Abstract

There was once a time in our culture when experience with farming—even if only through a family relative—was not unique. But now, there is a growing disconnect between those who produce the food, and those who consume it. In this collection of nonfiction essays and prose poetry, I make use of writing about Place to bring my experiences growing up on a family farm to others. Rather than using data and information to explain why we should care about rural life, I utilize a combination of vivid imagery, sensory details, and flowing prose to bring the reader into the agricultural world in a visceral way. I want the reader to taste cold rainwater, feel the heartbeat of a new lamb, smell the heavy scent of lumbering cattle, and hear the quiet whisper of cornstalks.

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Author's Statement

In my four years as a Creative Writing major, much of my time has been spent developing and expanding my own approach to writing, and now, at the end of my senior year, I have a better sense of who I am stylistically. When I started my major, I was instantly drawn to the works of Wendell Berry. Both his poetry and his essays reflect a perspective of rural life and simplicity that intensely resonated with me. Once I began exploring this style of writing, I discovered the novels *South of the Big Four* by Don Kurtz and Jane Smiley's, *Thousand Acres*. Both of these novels were written about agriculture and farm life in a way I never thought was possible.

Initially, it was my own background in agriculture that drew me to these texts. I grew up on a small family farm in East-Central Indiana, and upon entering college, I was concerned that much of my agricultural lifestyle would have to be left behind for literary pursuits. The above-mentioned poems, essays, and novels, however, showed me writers can, and do, write about life on the farm. Further, they can take the everyday life of farm work, and turn it into something intensely meaningful.

After reading literature about rural life, and experimenting by writing some of my own, I realized there was a common theme of Place in both what I read and what I wrote. I was extremely intrigued by the ways characters interacted with their environment, and vice versa—particularly when the environment centered around farming.

I kept this theme in mind when planning my honors thesis, and made it my goal to create a collection of nonfiction essays and prose poetry that highlighted
Place through my own interactions with the world I grew up in. To accomplish this goal, I had to first consider the purpose of the different genres, and then the purpose of the collection’s organization itself.

Of the two genres I used in my collection, prose poetry was the first, each poem serving the simple purpose of encapsulating a brief, specific moment or idea. To me, much of creating a sense of Place is creating a strong vision of the narrative’s world. My intent for the prose poems was to act like landscape paintings, providing vivid images of what I wanted the viewer (or, in this case, reader) to experience. Because of this, none of them are intended to have much more meaning than appreciating the simple beauty of the world I wanted to share.

An example from the collection is the poem, “Pink and Red Peonies.” The poem itself is simply about a moment when a summer thunderstorm hits, and has no meaning outside of capturing that instant in time. However, despite having no deep, “moral-of-the-story” meaning, it works to create Place by sharing a vivid sensory experience with the reader, drawing them further into my world.

The essays, on the other hand, are intended to have deeper meanings. I wanted to use the longer format to draw out specific ideas from Place. Because of their length, I had the room to create extended metaphors from my interactions with the settings of the narratives, and draw out main ideas or themes.

One of the strongest examples from the collection is the first essay, “A History in Dust.” Through the action of sweeping out the barn in the piece, I connect myself to my family, and then my family to our land—all through the dust and hay chaff I sweep off the floor. The interactions between the setting and myself create
metaphors, which in turn create meaning. Because of the important role narrative setting plays in developing that meaning, a strong sense of Place is created.

Besides thinking about the purposes of the genres I used, I also had to consider how the organization of the pieces itself would add to Place. With this in mind, I began with the poem, “Crushed Cans,” which focuses on country roads, and the “gods” that drive on them. My intent was to create a sense that just as a visitor arrives to the farm by road, so too would the reader.

After that, throughout the middle of the collection, the pieces all transition from one to another through similar imagistic or thematic elements. An example of this is the transition from the essay, “Under Harsh Conditions,” to the poem, “Soak.” “Under Harsh Conditions” ends with a hopeful raindrop, and “Soak” focuses on the feeling of being caught in a rainstorm. The two fit together nicely, both thematically and imagistically, one seeming to flow into the other. By transitioning in these ways, I hoped to create a sense of one, continuous piece, which as a whole creates a large, overarching theme of Place.

To round out the collection, I chose to end with the poem, “At the End of a Cornfield,” because it encapsulates what I would consider to be the perfect way to end a day. I wanted the reader to finish reading my collection the same way I would finish a day in the summer on our farm. The reader arrived as a stranger by road, and I hope that they leave as a friend, standing and watching the sun sink behind a quiet field of corn.

This is what I believe Place really comes down to—a connection between characters and their settings so strong, the reader is made to feel like a part of the
narrative's world. Partly, this is why my collection is entitled, "At the Edge of the Fence." In a period of time when agriculture is not a generally well-known or discussed topic, I wanted to meet my readers halfway, where the fencerow meets the road. And maybe—if they're willing—they'll stay awhile, arms resting on a fencepost, and let me tell them about where I come from.
At the Edge of the Fence
Crushed Cans

Hello, you gods of country roads, rumbling echoes of engines in empty fields. Your arms dangling from windows; your hats frayed and faded, threadbare. Used tins of Skoal clatter in cupholders, and sunglasses hang from the mirror where you watch the empty and crushed cans—Mountain Dew, Mr. Pibb—pirouette in the truck's bed.
Dew

I sit down on a leaning fencepost at the edge of a soybean field stretching before me like a lined sheet of paper. The even rows of soybeans break order with arching stems stretching, winding, and curling haphazardly in every direction. Casting its light like a fog, the setting sun fills the gaps between the dying, ready-to-be-harvested plants, and the pods glow with a golden aura, the fuzz covering them catching the sun as if it were dew.
A History in Dust

The broom bristles whisper, rustle across the smooth barn boards. Creaking and sighing, the boards bend and shift beneath my feet. Together, the broom and I move slowly, waltzing from one end of the barn to the other, kicking up dust, stirring the chaff in our wake. Yellowed sunlight shines through cracks in the siding, catching the dusty swirls and spirals, illuminating them as they drift from the broom’s shifting ballet. Above my head, barn swallows dart and dash through the old rafters, their short chirps burst back and forth as they rush through warm sunbeams.

From the wide barn door a breeze blows in, making the motes dance with sudden activity. The wind carries the smells of summer—sticky-fallen pears, fresh-cut grass, new-turned soil, perfumed-blooming blossoms, and the clean smell of warm air on a June day.

Shish-Shwish Shish-Shwish

The dust and hay chaff flies away as the broom swishes it to the side, revealing a past, a history beneath my boots. The grain of wood bends in long crescents, turning, arcing like a thumbprint stamped on each board. Knots and whorls in the timber stand out, marking once-upon-a-time branches. As more of the dust is swept to the side, more of these marks—these signs of identity—emerge.

The barn has been in our family since it was first built more than a hundred years ago. The boards that I’m sweeping are old, worn down, smoothed over, and
beat up from a past tied to our past. When I sweep them, I see small dings, pieces of wood missing, heads of nails polished silver, new wood patching holes—all signs of my family. Each injury to the boards was created by our influence, and, because of this connection, we have made them all unique. Without us, they would simply be dull, lifeless wood without a story, but our interactions have given them life. Each chipped edge, dented surface, and replaced nail adds to their history, and ties inextricably into our own.

*Shish-Shwish Shish-Shwish*

The hay chaff tumbles and twists away from the broom’s back draft. The bits of hay and fragments of straw fall from the broom and I, piling beside the wall of the barn like a mottled snowdrift. Each broken twig and torn strand of grass connects my family to our land. Like twisting roots, the chaff ties us to our ground.

The chaff is made up of hay and straw from all different years, some good and some bad. There are green pieces from the years that were just right, and darker pieces from the years that were either too dry or too wet. Each field has a connection to the chaff, pieces of tough chicory—dried blue flowers still attached—from the Hay Field, small yellow-flowered trefoil from the Pasture-on-the-West-Side-of-the-Road, and deep, green clover from the Al Lot. Each piece of chaff has a connection to a piece of our land, and they are all here in this barn together—all of our land is here on this floor.
Shish-Shwish Shish-Shwish

The Hay Field was the first field that I baled hay in, the first field I realized just how much work went into the tightly bound bales. I remember the scratches and cuts on my forearms from the dried grass and weeds, the ache in my fingers from the stiff wires, and the exhausted heaviness of my body after stacking the wagons with bales.

I remember being a child, standing in the Pasture-on-the-West-Side-of-the-Road watching my mother ride her horse around and around in the makeshift arena of mowed grass. The thistles spotting the pasture around me felt tall, like green skyscrapers topped with round violet flowers and drooping, needled leaves.

The AI Lot was the first place I saw sheep. I remember being afraid of the old ewes in the small barn that sits in its corner. They were loud, and at the time, felt gigantic. On the far side of the pasture sits the interstate, and I'll always remember the first time I stood there and realized how much I hated the constant static noise of the semi-trucks and commuting cars.

Shish-Shwish Shish-Shwish

The dust swirls, tumbles around me as I sweep. Each particle of dirt, each dancing mote, came from somewhere. They are fragmented, individual, and yet, they
are not wholly different from one another. Each holds a similar appearance, drifting with familiar randomness, and glowing in the sunlight with the same standard brightness.

I look to the side, hanging on the wall are old halters, old tools, old brushes, old ropes, and old hay. I can feel the roughness of the broom handle in my hands, the swaying rhythm of sweeping moving me forward. The dust could have come from anywhere or everywhere in this barn, decaying wood, decaying tools, decaying hay—a decaying way of life. It is in this dust and chaff I sweep off the floor, that I can see my history.

As morbid of a thought as it is, my family is here too. Within the smallness of these specks, there's an infinity of possibilities. In the innumerable bits of dust and particles, there could be bits of my family, remnant cells from my great-grandfather, or great-great-grandfather. Around me could be swirling Urba Carter, or even W.E., anything is possible. With each pass of the broom, I throw the dust into the air, dust made from the farm, the tools, the people who've farmed it—all trapped in time.

With each shushing brush of the broom, more of my history is thrown before me,

swirls around me,

spirals close to me,

and dances in the sunlight.
Great Chunks of Earth

In the evening, when the heat of the day is fading and the sun shines deep orange on the horizon, I dump crushed corn into three long troughs set in the middle of the feedlot. The cattle, who've already seen me, begin lumbering up from the dust and the dirt and the brittle, dried grass of the pasture. As they pass me at the gate, I become small, fragile next to their hulking bodies. Like great chunks of earth, they smell heavy and natural.
Between Green Beans and Rye

On a fencepost at the edge of the garden, a redwing blackbird belts out its song as I pull up another thistle from between the green beans and rye. The cool garden soil sticks to my fingers and darkens my nails, and down, next to the plants, I catch the deep, redolent smell of turned earth before I pull, the moment of tug and release, when roots tearing out of the ground pop and snap like cracked knuckles.
Underfoot

As children, my sisters and I tightrope walked on molehills, told by grandma to crush them, keep them out of the garden. In our innocence, we found pleasure in feeling the mounds and tunnels and homes crumple underfoot.
Replacing Old Fences

The old Ford tractor rumbles over the dried-earth-ruts in the field towards me, with my father waving from the wheel before shutting it down. The rhythmic putter of the tractor engine disappears, and the sounds of the birds in the field and woods around us come rushing back. I'm standing, looking at an old, broken down fence in front of me.

In the shade of the woods, I can hear the static hum of cicadas as the hot August sun beats down through the gaps in the leaves, casting mottled shadows on the wizened fence. The posts are crooked, weatherworn, scarred, and handicapped. The rusted wires hang limply off nails, drooping into the weeds and covered by seasons-old dead grass.

My father walks over to me, his cracked leather boots kicking up dust as he steps through drying patches of pasture sod, and in his hands he has a crow bar and two gardening spades. He sets the tools down, and we reach through the scratching blades of crisp, yellowed grass, and start pulling the wires up.

In a way, I think—while working on this remnant from another time, another way of life—this old fence reminds me of my grandfather. Like him, the decaying barrier is set in its ways and sure of its duty. It has endured, mainly because that's all it knows how to do. In this field, this old fence had a purpose for many years, and it is in this field that it still feels the need to continue the way it always has.

The corroded barbwire doesn't come up easy; it catches on the grass and pulls long, dried strands of the fescue up with it. Sometimes, the wire is even
covered by dirt and bits of stone. With time, the fence has become more and more rooted, enmeshed in the ground in which it was installed.

When the wire is pulled up, we bundle it into round loops of used, bent steel. We throw them in the back of the trailer, where soon the rest of this old fence will be added, behind the piles of emaciated metal strands. I turn back to the fencerow, and the feeling of working on our ground stirs something in my memory.

I remember the day when my parents finally got this land from my grandfather. My only visual memory of this event is of them standing in the kitchen, caught in a sunbeam next to the backdoor, hugging. I was maybe too young to really understand—or even remember very clearly—what this meant to them, or why this moment seemed so meaningful. But I do remember a feeling of relief, not really my own personal relief, but that of my parents. Something had changed for them, and though I was still young, I remember being able to feel that in our household every time my mother decided to repaint a room, or rearranged things in the barn. There was a sense of freedom from what my grandfather said and did, a sense that it was now their turn to run our part of the farm. It was an optimistic feeling that there was change happening.

My father and I turn to the bare posts, which—despite the way they look—are still semi-solid, as if stubbornly clinging to the ground they’ve always been in. Years of heavy winds and storms have worn the grain of the wood into stretching splits and gaps that lay on the surface like long, weathered wrinkles.
My father hands me a heavy gardening spade, and we start digging around the base of a post. We dig and dig and dig, but the farther we go, the more post we find. By the time we reach the bottom and manage to pull it out of the ground, we realize how deeply rooted it was. The post's base sat an arm's length under the surface, and looks as if it hasn't changed since the day my forebear tamped the topsoil tight around it. Above the ground, the post is cracked and hollowed from enduring time and the elements, but beneath the sod laced with the roots of fescue and timothy, the old wood is as solid and whole as the day it was set into the firm, clay-filled Indiana earth.

Next, we tackle a place in the fence patched with an old, broken gate, whose paint is nearly all peeled away and the metal covered in a thin layer of rough, sandpaper rust. Parts of the gate are broken, and falling apart, barely held together with bits of corroded baling wire. If only a few of these wires were removed, the gate would fall to pieces, useless and left forgotten in the field.

We throw the old, falling-to-bits gate into the back of the trailer, and get to work on removing its post, which—like the previous one—proves to be just as solid and stubborn. I take a break from chipping away at the clay and dirt with the spade, and watch my father working. I can see the contours of his back moving, straining under the blue chambray shirt. I wonder, then, if he will ever be like my grandfather. Will his back, which moves and works tirelessly now, ever be too stiff to work? Will his knees give out, and a walk to check the pasture fence become a job solely for me? Will I be in his place someday? Replacing the fence I'm helping him build?
Looking down at a piece of barbwire in the grass between my boots. Its curling strands are roughened and brown, two twisted barbs wrapped around the wires, one still sharp and pointed, the other worn down and smaller.

I think—not for the first time—about my father’s relationship with my grandfather. There is a fence between them I’ve never figured out, built with posts and wires of old arguments and conflicts. When they work together, each is separate and prickly like individual barbs. Whether its when sorting cattle, making hay, putting in fence, or any one of the myriad farm tasks, they’re always each like the two barbs in the grass at my feet. My grandfather plays the role of the worn barb: smaller, passive, confident in his experience, and unwilling to stop the work he’s always done. The sharper barb, I think, is like my father: strong, and always on the offensive when working with my grandfather.

I run my thumb over the sharp edge of the prickled barb. It wasn’t long ago I realized how much work my own father puts into making sure no fence is constructed between himself and I. Instead of a fence running between us, he has created a fence connecting us, something solid and well built. When we work together, we are the smooth, linear electric fence that will replace the rough barbed one. Rather than being individual barbs when we work, we are like a long electric fence wire, one unit with all our energies flowing wordlessly towards any task. There is no fence between us; we are instead part of a fence, linked and strong.
Soon, I stand up from resting, and walk over the rough ground to the post where my father is working. The sun bakes us from above, and I can feel the skin on my neck begin to burn. My cotton shirt sticks to my back, but before long my father and I uproot the post that was so set in its ways.

This process continues, and we slowly remove each post. They’ll be replaced with new ones, cut from tougher pine wood, painted in chemicals to keep the elements out, and placed into the ground using machine power and not man-power. Rather than being strung with strands of barbwire, they’ll hold heavy-duty electrified wire firmly affixed to the wood with plastic brackets. As beat-up and worn down as the old fence was, the new fence will be spry and young. All the weeds, dead grass, tree limbs and saplings that grew up in the unkempt fencerow will be removed. It will change the way this ground looks, and the shift in the generation will bring a new view to this part of the pasture.

My father and I finish tearing the fence out, and the old posts and wires are loaded onto the back of the trailer. I sit down on its edge, and can feel the rough, lichen covering the trailer bed under my palms. My father starts the tractor, and with a small rumble we drive off, bumping and bucking over the dry ground. As we putter away, I look back at the now empty fencerow. The sun casts mottled tree limb shadows over the bare spot along the edge of the woods ready to be filled with something new.
Quiet Gaps

I pass through quiet gaps between tree trunk pillars, pews of rotting logs and fallen limbs, and a broken-at-the-base-stump altar. Branches above me, with leaves lit like stained glass, bend into bark-skinned gothic arches holding the roof up, containing the silence.
Steady Cadences

Beneath my bones and nerves and muscle and skin, I feel the new lamb's heart beating as I hold him. From behind his rough, newborn wool comes the flutter of his life, pulsing just a few inches from my own. I feel the steady cadence of my heart and his, and imagine the two of them beating quietly together like poetry in a prayer.
Pulling Nails

It starts with a hammer and a crowbar, or as we call it at home, “a wreckin’ bar.”

In front of me is the decaying body of an old shed built by my great-great-grandfather. The caved-in roof, broken sides, and rotting wood make it lean against the side of the barn. The tin on the roof is peeled back like a half-picked scab, each sheet the deep rust color of blood—not “oh-I-pricked-my-finger-blood,” but dark, vital blood. Pieces of siding are missing, exposing the broken ribcage of the wall frame, and despite the warmth of the sun burning my skin, I can feel the clammy, moist air from the dampness of the shaded interior. Inside, bits and pieces of disused farm equipment and scrap wood rust and rot to pieces.

In my hand is the work-smoothed handle of the hammer, the end a solid weight that feels reassuring. In my other hand is an old “wreckin’ bar,” not the normal-sized one, but the extra long one that hangs in the tool shed. Its weight, unlike the hammer, isn’t reassuring, but challenging. When my arm lifts it, I can feel my muscles at work, watch them push and move under my skin.

Beside me is a bucket of old nails, rusted, bent, broken, snapped, torn, and some twisted. There are heavy nails, used to secure 2x4’s (or as we say, two-bafours), and smaller nails, made with a natural twist for holding roofing tin. Carrying the bucket, wreckin’ bar, and hammer, I walk towards the body of mold, mildew, and metal.

Climbing up the sloping side of the shed, looking for the spot where I left off on the roof the day before, I remove nail after nail. I set aside the wreckin’ bar,
hooking it on an exposed rafter, and work my way down the line of nails holding the sheets of tin to the rafters and nailers.

I lift the hammer and I can feel the muscles in my arm working, connecting and pulling on my bones and tissues. Bringing the hammer down with a BANG that echoes around the farm, I beat the metal below the head of the nail, so I can hook the hammer's claw under it. The deep red rust colors the surface of the hammer like blood marking a murder weapon.

At first, the nail doesn't budge, sticking in the wood like a barbed splinter in the skin of the roof, but once I get under the edge, it begins to loosen, centimeter by centimeter pulling free. As I pull, I feel the muscles in my arm tensing, the feeling of having strength, the feeling of exerting that strength, of being alive to exert strength, and then comes the most perfect moment, when, with a small pop, the nail gives and slides out to be dropped in the bucket.

Each nail is like this, well, not exactly like this. No nail pulls the same. Some take longer to get loose, some are barely held into the wood, and still others simply break, snapping cleanly off as you pull, the shining, untouched-by-rust insides glinting under the sun. Some of the nails even refuse to be removed from the tin, instead wrenching out a piece of the metal with them, leaving a torn hole like ripped flesh.

The release of the tension in my arm comes with a small feeling of some kind of accomplishment that the nail in the falling apart wood is now gone. I look over my shoulder at the pile of tin on the ground, and then at the empty portion of the roof. The muscles in my arms move under my skin, my lungs take in the air. My body
dismembers this body. The dampness from the inside of the shed mingles with the hot sun and full summer breeze, and fills me with the smell of the solid darkness of the earth. I breathe in that clean air, and focus on the way my lungs feel. The muscles deep in my body are moving, expanding. The air rushes in, filling all the small places between my organs’ flesh. I hold the breath; make myself aware of the body of air in my body of flesh as I stand on this body of metal and wood and earth.

I slide back off the wall for a rest and sit down on an old fencepost laying in the grass. I can hear barn swallows and redwing blackbirds in the trees around the barn, and killdeer call from the grazed-short grass in the pasture. The breeze picks up, and throws over me the coolness of the tree-shade, and the rich, redolent smell of the sod around me.

Looking at the space where the shed sits, I imagine what it will look like once it’s gone. Locust and maple trees that have grown up around it will be free to extend their branches in the space where its roof stands, and the sun will be able to reach the cold earth the shed takes up. An odd emptiness, but fullness will come with the shed’s removal. The space next to the barn will look emptier, devoid of the structure built to hold the first vehicle on the farm, but eventually only used as a space to store trash and broken tools. In time, though, there will appear a fullness that can’t be replicated with any number of physical objects. Once the shed is gone, the bare earth will remain, like the piled-in dirt of a new grave, but in time, that too will disappear. The grass will grow where there is only spongy wood and wasted tools, and trees will cast shade over clean earth, not rusted sheets of tin.
Running my hand over the smooth wood grain of the hammer’s handle, I get back to my feet. With the weight of the bucket of nails in my other hand, I walk back over to the shed, and, crawling back to the roof, I get back to work.

It starts with a hammer and a crowbar, or as we call it at home, “a wreckin’ bar.”
A Short Length of Chain

The gate to the barn lot is kept closed with a short length of chain, its links polished silver, smoothed by years of my family’s hands sliding it off and on a bolt stuck into the side of a weathered fencepost.

When the gate swings open, the chain clatters against the boards with a noise as recognizable and familiar to me as my father’s voice when he tells a joke, or my mother’s laugh. And when it closes, the clink of its metal on the bolt’s metal rings like a bell in my mind, as if calling me home from afar.
Heavy Hoof-Falls

A daily stream of heavy hoof-falls carves the cow path into the landscape, bending, curling, and winding across the pasture—a narrow ribbon of parched, bare earth, cutting through the fescue, timothy, and red clover.
Water at the Woods

In the dry summer, jagged cracks open up in the bare dirt like little Grand Canyons in the backyard. Birds can't find water, and start coming to the sheep's tank. The fence and gate that sit on either side are now covered in bird shit, splattered on like drops of white paint.
Pink and Red Peonies

We watched the storm roll in, red and orange on the weatherman’s radar. From the front porch we saw the wind pick up across the road, turning the field of soybeans to a green sea and slashing the cottonwood leaves with rain. Our side stayed dry. The air, immobile.

We were on the edge.

And then, the gust

hit our yard, blew the pink and red peonies flat, and thrashed the maple limbs like a dog shaking the life from an animal. The rain blew sideways, soaked our jeans, our shirts, and washed the heat of June from our skin.
As the wagon moves, it shifts beneath my feet. A summer breeze blows across the field, bringing with it the hot, crinkled smell of parched grass. Cracked-earth-ruts and holes in the dry hayfield make the old, wooden wagon buck and kick under me. I can hear the shish of the hay windrows under the half-inflated wagon wheels. The rough, aged boards under the worn leather of my boots creak in rhythm with the jerky stop-go movement of the tractor. I shift my knees back and forth, trying to find a balance with the old wagon, trying to catch the offbeat cadence.

My father throws the switch on the hay baler, starting the cacophonous cranking and grumbling of the old piece of machinery. Killdeer and barn swallow calls are drowned out and muffled by the baler. The heavy sounds press up against my eardrum like a cotton ball, squeezing all other noises out. My father looks back from the tractor, giving me a thumbs-up to make sure I’m ready. From here on, our voices go unheard, and instead we rely on flashed hand signals to stop or go. With the absence of outside sounds, I feel cut off and separated from the world. The tractor starts forward, and the work begins.

The hay baler pushes out the first bale slowly, thumping, grumbling, and clinking as the gears shove it my way. I walk across the smooth boards, their grain polished and buffed from the dragging of coarse bales year after year. I can feel my boots catching on the tops of loose nails as I try to make my way to the hay baler hooked to the front. I stumble, my body trying to adjust to the creaking rhythm.

The small hooks on the baler’s front sweep up the dry blades of grass, and push them to the back. They are shuffled along and compacted together, wrapped in
wire and made into a bale of hay. The gears compressing the hay clink and clank in a steady beat, as my boots make a constant stamp-stomp on the old boards of the wagon.

I stagger forward to meet the bale pushed from the loud machine. In my hand is a work-worn hay hook, a simple piece of steel with one end looped for me to hold and the other a sharp hook for the hay bales. The tool, its tip smooth and gleaming, slides in my glove as I arch forward to grab the bale. The steel flashes in the sun as it glides smoothly into the compacted hay. With a soft snap, the fibers of hay break from the next bale as I pull it free of the baler.

With one hand holding the hook and the other, one of the wires, I carry the bale to the back of the wagon, and lay it down to start the stack of hay. The bale’s wires cut into my hand, even through my thick cowhide gloves. Their leather becomes a second layer of skin, as if the wrinkles and kinks were grafted for me. The sticks and dried blades of grass burn my arm as they make small cuts and abrasions on my skin, leaving little red dashes.

My t-shirt sticks to my back and the dust from the hay baler covers my face, arms, any part of exposed skin. Filling the air like a fog, it drifts along with the tractor, baler, and wagon, burning my eyes and nose. My arms are red, cut up and scratched from the rough hay. Blisters form on my fingers from the pressure of the baling wires. They sting and stab, any weight on them like dull needles against the inside of my knuckles.

It takes at least a quarter of the load to find a balance between retrieving and stacking each bale. The key is to find a rhythm. If I am too fast, I have to wait for the
next bale to be made, suddenly given the time to realize how hot the sun is and how
tired my arms are. If I am too slow—and wait too long—the bale falls off the wagon,
and the tractor must be stopped so I can throw it back on.

I try to find a rhythm between the two, a balance in my timing and
movements. I go back and forth, grabbing a bale, stacking it, grabbing the next, and
stacking it too. With no rest, no stopping, I lose myself in this rhythm. The cadence
of work becomes like a heartbeat, and I maintain it without thinking.

One by one, the bales fill the wagon from the back to the front, four high and
two wide, with only one bale left to place. This final bale is the most difficult, not
only because it must be placed on the very top, but it also must be done while I
balance on the six-inch space at the front of the wagon. The hook glides into the hay,
grabs it, and I roll the bale over me and flip it on top of the load. The dust and chaff
fall into my face, down my shirt, and all over my arms, but there is no way I could
add the bale to the wagonload and keep my balance otherwise. Sometimes I have to
get covered in the dust, dirt, and chaff in order to keep my balance.

My father looks back from the tractor, bringing it slowly to a stop and halting
the jerking ride as I slide off, my worn boots crumpling the dried grass beneath
them. He pulls the switch and shuts off the clanging hay baler. The wagon is pulled
away to be switched out with an empty one, and I walk over to meet him and the
next wagon at the start of the field. One down, two more to go.

I breathe in the fresh air of the hay field, and realize that this is where I
belong. No matter how much work I have to do, I feel alive here. I think back to the
end of my semester a month ago, and remember the stress of finals, the crushing
rush of trying to finish projects and assignments. The fear of academic failure was a worry that burned acidly in me.

I smile and stretch, bending my arm around my neck. My muscles feel stiff and tense from the work, but they feel alive. All that matters out here is that I’m strong enough to fill the load, and brave enough to stand on the edge to finish it.

My father and a new wagon creak up to meet me at the start of the next row of hay. I climb on, flash a quick thumbs-up sign, and the tractor pulls off as my father starts the hay baler. I realize, it was only when I was at the end of the previous load that I found the balance of that specific wagon. Now, I have to find it all over again with the next wagon, the next load. This one is built differently—different size tires, a different length, older axels, a shorter wagon tongue, etc.—and my legs feel unsteady as I try to find my balance all over again.
Dirt on My Hands

I love the feeling of dirt on my hands, lodged in the grooves of my palms, wedged, dark and rich, beneath my fingernails—the most basic element of Home coating the shallow valleys of my fingerprints.
On the Porch

With a book open across my chest, I lay on the porch swing, gently rocked back and forth by the wind blowing off the pasture, carrying with it the rich smell of warm sod and redolent earth. From the front-yard-maples comes the static rasping of cicadas, and the soft susurration of the breeze in the leaves, like a mother hushing me to sleep.
Under Harsh Conditions

On our small farm, set back from the lineless country roads, is a patch of woods behind the barns and other buildings. On the three sides not habited by our farm are grain fields, stretching and barren. The woods themselves stand tall against the smooth, open fields, like a vernal sentinel reminding the modern grain farms of what is wild.

Deer paths run from the fields into the woods, barely noticeable if you’re not looking. Between the tall weeds on the woods’ edge are gaps left by the constantly moving deer, leading to paths of stomped-down grass and leaves. The paths twist and turn through the tall trees like rivulets of bare ground under your feet. If you follow them, you can move through the small spaces between the oak and maple trees, sliding silently through the woods.

Many of these paths run through thick bunches of wild roses and raspberries, sharp walls of thorns on either side and even above. The underbrush quivers and small things of fur and flesh dart across the fallen-leaf-floor too fast to identify. Birds shoot out of the low branches of trees like arrows from a bow as you pass, and always above is the constant sound of the wind brushing through the branches.

If you follow any of these deer paths long enough, keeping close to the well-traveled highway you’re on, you’ll arrive to the center of the woods. There, in the center of this wildness caught up between the machine-run fields, lies a small body of water. No creek feeds into it, seemingly filling itself. Under the speckled sunlight shifting, shining through the leaf ceiling is the little pond of water, no more than a
dip in the ground filled with rain, ringed with trees that arch over it and small shores of fallen leaves.

The first time I saw this, I held my father’s hand as we walked under the tall ash and beech. In this memory, the woods felt like a place of wild things, somewhere that should be respected and feared. We wandered through the trees, and he showed me the roughness of oak bark and the long thorns of the black locust trees. He took me to the hog sheds left abandoned by my ancestors, and sat me down to feel the width of an old tree stump long ago logged for money. Eventually, we reached the center of the woods, and inevitably, the pond.

We walked to the edge and sat on a smooth tree root stretching out over the shallow water. He leaned down and said to me, “Look John, you can see the fairy shrimp.” Leaning over the clear pond water, I saw a shadow flash through the detritus lining the bottom. And then, again, another shadow flickering through the old leaf litter under the water. “There!” my father laughed, “another one, in the sunlight!”

I looked where his finger pointed, and could see a nearly transparent creature clinging to a sunken maple leaf. With its little legs wiggling, it looked like a shrimp found in the ocean—like you would expect to see on a dinner plate—but here it was, in the water of our woods. In that moment, my imagination sparked, and I realized the sudden joy in what seemed impossible. These little transparent creatures were wild, mysterious, and beyond what I thought was real. They made the pond in the woods sacred, something to be worshipped for its mystery.
As I got older, I realized just how strange the little shrimp were. Once I could
go back to the woods on my own, I took a jar and scooped some up with pond water.
For a week they drifted and scooted around in the Ball jar as it sat in our dining
room. Their little legs fluttered, and their transparent exoskeletons made them look
like ghostly silhouettes swimming around. Their mystery grew as I thought more
about them. How did they get there? The pond had no creek, no stream or brook, no
way for water to feed into it. Did they somehow float in on the wind, or were they
just always there? Were they a part of this environment, that little dip in the ground
for eons? Had these small creatures been perpetuating themselves continuously in
the little body of water for hundreds of years? They fascinated me, seeming still so
wild and mysterious. The connection they had to my imagination, to my creativity,
was not lost on me.

I finally looked up information on them, and found that they are actually
complex, and have an amazing ability to endure. The small crustaceans have special
eggs, able to persevere through less favorable conditions. To quote one article:
"Their eggs are extremely hardy, encased with a thick, protective shell that lets them
withstand long dry periods and extreme temperatures, hidden dormant in the soil
until adequate rainfall give them a proper pool to hatch in."1

1Biologicaldiversity.org

<http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/invertebrates/Riverside_fairy_shrimp/index.html>
Another source I found discusses the females’ abilities to lay two different types of eggs, one kind in the winter and another in the summer.

Females can produce two types of eggs, thin shelled "summer" eggs and thick shelled "winter" eggs. The type of egg produced is determined by the number of males in the community; summer eggs will be produced if there is a shortage of males in the population. Summer eggs hatch rapidly; the young form while still inside the brood sac. The young from these eggs will populate the pool during the same season they are laid. The winter eggs remain in the mud at the base of the pool and dry out with the pool. The eggs will hatch in the spring when the pool refills.2

These mysterious creatures that once sparked my imagination only appear under the right conditions, and they remind me of times when my life felt like a dried-up pond bottom—when my worries and fears were stretching cracks along its parched floor.

I’m sitting at a table in a dining area; around me, people are smiling and talking to one another. My girlfriend, Susan, across from me has a serious look on her face, her food untouched. Our blue eyes meet, and then she looks away. The semester and a half we got to know each other we became good friends. We decided to form a relationship that was more than just friendship, but only a week later it was not the same.

"John," she begins, "this isn’t working. I’m sorry, it was a mistake to try to have a relationship. I think we should go back to just being friends."

My jaw tightens and unclenches, and my molars grind together, holding back the words I don’t want to say. *What are you talking about? What if we just tried harder? I want this to work, even if we’re different kinds of people.* But in the end, she’s walking out the door, and I’m sitting at the table, nudging the last bits of spaghetti and tomato around on my plate with a fork.

Later, I’m walking down the flat sidewalk from the dining area to my dorm. On a normal day I would walk along, taking in the sharp chirps of robins and sparrows, and enjoying the tingling warmth of the sun. Today, however, I put my headphones in, and look down to watch my feet pass over the cracks in the sidewalk.

In my head, I’m replaying the memory of us sitting in the grass outside our dorm. I remember, in that moment, trying to connect nature and her. I remember the fresh smell of new grass, damp and cool, mixing with the earthy smell of the newly planted flowerbeds by the dorm entrance. Susan’s smooth hand is in mine, but that’s all I can feel of her. I remember looking at her and smiling. She looks back, trying to smile, "John," she says, "the grass is itchy, let’s go back inside."

A week after the break up, I’m sitting at the desk in my dorm room in the midst of finals and the stiff back of the chair supporting my weight as I slouch at my computer. The screen has an essay I need to revise on it, but I can’t focus. Outside my dorm window the wind moves new leaves of the maples by the parking lot.
couple gets out of a car, grocery bags in hand. The man leans down and kisses the
women as she closes the car door. Beside me is my notebook, some of the pages
filled with poetry written with soft words, others written in bleakness towards a
future without her. I feel hurt and broken, all my worries and doubts cling to me like
itchy, drying mud. Inside me I feel no creativity, no imagination, only the fear of
ending up alone in the world. Distant from the couple in the parking lot, I hunch
over and try to refocus on my essay.

"Hidden dormant in the soil until adequate rainfall give them a proper
pool to hatch in."

Three months later, I am lying with someone new curled up beside me under
the tall oak trees of the picnic area at Salamonie State Forest. The area is set on a hill
surrounded by the Salamonie River. In the tall ash trees I can hear the constant hum
of the cicadas, and the flowing shush of the wind in the leaves. I look up at the bright,
verdant pattern of green above me. Each individual leaf is beautiful on its own, but
the whole group stands out, illuminated like a wide stained-glass window. Chelce,
my new girlfriend, lies wrapped in my arms, closer than Susan ever was. She’s
absolutely beautiful, constantly reminding me to look around and see the beauty in
the world. Next to me, I can feel her heartbeat, and her gentle breath on my neck, as
she lies napping. Her hair is auburn, the same shade as the turning leaves in the fall,
the same shade as embers when a fire burns low, the same shade as any one of the
robins’ breasts singing above us.
"The winter eggs remain in the mud at the base of the pool and dry out with the pool. The eggs will hatch in the spring when the pool refills."

For the first time in months, I feel opened up. At the foot of the blanket is my bag, with a notebook inside I've started using again. Chelce shifts her head, and curls up under my arm. I can feel her beside me, closer than anyone ever has before, as if the two of us could melt together into one being. She opens her eyes, deep green like leaves in summer, and looks at me. I can see the soft freckles across the bridge of her nose, looking all together like the same leaves drifting to the ground in autumn. Above me, the branches rustle and whisper in the wind. Beams of sunlight shift through the foliage, their slow warmth filling the entire area.

Weeks later, I’m walking alone at home down a deer path in our woods, leaning over, ducking under tall vines of thorny raspberry. I run my hand around the rough width of a towering oak tree. Old leaves crunch under my feet, and the birds sing in the branches above me. Mottled shadows of the upper oak limbs criss and cross along the path before me. The well-traveled highway cuts through a wall of weeds, and runs around the small, smooth trunks of maple saplings. My feet move, one before the other, and I can feel my heart beating, my breath moving my chest, and the surrounding silence quieting me.

Plotlines I discussed with Chelce the night before still move in my head, lines of poetry still try to form, and images for me to paint with words shuffle in my mind.
Her own ideas are beautiful and she freely lets me illustrate them for her with words. She loves my writing, loves my words, and loves me for being exactly me. I feel truly alive around her, my creativity hatching free of any shell that it could be trapped in.

Soon, I come to the end of the deer path, its smoothed-out road through the fallen leaves ending at a dip in the ground. Wildness of the woods grows up everywhere, young saplings, tall horseweeds, arching goldenrod, and prickled raspberries.

No water.
No mud.
No shrimp.

My thoughts and ideas stop in my head. Where are they? Where is the mystery from my childhood? I feel lost, trapped, like something from my past, my own nostalgia has been locked away. I sit down on a smooth tree root, the same one I leaned over as a child, my father pointing out the small fairies in the water.

"Though the resting period usually varies between 6 to 10 months, eggs have been hatched in a laboratory after 15 years."

Beyond the sadness of the pond’s drying is Chelce’s constant image, her smile and words radiating under it all. I think of the reawakening she brought me, the reminder of what my creativity can do. The eggs will endure. No matter what
happens, how harsh the environment will get, or how long it will stay bad, the eggs will hatch again.

I stand up, and walk back out of the woods. I pass under the arches of raspberry and wild rose vines, around the wide births of oak and maple, and across the small patches of young saplings. The winding deer path takes me back out to the edge of the wild. I step onto the bare dirt field, still thinking about the empty pond, and feel a small raindrop hit my hand.

Works Cited


<http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/invertebrates/Riverside_fairy_shrimp/index.html#>


<http://www.veralpool.org/inp_fs.htm>
Soak

Walking down the driveway, the wind grabs dust kicked up by my boots, blows it around me like a veil of grit. Charcoal clouds churn, and thunder rumbles overhead, as fat drops of rain rush to Earth, soak though my thin cotton shirt, and splash off my nose, sliding to my lips where

I taste their atmospheric sweetness.
At the End of a Cornfield

Standing alone at the end of a cornfield, I watch as a warm breeze moves among the stalks, their leaves each rolled to narrow points from thirst. The plants seem to whisper, shifting in the wind and brushing together. A killdeer punctuates the evening with its call, k'dee k'dee k'dee, as it flies in a wide circle over me. The sun sinks lower, and the sky is lit with tangerine and golden lines of light, silhouetting the long horizon clouds.