For Kith and Kin

Six years have passed since I moved to southeast Idaho to study at ISU and made my initial solitary visit to the farm on a gray, rainy day. Now, on the verge of completing my dissertation and finishing the doctoral program in English in this July of 2014, I'm here at Frank and Jenile's farm again. There are no clouds in the sky and the heat is stifling. From the road's edge I look out over Frank's first field of 20 acres. Richard Sheppard, who still leases Frank's 40 acres from my dad, is farming wheat this year, and even though the wheat is still green and just over knee-high, the way it ripples in the wind feels exhilarating. But this feeling is quickly drowned out by the reality that someone else is responsible for growing this crop. I envisioned this would be my wheat by now. But I'm still a visitor here.

Here at Frank and Jenile's farm little has changed since my visit six years ago. Soon after that first visit the local congregation asked my dad for permission to paint the walls and replace the carpet in order to provide a living space for a family in need. The Killians lived here at the farm for about four years before leaving without notice. The house and yard look just as shoddy as when the itinerant workers left. Overgrown trees and shrubs obscure the house. Weeds have overrun the front and back yards, the stock yard, the barns, and Jenile's garden. Without human residents, mice are finding ample space and opportunity for building large nests. I've already found nests inside the tractor's engine cover and down inside the fruit cellar. A small pile of carpet fibers spread across the floor inside the house suggests mice are seeking shelter there as well. But mice

aren't the only residents. Feral cats, finding sanctuary inside the house while devouring their capture, have left several piles of feathers in two different rooms.

On my first visit six year ago, I brought along Gary Paulsen's *Clabbered Dirt, Sweet Grass*. Today, instead of a book, I have my wife Brianne and our eighteen-month-old son Ezra with me. The last time Brianne joined me at the farm, we still lived in Reno. We drove to Pocatello to visit the university after being accepted to the program and while here I wanted her to see the farm, the place I hoped we could make our home. The condition of the farm and its distance from the nearest small town appeared to overwhelm her. She cried that day.

Brianne is in good spirits today. While I don't believe this will be my last visit to the farm, this visit feels, in some way, like we're saying goodbye, both to the farm and to Idaho. Brianne is taking photographs of me all over the farmhouse and yard (many with Ezra in my arms) and documenting the current appearance of the place. I realize, however, if this visit was intended to persuade her that we should move here, she might be crying again.

For fifteen years I've been hoping to become a farmer here at Frank and Jenile's farm. But the older I become the more I realize that life is nearly impossible to orchestrate. And so I've finally begun to accept the reality that the farm will never become my home. I've realized, grudgingly, that I'm not a Prodigal Farmer. If the farm ever became my home it would be the site for my endeavors and struggles as a first-time farmer. A Millenial Farmer.

While my dad's youth on the farm has shaped the culture of our family for many years, I am not a farmer. I am not even a farmer's son. My dad is the farmer's son. And

my original plan to find a faculty position at the university near the farm, so that I could pursue some vague mission of continuing our family's legacy at this site, has not played out the way I've imagined it in my mind for so many years. While I've applied for different positions at the university on three separate occasions, I have had no success.

Perhaps more significant than my inability to find work near the farm, I married a woman who is happier living in an urban environment than in a rural community that is home to just a few hundred residents. I knew when I began falling in love with her back in Reno that these types of differences could one day add an extra hurdle to accomplishing my goal for living and working on Frank and Jenile's farm. Even if I had obtained a position at the university, I'm confident Brianne would not be happy living here. For a time I fought these differences. Or tried to pretend they didn't exist. For a while I thought this meant giving up my plans completely. But over time Brianne has gained an appreciation for my desires to become a farmer in some future, still undetermined, location and manner. And her support has made it easier for me to trust that eventually we will find a compromise, shaped by where we live and what kind of property we can find.

But even if Brianne did feel willing to live at Frank and Jenile's place it's still not clear whether I'd receive my dad's support (without which I could not move forward since he owns the farm). For years my dad and mom have hinted they might build a new house here and retire at the farm. However, with each passing year since he bought some ranch property in southern Oregon, my dad has become increasingly invested in his operations there, in his pastures, his steers and chickens, in the clientele who purchase his hay and beef. Still, my dad holds on to Frank's farm, unwilling to relinquish the place

where he grew up, the place that shaped so much of the person he has become. At times he's implied he's waiting to see what I do next. If I were to get a job at the nearby university, then perhaps he'd build a new house at the farm for me and Brianne (with a second master bedroom for visits by him and my mom).

The idea is compelling, but it's also painfully ironic. When my dad and mom visited us a week after Ezra's birth, my dad took occasion to speak to me about my intentions for farming while the four adults sat around the dinner table. As I held Ezra in my arms, so frail and helpless, my dad began talking about my future. If I received a position at the university near the farm it would be his pleasure to help us build a house. I could keep some animals there and raise a small vegetable garden. It would be a great place to live out some of my interests, not unlike he's done at his place in Oregon. I could even make some money, as he does, but just enough to pay for the costs. Like a hobby. But I wouldn't be a real farmer. I needed to give up my idea of making it a working farm. He would continue to lease the 40 acres.

As he spoke I carefully avoided making eye contact with him. To live at the farm under the circumstances he described would have felt incomplete. I never wanted to live and work there unless I could give a full effort to achieving my goal of making Frank's farm a working farm again. While I listened to my dad give me one last speech about the farm, my eyes rested on Ezra. I hated listening to my dad's comments discouraging me from pursuing my dreams, especially during this occasion for celebration. But maybe the timing was completely appropriate. My future, with my little family, will take me elsewhere.

So what happens to the farm now? When I asked this question fifteen years ago I decided to make myself the answer. Now, so many years later and still without an answer, the same question was on everyone's mind two months ago when my parents and siblings (and their spouses) joined me and Brianne in Pocatello to celebrate my graduation. The answer rests with my dad. In truth, it always has. If I had to guess, I don't believe he's ready to determine the answer. He's never told me why he still holds onto Frank's farm; but whatever the reason, he doesn't seem ready to let go of the farm just yet.

If my dad were to sell the farm to Richard Sheppard, then Frank's 40 acres become just another tiny nondescript portion of an industrial-scale farm. If he keeps the farm but nothing changes then it remains a physical memory of a period of farming that no longer exists in this country. But not really an adequate physical memory, because with each passing season the farm becomes ever more decrepit. As Gunnar says in Paulsen's book, when the son or sons—or grandsons in my case—don't farm, "the brush will take it back, the farm, all of it" (xv). Instead the farm becomes a fading and decaying memory of the place that only existed because of the constant daily labor of Frank and Jenile.

I return to Paulsen's questions after he talks to Gunnar while seated on the side of the deceased horse: "How can it end that way? The horse goes on but not the man, not the farm—how can that be? Who will make him go on and on so that the things of him, the way of him will not stop, will not end?" (xv). Since fifteen years ago, all I've wanted was to make this story end another way. I wanted the man and woman—Frank and Jenile—to

go on. Making their place a working farm again, I believed, would keep them going for those of us who remain after them.

As I walk around outside the farmhouse and try to imagine what life would have been like here for me and Brianne, I wonder what to do next. How else will Frank and Jenile go on in me? Several years ago, accepting that I wouldn't be living and working at the farm would have meant complete failure to me. No other alternative would have been worth considering. The farm, this physical space, meant everything. This place, and its meaning to our family, was the original reason I felt compelled to become a farmer. Does accepting a future of farming at another location mean I am giving up? Perhaps not, but one thing is for certain—it means that I won't be saving the farm. It's out of my hands. (Perhaps it was never really in my hands.) And eventually this physical reminder of Frank and Jenile will disappear for their children and for me and my cousins, if it already hasn't.

So is it possible to keep Frank and Jenile going without the farm? My dad explained to me recently that Frank is often with him when he's working at his small ranch in southern Oregon, moving water over his lush pastures, cutting and bailing hay in the summer heat, and moving steers from pasture to pasture. The physical location is certainly not the same. But while my dad's place is hundreds of miles away from Frank's farm, the labor and activities make him feel Frank's presence, almost as if my dad was a teenager again, working beside his father. (This is not unlike the thoughts and feelings I have shared with my mother and sisters about Jenile while baking her bread recipe, preparing strawberry jam or chili sauce, or cooking a summer dinner almost entirely from fresh vegetables harvested from the garden only minutes earlier.)

I thought my studies—my work with words, literature, and stories—would help me save the farm. Is it possible, even if Brianne and I will not be settling on the farm, for my efforts to help Frank and Jenile to go on? As I quoted Wendell Berry in Chapter One, I feel that I "have an obligation to remember these people [Frank and Jenile] and live up to them—be worthy of them" (Fisher-Smith 52). Berry is speaking of communities and how each generation is responsible to the other, in part by providing a handbook created from memory, "a kind of operator's manual for the use of the immediate place." Even if I never live at their farmhouse or till and plant their fields, never use the "immediate place," I want to move forward in another place, by employing an operator's manual compiled from Frank and Jenile's memory.

I believe anyone, including a non-farmer, can benefit from the handbook made from the previous generation's memory. But after my dad's comments during my parents' visit to meet Ezra I felt defeated. Am I any closer to becoming a farmer now than I was fifteen years ago? Brianne and I talk often about suffering from the same challenge that most young farmers have: no land and no capital. But after so many years of reading and writing about farming (and thinking about my future at Frank and Jenile's farm) I couldn't wait any longer to begin. I searched for something I could do now to actually start accomplishing my goal. Enough talking. Enough reading. Enough writing.

But what can I do without land and without capital? The recent growth of interest in small-scale farming and local foods has given birth to a cottage industry of food products made from local farms using sustainable methods. These producers process and market everything from pickles and relish to mayonnaise and mustard using words like "local," "small-batch," and "artisan" to advertise their products. Not only does this

cottage industry provide unique opportunities for entrepreneurs it also provides an outlet for farmers who face the challenge of distribution to customers when their acreage and variety of goods do not make wholesaling a profitable option. By cutting out the middle stages of business, and bypassing distributors, small farmers keep more money for themselves and provide customers (such as these cottage industry food processors) a fresher, more local product.

During many hours of daydreaming about my future farm I've imagined possible solutions for distributing my product directly to consumers: farmers' markets, CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), roadside stand, storefront, direct farm visits, even online orders and home delivery. One of these solutions includes processing my own fresh foods for consumers to enjoy in another form throughout the rest of the year, after the harvest season ends. While I have no land today and currently grow no fresh food of my own (other than two small garden boxes), I began to wonder why I couldn't begin gaining experience and customers by purchasing fresh produce from local farmers and creating a product for market.

Over the past few months, during the evening hours when I needed a break from the demands of completing a doctoral degree, I began to sketch out ideas for a small-scale food business. How could I combine all the influences that brought me to this point, including family, literature, and food?

Eventually I conceptualized and began making a budget for a business called "Kith & Kin: Vintage Foods." The phrase "Kith and Kin" certainly evokes notions of family but for me something about it also elicits a sense of language and story. Food and family are deeply connected. As discussed earlier in the dissertation, for my dad the

notion of "farm food" embodies simple foods made from fresh ingredients grown and raised on the farm. Any processing of food is minimal and mostly done on the farm in the form of canning fruits and vegetables, baking homemade bread, and churning butter. "Kith & Kin" represents my attempt to share some of my family's food culture, especially its sense of "farm food."

For now there is no farm and very limited capital. Although I hate using the word hobby here, it's really the money someone else might use for personal interests that supports my initial efforts with "Kith & Kin." In the meantime I keep searching for a full-time teaching job. For now my desire is to gain business experience that will benefit me once there is a farm. I want to be ready with a companionship business when a future farm begins providing fresh food for processing. But for now I will be required to purchase fresh fruit from farms around the region. So I will begin small, selling only two different foods in the first year—jam and honey. The recipes for three flavors of jam—strawberry, apricot, and pear—are my own, but my interest in taking fresh foods and adding labor and skill to make a new product is rooted in Jenile's kitchen (though only by memory) and my mom's kitchen, where I first gained hands-on experience baking bread (from Jenile's recipe), canning fruit, and processing jam.

I don't want to simply mimic what has already been done during the recent surge of available "local" and "artisan" foods in various regions around the country, catching a wave of momentum until the trend fades. Co-opted by industrial companies, the word "artisanal" has already lost its meaning. Burger King's "Chef's Choice" hamburger is served on an "artisan bun," Domino's offers an "artisan pizza," and Tostitos sells a line of "artisan recipes" corn chips.

So why did I select the word “vintage”? Certainly the word “vintage” risks adopting a trendy category considering the word is often used when referring to a retrospective style of fashion. But in addition to denoting an earlier time, vintage can also imply something of greater quality, not to mention the notion of the harvest or one particular year of the harvest.

And so with a story (still vague at best) to build upon, I hired a designer and began selecting containers and images and fonts that I felt would represent my story. Last week, when I should have been completing the final revisions of my dissertation, I drove with my family 110 miles south of Pocatello to Brigham City, Utah and connected to Highway 89 at the beginning of “Utah’s Famous Fruit Way.” The apricot season was almost over and I didn’t want to miss my chance. After comparing the fruit and prices at two different fruit stands I purchased four bushels of Goldrich apricots for $17 each, totaling approximately 100 pounds of fruit. In another month I will purchase eight flats of strawberries from a farm in St. Anthony (about 25 miles north of Frank and Jenile’s farm) where they utilize an inventive method of growing strawberries vertically. And finally, toward the end of summer and beginning of fall, I will find a grower of pears (likely the closest will be in Caldwell near Boise). By the end of the harvest season I will have produced approximately 100 jars of each flavor of jam. While visiting southern Oregon in August I will purchase approximately ten gallons of raw honey from my brother, an anesthesiologist and bee keeper, who currently maintains about 65 hives.

The results of this effort remain to be seen. Admittedly it will be a modest beginning, a business on the side. Will I have any real success? Can my business grow?

With time, will these efforts lead to land and capital? To a farm of my own? Or will it only be an intellectual exercise of sorts?

I don’t know.

But I hope, in some form, the things of Frank and Jenile and the legion of other family farmers (many of whose lives have been chronicled in memoir, fiction, and poetry), the way of them, will go on in me.

Pedagogical Chapter

Blurring Department Boundaries:

Employing Personal Narrative in the Literature Classroom

Responding to inquiries about my dissertation-in-progress has been almost as interesting as the process of research and writing itself. For most, it seems, farming and literature do not seem like a natural combination of topics. But even more memorable than discussing research topics has been the experience of describing my effort to incorporate personal narrative into my scholarship. Most that I've talked to have never come across a work of narrative scholarship and have a difficult time imagining what it might looks like—So is it like a memoir? A novel? Journalism? Others appear just skeptical. How do you write creatively and critically at the same time?

In an opinion piece written by Gerald Graff, former president of the Modern Language Association, he wonders why we don't ask questions like this more often: "The connection between creative writing and conventional literary study is another of the many questions about writing…that we avoid discussing just because we can" (271). We can avoid these discussions Graff continues, because due to the nature of institutions we have to incorporate specialization into our departments. While he acknowledges that we can't avoid necessary division and specialization of labor, he does ask why we accept the "failure to connect the specialized functions, something that would require that we not only talk to each other about the connections but actually work together in our teaching." In his brief piece he explores some of the benefits that could be derived from an increased integration between the creative and literary tracks in an English department.

As a result of discussing my dissertation-in-progress I have had discussion, both external and internal, about the relationship (or lack thereof) between critical literary study and creative writing in the study of English. My efforts to incorporative narrative with my scholarship as a doctoral candidate led me to contemplate whether personal narrative could be a benefit to undergraduate students in literature courses I might teach in the future. Couldn't personal responses to literature (explored through creative writing assignments) be a benefit to a student also working to respond critically to a literary text?

Looking ahead to a possible future in academic instruction, I think often about literary instruction. I've only ever taught three courses in literature. And while I completed one excellent course in literature pedagogy and two supervised teaching internships, I feel self-conscious about my experience and instruction for teaching literature. Still, when Elaine Showalter, prominent literary critic and former President of the Modern Language Association, lists "lack of training" as one of seven types of anxiety experienced by new college instructors, I believe she is describing a previous generation. While her audience, presumably, is made up of new, developing, or future instructors, her real-life examples come from those "tenured professors at the beginning of the twenty-first century [who] picked up teaching through painful experience, doing unto others as was done unto us" (4).

Thanks to Composition studies—that ever-expanding subfield of English studies where scholars and teachers can make a living exploring pedagogy and methodology for teaching writing—and the inclusion of composition teaching seminars into the curricula of graduate programs across the country, the majority of today's emerging instructors have, or will, cut their teaching teeth in a composition classroom. No, for myself and

other current graduate students teaching isn't, as Showalter suggests, full of disparaging tales of initiation and preparation consisting of just a few, offhand words of advice from mentors. The real challenge for today's young instructors becomes the transition from composition to literature, moving beyond the familiar environs of freshman writing classes into courses in literature and related subjects.

Indeed, as young instructors pass through composition's rite of passage—where pedagogy is the norm rather than the exception—and into literature, they come to a crossroads. Upon assignment to that first literature course, when the tasks for preparing a new course stare an instructor in the face—designing a syllabus, selecting reading materials, writing exams and assignments—he or she must ask certain questions: Do I adopt the pedagogy and methodology gained from teaching composition? Do I simply refer back to literature courses taken while a student and mimic practices observed there, "doing unto others as was done unto us"? In a field where discussions of pedagogy seem rare, do I co-opt literary criticism—a tool used primarily for interpreting literature—as my main method for how to teach literature? With nothing resembling the cornucopia of composition's pedagogical approaches to draw from new literature instructors, including myself, often find themselves beginning with even more fundamental questions: What should be the primary purpose of my literature course? When students finish the course, what skills and knowledge will they have gained? What kinds of practical methods do I use to achieve my goals for the course?

Many experienced educators have posed similar questions. Although the late literary critic Louise M. Rosenblatt's book *Literature and Exploration* was written over sixty years ago, a quick review of the diverse approaches used for teaching literature in

today's college English departments suggests that her sentiments are still relevant. Rosenblatt perceived "an unbridged gulf between anything the student might actually feel about [literature] and what the teacher, from the point of view of accepted critical attitudes and his adult sense of life, thinks the pupil should notice" (59). As a result literature becomes, for the student, "something academic, remote from his own present concerns and needs" and for teachers, an unbalanced emphasis is placed on preconceived notions of what literature means, particularly "whatever can be systematically taught and tested" (59, 62). Thirty years later, writing of education in general, the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire echoed Rosenblatt's argument. "Education is suffering from narration sickness," Freire wrote, contending that the teacher-student relationship, at any level, often consists mainly of a narrator—the teacher—and "patient, listening objects"—the students (71). In Freire's now well-known banking metaphor for education, this kind of student-teacher relationship results in instruction simply becoming "an act of depositing" (72). This kind of depository teaching, where little emphasis is placed on student cognition, is still an issue for contemporary instructors and researchers.

In his book *What the Best College Teachers Do*—a rare blend of scholarship and practical application—Ken Bain dwells at length on how students learn. After direct analysis of classroom subjects and review of current research on intellectual development, Bain contends that students do not simply receive and memorize knowledge; instead, students learn by constructing knowledge (27). Borrowing from the models of other researchers, Bain places students in three categories: received knowers (equivalent to the "banking model"), procedural knowers (or those students who learn to play the learning game by meeting criteria required by instructors), and "independent,

critical, and creative thinkers" (self-aware students who recognize and value the ideas and skills used for learning) (43).

In a literature course, a variety of methods could be employed to help students progress along this continuum from received knowers to independent, critical, and creative thinkers. Many instructors utilize expository writing that allows students to demonstrate their own understanding of a text while practicing skills of critical analysis. An emphasis on writing in the literature classroom might be the best avenue for students to achieve that much-desired status of independent, creative, and critical thinkers, as described by Bain, as well as an "unobstructed impact between reader and text," for a "form of emotional release" and "more complex satisfactions from literature," as hoped for by Rosenblatt (71). However, one great obstacle towards the use of writing meeting its potential in a literature classroom is what many perceive as a gulf between reading and writing in academics. Peter Elbow, the prominent scholar and writing pedagogist, calls it a war. Despite the fact that we traditionally assume that reading and writing go hand in hand for education, Elbow argues that in most classrooms "reading is privileged over writing" (10). We have been "brainwashed into thinking," he urges, "that reading comes first and reading is easier than writing" (23).

Nowhere is this more true than in literature classes, where the text rules. And why shouldn't it? Course titles and descriptions imply that literature is the dominant focus for such a class. As a result, any writing composed by students in a literature course tends, in Elbow's view, to "serve [the] reading" (10). My own experiences in literature courses while an English major bear this out. Typical writing assignments were not designed to evoke personal responses to the text. The emphasis, at least as it seemed to me at the

time, was on deciphering *the* meaning of the text, and not on thinking for myself through critical analysis. And even when assignments encouraged personal response to a text, writing instruction was completely absent, the assumption being that students gained their writing skills elsewhere, such as in early composition classes. As a student I did not typically attempt to play the learning game, but writing assignments in undergraduate literature courses seemed to almost beg for students to act like received knowers.

So how can literature instructors close the gap between reading and writing? As suggested above, more writing has the potential to benefit students of literature by helping them become Bain's independent and *critical* learners, if writing assignments call for students to forge new interpretations of the text. But would this fully satisfy Rosenblatt's call for instruction geared toward a student's personal response to and interaction with literature or Bain's call for independent, *creative* thinkers. Elbow explains how giving writing equal authority to reading helps students recognize the creative qualities of making meaning from a text:

> If we gave more centrality to writing, it would help out with an important and vexing problem in the teaching of reading itself. That is, we often have difficulty getting students to see how the meaning of a text is actively created and negotiated—not just found as an inert right answer sitting there hidden in the text or in the teacher's mind or in a work of authoritative criticism. (14)

Can you hear echoes of Rosenblatt? In her text she urges instructors, again and again, to provide students with the chance to "handle their primary responses to a text," "to develop [their] understandings in the context of their own emotions and their own

curiosity about life and literature," to "have an unself-conscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction" (61, 63, 64). For Rosenblatt, Elbow, and others, this kind of student interaction with literature requires open, creative thinking. In other words, it seems possible that encouraging personal responses to a text can actually jumpstart a student's critical understanding of a text.

As counterintuitive as it may sound, is it possible for creative writing to play a vital role in literature classrooms in order to promote this kind of open, creative thinking? Can creative writing—a form long considered completely unrelated pedagogically to composition—become a useful tool for instructors to help students actively explore and make meaning from a text? I believe the answer is yes, but only if creative writing assignments do not replace the task of critical thinking in a literature classroom. These kinds of thinking (critical and creative), along with critical and creative assignments, must go hand in hand. And if creative assignments have any real purpose in a literature classroom, it is to help students become more personally engaged with a text, which will eventually provide a clearer (and more critical) understanding of a text.

Recently scholars of composition and rhetoric—a field known for questioning and pushing the boundaries of English studies—have sought to find common ground between composition and creative writing, two subfields of English studies generally viewed as operating on separate tracks. George Kalamaras argues that if greater pedagogical attention were placed on creative writing, "both composition and creative writing [would] have much to learn from one another," because they would be "seen in more fluid, reciprocal terms" (78). Ted Lardner suggests courses beyond the workshop as potential contexts for creative writing, asserting that creative writing can be "a practice of literacy"

(73). This alternate view will take time and require the field of creative writing to emulate, in some ways, composition's emphasis on pedagogy, a critical activity many in the field of creative writing have not been willing to engage in. As creative writing continues to gradually partake in the discourse of "talking about and questioning received notions of the author, or creativity or the writing process, or of 'good' writing or the goal of writing," creative writing can serve many purposes and in many courses beyond the creative writing workshop (75).

Perhaps most forward-thinking among composition scholars currently exploring the blurring of boundaries between expository and creative writing is Tim Mayers. In his insightful, ambitious study *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*, Mayers responds to scholars like James Berlin, Richard E. Miller, and Stephen North who all—in slightly different forms—call for a transformed English field, one where textual "production and interpretation are given equal weight," or where "literary study, composition, and creative writing [are combined] in a 'fusion' model where the concerns of each strand are continually brought into dialogue and negotiation" (24). Mayers' contribution to this discussion—in addition to his bold ideas for an overhaul of the entire field—includes the "possibility of theoretical scholarship in creative writing" (29). While his pedagogical emphasis is generally on the creative writing classroom, what makes his argument important here is his strong emphasis that "composition and creative writing are indeed poised for some kind of alliance," as are, I believe literature and creative writing (114). He works hard to make a case against creative writing's "privileged marginality," and its supposed absence of true pedagogy, as a subject that can't really be taught (10). His text implies that creative writing, just like

the expository writing taught in composition classrooms, can become a valuable method for learning about literature, such as for examining the ways literature has always been "such a contested terrain," with its "histories and implications" (151). If what Mayers argues is true, then creative writing can become a source of inquiry, a method for understanding literature as a field and for considering individual texts.

Scholars and instructors have begun to explore practical applications for creative writing in the literature classroom, not just for alternative assignments but as a legitimate tool to encourage independent, critical, and creative thought. The most typical application, and perhaps most obvious, involves writing assignments encouraging students to explore and respond to a piece of literature by writing creatively about similar subjects or themes, or in the same form or style. In an experimental course in England, designed to give students experience in "various 'modes of inquiry' through which knowledge is made within the discipline of English studies," a group of scholars and instructors undertook to "use creative writing as a way of exploring the perennial problem of whether one can ever 'voice the other'" (van Oostrum, Steadman-Jones, and Carson 556). The assignment, which required students to respond imaginatively to a particular passage from Alex Haley's *Roots* via a short piece of poetry, brought a certain amount of success:

> It gave the students insight into what being an author is far more than any of our lectures could have. In some cases, it also brought home to the students how far removed we are from the world of *Roots* but also how interconnected. When this kind of process unfolds unconsciously and

> unintentionally, it can even bring home to learners something of the magic of writing. (566)

Following this experience, teachers involved were able to argue for the potential of creative writing to teach literature, but with certain stipulations. The assignment must be "embedded in appropriate pedagogical practice" and "supported with appropriate learning resources" (556, 558). Despite the instructors' deliberate efforts to unite creative writing with inquiry and understanding, students often approached the assignment as a break from "real" work. In other words, a creative writing assignment loosely connected to class reading material—without careful assimilation with pedagogical goals—will often result in an assignment students don't approach with sufficient seriousness.

When Deborah Bowen began experimenting with creative writing in her literature courses, she hoped to decrease "student passivity" and increase "student productivity" when responding to a text (339). Her creative writing assignments—not unlike the project described above—are "premised upon the style, perspective, and genre of the texts read," and seek to achieve a much wider range of goals than simply writing creatively in a form (such as the sonnet) just so they can experience what it's like (340). In fact, Bowen has found that writing assignments of "imitation and extension of a text" often lead students to much more than mere mimicry, including greater critical awareness of a text's issues and appreciation for "the significance of a writer's ideological stance to his or her choice of language and form as much as subject" (341).

Another instructor, Phoebe Jackson, in order to "stress the linkage between reading and writing," turns to Peter Elbow's notion of "low-stakes" writing and includes an assignment to "take on a character's persona and describe his or her interactions with

other family members" (111, 112). Elbow argues—and has been doing so for some time—that "writing doesn't have to come first to be important" (21). Just as certain reading assignments are supplementary, writing assignments can fall along a spectrum, from "low-stakes" to "high-stakes" because "students come at purely analytic discussions of texts in a much more shrewd and energetic way when they have had a chance to try out some of the same kinds of writing in an experimental, playful, nongraded way" (19, 22). This kind of approach to creative writing in a literature course can be valuable. It might make the difference between students who approach creative writing openly and those who the instructors in England struggled with, weighed down by the pressure to write a "good" poem or story. Elbow continues:

> This approach is particularly important in getting students to try out imaginative pieces like those they are reading. Students are often nervous about writing poems, stories, or dramatic scenes/dialogues. We can help them by borrowing themes or structures from the reading. For example, a few key words or phrases from a poem can serve as a helpful springboard or scaffold that will help students find a way to write a poem or story of their own. Of course students need to be invited to treat imaginative writing as an experiment—not necessarily to finish or revise." (22)

These "low stakes" methods—often employed by composition teachers—can take pressure off students who have never tried to write creatively. Instead, these methods allow students to experiment freely and try new things without being overwhelmed by concerns with evaluation.

For Jackson, the main achievement of utilizing Elbow's "low-stakes" concept is not for her students to finish and polish a poem or story, but to learn through the act of writing that "meaning and interpretation of a literary text," just like students' creative writing pieces, develop in an "evolving process" (114).

Despite the fact these three approaches (literary response through creative writing, "imitation and extension of a text," and adopting a character's persona) to using creative writing in a literature classroom are similar, the results are diverse. While it came with significant challenges, the instructors in England used creative writing to investigate a literary text by exploring multiple interpretations. For Bowen, creative writing made her students more active and more engaged. Interacting with literary texts through their own creative endeavors gave students a "first-hand awareness of the uninnocent nature of the writing process," and as a result helped "facilitate the demise of naïvete and the rise of a constructive wariness on the part of the student critic" (343). Creative writing also gave her students more awareness of an author's choice of form and language, in addition to subject. "Not least important," Bowen concludes, "the students…enjoyed themselves" (341). For Jackson, by placing emphasis on creative writing through non-threatening methods, she pointed her students towards interpreting literature as a process, just like writing is a process.

Using creative writing in a literature course is not a new idea. However, many are hesitant to experiment with creative writing assignments for a variety of reasons, including a lack of pedagogical or personal experience with creative forms, assumptions about hard and fast borders within English studies, and a fear of creative writing only appearing as a break for students. Despite these legitimate concerns, instructors should

consider the possibilities for using creative writing in a literature class for its many potential benefits. For starters, it can help close the gap between reading and writing; in the process it can also completely change the way students approach reading. “Making writing more central in what was formerly just a ‘reading’ or literature course,” Elbow contends, “causes a major change in the way students come at the reading. They are braver, more lively, and more thoughtful. We read differently when we read like a writer” (22). Creative writing, carefully employed in the literature classroom, will give the student a chance to experience the process of making meaning from a text, moving far beyond traditional or expected interpretations, and especially beyond simple memorization of facts and information as passed on from the instructor. Creative writing brings a “constructivist approach to the reading of literary texts,” serving as a “complimentary function to scholarship” (Lim 165).

As experienced by the instructors discussed above, practical application of creative writing assignments is not easy; it requires experimentation and patience. Just as creative writing in a literature classroom blurs the boundaries within English studies, this approach also stretches the limits of students. It should be no surprise, then, that instructors will also have to leave their pedagogical comfort zone to find exciting and new possibilities for teaching literature.

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