


Spring 2018

(In)visibility and meaning in food labor: A Feminist autoethnography

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(In)visibility and Meaning in Food Labor: A Feminist Autoethnography

Kathryn Shedden

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of the Arts

School of Communication Studies

May 2018

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis project has been a soul-searching, exhilarating, frustrating, eye-opening experience which has exposed me to new ways of knowing and making sense of the world. It would have been a very different journey without all of those who embarked on it with me, supported me, challenged me, and inspired me to stay with this critical and introspective journey. If it were not for the sacrifices made by my parents, Jane and Malcolm, my life (and the title of my thesis) would be very different. Thank you both for encouraging me to pursue further education, for teaching me in your own ways (in the barn and garden or through MS Paint and laser disc), and for the \$7 a week and a gel pen of my choice in exchange for my poop-scooping labor as a child (see thesis title). I love and admire you both.

My experiences in graduate school, and the relationships I have been so fortunate to form as a result, have also played an integral role in my pursuit of and actually finishing this project. Thank you, Melissa, for the countless hours you have given to support me and for the conversations we have shared over the past two years. You are an invaluable (wo)mentor and fellow animal-loving friend and have provided both the structure and space for me to grow personally and academically. And thank you, Jennifer, for introducing me to critical systems-thinking in our Political Ecology course and for creating a deep sense of cognitive dissonance in the core of my very being (seriously). You encourage me to constantly question my own beliefs and values, be a more reflexive person, and make cross-disciplinary connections. I aspire to be perhaps half as badass as you are. I am truly grateful for the opportunities both of you have given me and enabled me to go after, and I hope you both know that I am one of many young women who have

been inspired by your work – you are both exceptional and much-needed examples. Michael, thank you for planting the seed of autoethnography in my brain and encouraging me to pursue the answers to my questions in my own experiences. I very much doubt I would have IOFed at all if you hadn't given me the outlandish idea to include it in my thesis work, nor would anyone see as much of “me” in my work. Thank you for being real with me when I needed it, for believing in me, and for being weird. I also owe many other professors in my program and who taught within the Environmental Studies minor a huge “thank you” for all I have learned which has lead me here. To all those mentioned in my thesis, though under pseudonyms, I hope what follows does justice to how you have impacted my own life.

I would not have the emotional fortitude to make it through graduate school without my closest friends. Michael and Laura, you two have become my dearest friends and literal extensions of my own physical body – your intelligence and drive is inspirational, and our conversations are irreplaceable. You have become like family to me in such a short time. Liz and Ryoko, though we no longer live together I still think of you every day. I cherish your friendship and know that we will always pick back up where we left off – you are two of the hardest working and talented women I know. Mark, there is not a human being on this planet that has been there for the ups and downs of my life like you have. Thank you for everything you have given to support me throughout graduate school and for helping me back up when I am at my lowest. Lastly, I would not be nearly as happy or healthy without the support of my non-human friends. Ripley and Chihiro, you are the best cat-companions to snuggle with on the couch or in bed as I recover from a long day. Wallace and Finn, your strange ferret-y ways make me laugh and teach me

patience. Winona, you are the trusty steed (moped) that gets me through every day no matter the weather. Thank you also to my tomato plants, Franz, Shrek, Tarzan, IPAs, memes, Pale Fire, Greenberry's, Dunkin', and Stardew Valley for their unwavering support and inspiration.

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ABSTRACT

My graduate thesis project entitled “(In)visibility and Meaning in Food Labor: A Feminist Autoethnography” illuminates the gendered experiences of female food laborers and how women make meaning through their labor in this context. Gendered experiences do not stand apart from classed and raced identities, which I also reflexively analyze throughout this thesis. Women working within the food chain have been historically marginalized and made invisible, though they make up an increasingly significant portion of this workforce, a trend known as the “feminization of agriculture.” The discussion of the work that women do when discussing food in the academic literature also focuses largely on nurturing and feeding tasks, which does not discuss the wide range of food work that women do such as picking, processing, distributing, and serving. Throughout my thesis, I utilize autoethnographic methods supplemented with ethnographic interviewing to analyze my own experiences as a female food laborer. Specifically, I discuss experiences growing up on an alpaca farm in rural Virginia, my employment as a cashier at Grocer’s Market, as a voluntary laborer with the International Organic Farming program, and my experiences working alongside female farm owners in Ireland and Virginia. The narratives emerged through the writing process and are organized according to the following themes: vulnerable & gendered labor, what we do to make do, women’s bodies and work, and women mentoring women.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

After returning home from four weeks living and working on family farms in Ireland, I flipped back through my journal, looking for moments to reflect upon and write about. I'd been putting it off, as I was afraid I wouldn't have enough to say for my thesis project. I missed everyone from our host farms back in Ireland and had been following our first host's farm Facebook account to see if there were any updates - though was still feeling conflicted about the whole experience. My traveling companion Caitlin¹ and I talked about how much we missed Daisy and Molly from our second farm, though we were glad not to live in such close quarters for a while. Things had returned to "normal" for a bit, as I starting preparing lecture content and buying books for the coming semester. Still trying to figure out how to make sense of the whole thing, I turned to the last page in my journal from my time at Greg and Helen's farm, the first farm where I lived and worked for two weeks, and thought back to standing outside of the bus station - waiting for the bus to our next placement. I remember feeling quite profoundly sad.

Greg hugged me and said thanks, he added something about keeping in touch. I'm trying not to cry, it hits me all of a sudden. It's sort of a one-arm hug. I walk around in my boots to the car and Caitlin and Elyse are hugging goodbye - we only worked together for a week after she arrived from her last placement, but we were sad to see her go. I hug Elyse and Caitlin comes in for a three-person hug. Elyse hands us her second pack of cards and has written us a note on the inside of the Joker.

When Helen drops us at the bus station, she turns to me and says she isn't getting out. I see her face is a little red, her expression a bit distressed. I'd never seen Helen

¹ All proper names, including those of organizations and people, have been given pseudonyms throughout the thesis.

anything but cheerful or concerned (motherly) for us. She seemed to be near tears. It really affected me. I turned to her and put my hand briefly on her shoulder, and said “We’ll miss you, Helen.” She handed me a small paper bag and I felt a big tear fall down my face. I looked into the bag and saw 2 Budweisers, 2 apples, and a pack of Kit-Kats. It was a meaningful and thoughtful gift, and perhaps extending an olive branch as we liked to have a beer, and they didn’t drink. Tears came and went for the next couple of hours. It’s better to have met and feel sad for leaving than never to have met at all.

My journey to Ireland in which I worked on two different farms in the summer of 2017 is only one aspect of my experiences as a food laborer. My identity as a food laborer has been shaped over the course of my life, beginning at the age of seven and continuing to the present day, culminating in the pursuit of a career oriented around food production. I grew up on my family’s small alpaca farm in rural Virginia, which I consider to be a formative stage of my lifelong relationship with animals, development of environmentally-oriented values and ethics, and growth of my skills and knowledge regarding animal and plant husbandry, fiber arts, livestock showmanship, and farming as a business. I have since held a variety of paid and unpaid learning-oriented positions throughout the food system in both small-scale and industrialized contexts. While an undergraduate and graduate student, I was employed as a cashier at Grocer’s Market, a corporate chain of grocery stores, and also have worked alongside farmers in Ireland and locally in Virginia. My academic pursuits as a graduate student at James Madison University have also been largely focused on food studies, specifically meaning-making

through food labor in the case of migrant workers in the Shenandoah Valley, such as an ethnographic project with rural Latino migrant farm workers (Shedden, 2017).

In this thesis I use autoethnographic methodologies to voice my own experience as a female farm and food laborer, part of a diverse set of gendered communities that are not often represented as “farmers,” “farm workers,” or a part of the food industry at all, yet women do significant labor within the context of food systems globally. While I label “farm labor” in the context of work I have done on farms with crops and livestock, I discuss “food labor” in this project more broadly in terms of work I have done as a Grocer’s Market cashier as a part of the industrialized food chain. The meaning that women make through their labor has been historically overlooked and devalued, as have the fruits of their labor. Thus, I examine these processes and their implications within the sphere of farm labor, as it is largely underrepresented in the literature through an interrogation of my own lived experiences.

My focus on the gendered experience of food labor emerged through reflections of my experiences alongside my mother on our family farm and as a participant in the International Organic Farming (IOF) organization. While living and working with a woman farm owner, Molly, on her sheep farm in Ireland, it became clear to me that gendered experiences are significant in farm labor. Further, this experience working alongside of Molly led me to look back upon my experiences working at my first host farm in Ireland, my experiences growing up on a farm, and my work in food labor at the point of sale. This transformative experience abroad led me to seek out mentoring opportunities in a woman-owned farm in Virginia in my final academic year, which I also narrate as an important part of my sensemaking about gendered food labor. This thesis,

thus, guides the reader through a set of experiences in an attempt to provide understanding to the complex and embodied experiences doing food labor in a web of social relations that renders my body gendered. In many of my stories my body is both highly visible as a woman, yet simultaneously invisible - easily replaced by another female body. Yet, in empowering female-centered relationships, my experience is quite different. Thus, gender is a lens through which I make sense of my own labor, understand structural inequalities throughout food systems, and offer a framework for positive change.

Though my narratives are unique to my life experiences, they also seek to give voice to a shared experience which is contextualized within my own encounters with food and farm labor. Throughout my thesis, I offer the reader an opportunity to accompany me on this journey and experience these sense-making processes. My narrative voice aims to be evocative of the environment and feelings I felt within it, as I recount my everyday lived experiences and how they impressed on me expectations of enacting gendered roles in the food production system. My thesis would look very different if I had reported the observations I noted in the field in a distant manner, or even as a participant observer. My decision to approach the project autoethnographically instead, using my personal experiences as a lens to study gendered food labor was a purposeful choice I made to involve the reader in my perspectives and consider how this experience looks and feels. Thus, I aim to foster a sense of identification and empathy between myself and the reader, and by extension others who also share these experiences.

My thesis also seeks to problematize and interrogate the ways in which women farmworkers and food laborers are viewed and experience the meaning of their work.

Through my feminist analysis of experiences, challenges, and knowledges unique to women farmworkers, I illuminate the value of women farmworkers within the food chain and how narratives can reveal and fill deficits that overlooks women's experiences. I speak to the intersections of Whiteness and my identity as a privileged woman who also encounters sexism. This further complicates the experience of female farm work as not a singular experience, but heterogeneous one that is raced, classed, and sexualized. Thus, I also discuss the pervasiveness and implications of Whiteness throughout my experiences with farm work. As a white, educated woman my experiences as a food laborer are tied to this particular social location and have significance in terms of how I move through the world. Though my experiences are not representative of all women's experiences, my goal is to reveal some inequities throughout food systems which serve as entry points for change. The literature on food labor, and the heterogeneity of women's experience in that system, provide an important contextual backdrop to my autoethnographic narratives.

Why Study Food Labor?

Food is both commonplace and fundamental, and an industry of increasingly pressing concern, as "how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used" (Berry, p. 149). Neoliberal ideals have shaped the food system in its entirety through the distancing of consumers from production, creating what Wendell Berry calls the ideal "industrial eater" who does not question these processes. The food we eat is an immense industry, as "95 percent of American food is manufactured and sold by corporations" (Barndt, 2007, p. 68). Despite this, food is often marketed as reminiscent of an "agrarian imaginary" wherein idyllic rural farming is characterized as representative of American food production (Besky & Brown, 2015). The modern food

industry prioritizes production processes which are more cost efficient as opposed to necessarily more nutritious or ethical, which is also fueled by additives including chemical fertilizers, pesticides and antibiotics (Singer & Mason, 2007; Shiva, 2016; Otsuki, 2014). Food is ordinary, commonplace, and necessary by nature, and therefore taken-for-granted, of which industrialized food producers realize and have in turn instituted systems which marginalize workers, degrade the environment, and harm our bodies (Singer & Mason, 2007; Keshari et. al & Rawal, 2014).

There is a strong linkage between the ways that people work, live outside of work, and how they eat (Friedmann, 1999). Though our food system is now dominated largely by corporations and is heavily industrialized, it has not always been this way, as our societal relationship with food, work, and the division of the public and private sphere has changed significantly over time (Friedmann, 1999). The corporatization of global food production has altered expectations for how families earn a living income, the gendered expectations for heads of household to earn this income, and how families eat as a result of these new expectations in terms of work (Friedmann, 1999). Increasingly, there is a disconnect between the work required to produce food and the price that consumers see, which is significant in that the mere monetary price of a product does not fully capture nor represent the costs we pay as a society (Singer & Mason, 2007; Barndt, 2007). This is complicated by the costs associated with the gendered nature of food production, as our societal understandings of food production work are typically understood to be masculine tasks, shrouding the labor of women in both the public and private sphere. My thesis explores and interrogates the experiences of women food laborers and seeks to offer insight into the ways in which gender shapes the experiences

of and meanings about food production. In addition, my thesis offers a form of feminist knowledge regarding food and farm labor from an embodied perspective, which invites the reader to situate themselves alongside me in the narrative experience.

Women and Food Labor

Women face particular challenges due to historically and culturally situated norms and expectations which constrain them to certain tasks and roles as laborers, which has created a gendered division of labor. This has proven to be particularly relevant in terms of food and farm labor, considering the traditionally masculine gendered nature of farm tasks. There are additional expectations which arise from aforementioned expectations of women, which carry over to gendered tasks including caring for children and feeding which are not recognized as additional burdens. Finally, there are structural inequities which women face beyond their gender, including their class and race, which necessitate acknowledgement as they further complicate and differentiate women's experiences of food and farm labor. In each of these brief discussions of the literature that follow, I open with a brief window into gendered experiences I had doing food labor.

Femininity and Food Labor: Gendered Divisions

I had just finished up the rest of my training at Grocer's Market, and Renee walked me back over to the register to fill me in on a few more things.

“Well, you probably won't have to get any carts. It's kind of sexist, but it's whatever.”

Women workers, namely white women, in Western societies have historically been considered “too frail” for particular lines of work in the public sphere (Friedmann, 1999, p. 50). The responsibilities of women were typically confined to the home, to

domestic housework and nurturing duties, which are echoed in food labor expectations. During WWII, white American women entered the fields as laborers while men were away at war, where they persisted in the face of postwar propaganda which now promoted the association of men with mechanized farm labor and delegated women back into the home (Carpenter, 2000). Prior to the restructuring of the American food labor market in the 1970s women were not represented in these industries at all (Friedmann, 1999). The inclusion of White women, women of color, and men of color in food labor positions was done so because they were paid less and scheduled for “flexible” hours (Friedmann, 1999).

These gendered expectations persist today in food labor, as an “international division of labor” dictates what work is done by whom (Barndt, 2007, p. 16). Male work is characterized as skilled and demands greater physical strength therefore it is better paid and more likely to be unionized (Kainer, 1999). On the other hand, women’s work is thought of as unskilled and is typically more “flexibly” scheduled, which lessens their job security (Kainer, 1999). Kainer (1999) illustrates this trend in grocery store work, as women are recruited for sales and customer relations roles, are more likely to have their hours reduced in part-time positions as they are perceived as less likely to be able to complete a variety of tasks, and are unlikely to be represented in full-time managerial positions. In the tomato industry, women are thought to be more gentle and are tasked with picking the crop, while men are designated to the heavy lifting and mechanized tasks of loading and distributing it (Barndt, 2007).

Labor and food are similarly fundamental concepts, as they shape the fabric of our lived experiences and are central meaning-making exercises in our everyday lives.

Women's food work experiences mirror the inequalities faced in other fields, however, they also face unique challenges specific to food production. Gender relations are an often overlooked component of agriculture and are not often adequately addressed or considered in consumers' purchasing decisions or within larger regulatory frameworks (Sachs & Alston, 2010). Though women are a significant portion of the industrial food production workforce, in fact surpassing men in agriculture in some regions of the world (Jiggins, 1998, p. 251), they have been excluded from the often male-dominated spheres of well-respected food production work (Belasco, 2002). The "feminization of agriculture" describes this phenomenon of an increasingly female agricultural workforce, a complex term which addresses larger issues regarding how this trend came to be (Barndt, 2007; Jiggins, 1998).

Global policy decisions regarding agricultural development tend to echo the mythical notion that farming is a male-dominated field, overlooking the potential to address the underlying issue of gender inequality which dictates how women can participate in this industry (Jiggins, 1998). Globally, women are not afforded equivalent rights to men, in terms of owning property, rights outside of marriage, rights to education, access to the cash economy, and so on (Jiggins, 1998). Women are expected to contribute a large number of their work hours towards family maintenance-related tasks (ensuring food security, domestic responsibilities, healthcare) as opposed to the expectations placed upon men to earn income in the public sphere (Jiggins, 1998). The "feminization of agriculture," Jiggins (1998) argues, is "simply a sub-theme within the feminization of poverty" - a systemic issue which must be meaningfully addressed in order to prevent further ecological and societal harm (p. 260).

Women's Labor as Invisible

We had been weeding the carrots since after lunchtime, and it was about 4:30 now. I saw Helen heading over towards us, holding the pillow she used as a seat.

“Girls, did you like the soup from yesterday? I was thinking we could have some more of that with some ham and potatoes for dinner.” She always left an hour earlier than us to prepare.

“Yeah! The butternut squash one was really good.” I replied. Caitlin agreed and asked for the recipe when we got home. She had been keeping Helen's made-from-scratch directions in a note on her phone.

“Oh, and Katie - remind me to walk you through making dinner for tomorrow, I'll be visiting my mother and don't know if I'll be back in time.”

Gendered expectations also dictate additional unpaid labor not expected of men. Overwhelmingly, women are discussed in food and labor literature in terms of their role as mothers, in terms of both nurturing and feeding, as well as their role in the context of domestic work (Avakian & Haber, 2005). Women are viewed as largely responsible for caretaking duties, thus expected to provide for children and the family unit in many ways. Deutsch (2002) describes the shift from small grocers to chain stores as partially influenced by the strain of personal relationships inherent in grocery shopping. Women were “expected to solve the problem of high prices” and were “held accountable for the success of businesses within a community” as they were the primary buyers for the family (Belasco & Scranton, p. 161). The role of women in caring for infants and children in the context of what foods are prepared and fed, and how corporate entities targeted this demographic to alter these mainstream behaviors, is also significantly

discussed. For example, Bentley (2002) specifically identifies the role of Gerber in dictating how babies should be fed according to “expert” discourses, emphasizing societal expectations regarding good mothering (Avakian & Haber, 2005; Bentley, 2002). As the preparation of food increasingly moves outside of the home, this also dictates how women are seen and devalued as women and caretakers (Bentley, 2002; Julier, 2005).

While these are important areas of study which focuses on an integral labor role that women enact, this limits the discussion and understanding of the work of women to the preparation of food in the home and other private sphere tasks (Julier, 2005). In reality, women work throughout all phases of the food “cycle”. For example, they are involved in planting crops, processing agricultural products such as tomatoes or chickens, driving food delivery trucks, and working as cashiers and waitresses - to name a few. In addition to this paid labor, women are also expected to work the “second shift”, under which unpaid labor such as domestic housework, nurturing, and feeding lies (Hochschild, 1989). The role of women within the agricultural sector is largely dictated by the aforementioned restrictions, as women are primarily constructed as responsible for nurturing tasks and are legislated out of “serious” food work occupations in the public sphere. Women farmers, for example, are “concentrated in the low-input, low return end of the production spectrum and essentially not regarded by public sector agencies as farmers at all” (Jiggins, 1998, p. 257).

Structural Inequalities: Gender, Race, and Farming

After the stress of Dublin, I'm thrilled to meet our IOF (International Organic Farming) host family in the beautiful, green countryside. They have already taken us up to see the cows upon request, and Helen took us up to our room with some spare linens.

Caitlin and I laid on our new beds and took the opportunity to journal - the first thing I did was map out what our room looked like. The bed in the far corner was designated for the German girl who is due to arrive next week, Greg set us each up with a lamp near our bedside tables, and light shone in through the window between our beds.

I think back to the fall semester - my shoes crunching against the gravel as we walked through the labor camp. Migratory workers lived here during the season, and we had just missed them. A shiver ran down my body as we peered into the "bedrooms" - three metal bedframes, a disheveled blue mattress, and a concrete floor. In sleeping, eating, and bathing there was no semblance of privacy. They had no Helen nor Greg, no linens or pillow, and no choice.

Though the discussion of women in work is limited and problematic in some of the aforementioned ways, the conversation narrows sharply in terms of discussing experiences of women of color in this context (Avakian & Haber, 2005). Men and women of color experience disparate working conditions within the food system in comparison to their white counterparts. Liu (2011) found that in all areas of food system work, people of color earned less annually and per hour, with significant disparities in both food processing and distribution. Women of color are not only burdened with the societal expectations of female behavior, but with additional structural prejudices which dictate their roles within the structure of society. While white women earn "63 cents for every dollar made by a white male", black women made "53 cents for every dollar" and "Latinas fared worse still with just 50 cents" (Liu, 2011, p. 11). People of color are disproportionately employed in the food system and do not typically hold management positions (Liu, 2011).

Farm work is among one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States and is historically work which has been done by marginalized populations exploited for their labor (Shedden, 2017). Migrant farm workers are the invisible hands who pick our food, work which is largely unacknowledged throughout the food chain and results in a workforce which is largely impoverished and abused (Keshari et. al & Rawal, 2014; Shedden, 2017). They are a largely Hispanic and Spanish-speaking demographic in the United States, which is a fact which produces additional systemic barriers for these workers to access a fair wage and adequate working conditions (Keshari et. al & Rawal, 2014; Shedden, 2017). These vulnerabilities are amplified for female migrant farmworkers, who are subject to harassment in the fields (Keshari et. al & Rawal, 2014). Sexual harassment and violence in the fields is rampant, and there are serious repercussions for these women who report these crimes (Keshari et. al & Rawal, 2014). Farmworkers are also exposed disproportionately to pesticides, which has an enhanced effect upon women and children, and upon women who are pregnant and/or breastfeeding (Martinez-Salazar, 1999).

This trend has been illustrated throughout history, which has had a considerable effect upon women of color: defining their roles as both women and laborers. Bentley (2002) describes the feeding of children as related to social class, illustrated in the practice of employing wet nurses, typically by wealthier, white mothers. This practice declined when alternatives to breast milk became available, and as those typically employed as wet nurses such as women of color, female immigrants, and poor women were increasingly looked down upon. For women of color, “protecting one’s family from the demands of the market is strongly related to the distribution of power and privilege in

society”, which differs significantly from the experiences of white women (Julier, 2005, p. 170).

In this thesis I acknowledge the intersections of racism, sexism, and classism through my own subject position. Though I experience both food and farm labor as a White person which has accompanied dimensions of white privilege, I also occupy these spaces as a woman in a low-income situation. Cherry-Chandler (2009) discusses the concept of “food insecurity” as a consequence of financial instability, which she also critiques the sanitized term as a policymaking tool. The ability to consume food “serves as a bridge between private rituals and social issues,” which I also felt illustrated in my own experiences with federal food aid (Geis, 1998, as cited in Cherry-Chandler, 2009, p. 45). Cherry-Chandler’s (2009) narratives describes the food-aid recipient as an embodied site of contested power relations, as she recounts her experiences with highly processed foods and Black food culture and utilizing what she describes as surplus ingredients (e.g. chitterlings) as a result of this socio-economic position. Though Cherry-Chandler (2009) recounts experiences of structural inequity which differ from my own, her narratives illustrate how our own social locations dictate our relations to food. I argue that this is also the case in terms of how we relate to other areas in our own lives, including our experiences with work.

In overlooking the experiences of those who harvest, prepare, and sell our food we are fundamentally misunderstanding how the world is fed and making consumption and policy decisions which exclude them (Shiva, 2016). My autoethnographic narratives situate my own experiences within my raced, classed and gendered body and provides a perspective which highlights the lived realities of these converging identities. These labor

experiences do not exist in a vacuum and they have intermingling and systemic implications for our food system, which provide sites of entry for addressing issues of social justice. Examining the positionality of women workers who feed us is critical to this task.

Research Goals and Overview

The literature situates the need to understand the experiences of food labor within the social structures of gender, race, and class and showcases the need to attend to the lived experiences of those who occupy marginalized social locations in the food system. The autoethnographic narratives explore and give voice to the complexity of gendered meaning in food labor and were guided by the following questions. How do I make meaning in my work as a woman food laborer? What are the gendered experiences of food labor in the context of their everyday experiences? How do structural inequalities shape my experiences in my roles in the food system? How is gendered knowledge constructed and labor divided as a result? How are relationships I form with others within the food system gendered? And, what are the implications/effects of gendered food labor?

In the second chapter, “Autoethnographic Methodology,” I discuss the methodological framework which guides the narrative inquiry that follows. I also attend to how this methodology is particularly suited to the inquiry I pursue in my thesis project, through situating my own experiences within a larger conversation about gender, class, and race in food and farm labor. My accounts in particular contribute to critical autoethnographic work and feminist ways of knowing. The goals of these methodologies and my thesis project are to examine my experience as a woman within the food system

and provide potential areas for change to be made, while also privileging my voice as a woman. In the section that follows, I discuss how I ensure quality in my autoethnographic work using Tracy's (2010) framework for evaluating qualitative research and emphasize the role of relational ethics throughout the research process. Lastly, I give a brief chronologically-arranged overview of each field site and the characters featured within them, which foregrounds the four narrative chapters that follow.

In the third chapter, "Vulnerable and Gendered Labor," I include the following narratives: *New IOFers: First Impressions & Lasting Ones*, *Hay Baling*, *Cowboy Hat*, *Breeding Season/Kidding Season*, and *Blue Convertible*. These narratives are arranged to illustrate the tensions evident across a number of my sites which reveal how labor contexts are experienced differently when considering gendered identities. This section spoke largely to original questions concerning how structural inequities shape women's everyday experiences, how gendered knowledge is constructed, and what the implications of gendered labor are. These narratives aim to pursue this thread of gendered everyday labor experiences and contrast them with one another in order to illustrate how the culmination of these experiences foster feelings of vulnerability.

In the fourth chapter, "What We Do To Make Do," I include the following narratives: *Mom's Spagbol*, *690 ml*, *Simple Eating*, *Death*, and *Everything We Needed*. These narratives speak to gendered divisions of labor, relating with others, and the rationalization of what tasks must be done in order to make it through the everyday. Specifically, I explore how women in these storied experiences make sense of relationships with other women, the environment, and a gendered duty to provide exposes the nuance of food and farm labor from a female perspective. These narratives also speak

to the challenges that me and other women face in debunking the gendered norms which seek to constrain the work that women can and should do in our work. There is also a sense of comradery and relating to other women evident in these narratives, as we work together to address these unrecognized hurdles and trials. There is also a sense of necessity implied in “making do” which addresses both the everyday and the financial challenges faced by food and farm laborers.

In the fifth chapter, “Women’s Bodies & Work,” I include the following narratives: *Weeding as Women’s Work*, *Profile Pictures*, and *Holly*. These narratives collectively highlight the tensions between gendered labor expectations and the capabilities of women’s bodies. Judgements about women’s physical bodies constrains and enables particular labor tasks which are deemed appropriate for our gendered bodies. These narratives also problematize these gendered norms, as many women are more than physically capable of these tasks but are socialized to believe they cannot complete them or are told to complete tasks which are less physically demanding and “feminine.” This chapter in particular also speaks to original questions concerning the implications of gendered labor and how gendered knowledges are constructed.

In the sixth chapter, “Women Mentoring Women,” I include the following narratives: *Building the Pen*, *Farming & Fecals*, *Livestock & Breeding Knowledges*, *Veterinary Pursuits*, and *Farming/Making A Difference*. The relationships highlighted in these narratives illustrate the power and importance of (wo)mentoring in farm labor, which discuss some of the challenges identified in previous chapters regarding vulnerabilities and gendered norms. In the everyday conversations I have had with other women while working and living together, we identified common sites of experience.

Such conversations created opportunities for knowledge creation as well as identifying with common struggles which we as white women have faced. The peer-to-peer and cross-generational mentoring relationships I formed and observed throughout these experiences have informed what it means to me to be a female farm laborer and the value of this work.

The final chapter ends with a discussion of the implications which arise from my storied experiences, with connections made back to the initial literature. I address the themes of gendered divisions of labor, invisible/visible labor, structural inequities: race, gender and class, and knowledge creation through autoethnographic inquiry. I reflect back upon particular instances within the autoethnographic narratives which speak to these larger themes while also discussing my own positionality within these spaces. From the foundational experiences in my childhood to experiences as an IOFer, cashier, and student intern on a goat dairy these themes have emerged as meaningful places of inquiry. I discuss the complexities of gendered labor, the consequences of the presence of the physical female body and invisible labor also expected of women, and how my identity is has both privilege and also faces marginalization as a White woman. I end with a discussion of what vulnerable, autoethnographic narratives contribute to feminist ways of knowing and the importance of sharing these perspectives.

CHAPTER TWO: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

I will utilize a critical feminist autoethnographic methodology to investigate the intersections of race, gender, and work in the context of food labor. Specifically, I craft narratives of my experiences throughout the food production cycle, from farm labor to food seller at the point of sale, to uncover and examine meaning-making processes in food work. Specifically, I use autoethnographic methods to reveal my gendered, raced, and classed experiences in the contexts of my upbringing on my family's farm, my time spent as a IOFer in the Republic of Ireland, work on a goat dairy in rural Virginia, and working as a cashier at Grocer's Market. In what follows, I describe autoethnography and my feminist lens.

Autoethnography as Method

Autoethnography is a method of qualitative inquiry which situates the researcher as a site of inquiry and knowledge regarding a particular topic, as opposed to the study of the "other" (Ellis et. al, 2011). Autoethnography focuses on the "study of self" (Clair, 2011, p. 118) through the recollection and analysis of "remembered moments" (Ellis et. al, 2011) of experiences which altered the researcher's lived experience in terms of understanding and/or practice. The positionality of a researcher is emphasized, in terms of race, gender, and class in the context of their own experiences, in an attempt to highlight the multiplicity of truths (Ellis et. al, 2011). Further, ethnographic interviewing supplements autoethnographic inquiry, as it provides an opportunity for the researcher to be reflexive about their own experiences in the context of others' perceptions and recollections (Clair, 2011; Ellis et. al, 2011).

Autoethnographic methods contextualize my own experiences and situate them within emergent “multiple truths” of lived experience (Minge, 2013, p. 432). This research practice also seeks to “make sense of how we perpetuate the inequities” in our everyday actions, highlighting difference within relationships which creates productive sites for critical inquiry (Minge, 2013, p. 440). Autoethnography as a method allows researchers to create “ideological and discursive trouble while also creating humane and equitable ways of living”, complicating the experiences of the everyday and examining them for productive ends (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011, p. 110). Autoethnographic accounts are “embedded socially, structurally, and relationally” (Stern, 2015, p. 85), connecting the narratives of individuals within larger systemic and relational forces, which speaks to a particular goal of this thesis in terms of both food and labor systems. In highlighting the marginalized experiences of women in food labor, I seek to illuminate stories which will enable other women to make connections within their own lives (Stern, 2015).

Feminist and Critical Autoethnography

I take a feminist approach to this autoethnographic inquiry. Feminist ethnography is a method which renders the experiences and stories of women visible, which is a central goal of my thesis (McNamara, 2009). Feminist autoethnography sheds light on experiences which may be deeply personal, with the goal of providing narrative accounts in an effort to document and share these experiences. Feminist autoethnography aims to legitimize women’s stories as a site of knowledge and inquiry, and to create a space wherein other women can identify with these narratives and benefit from these accounts.

For example, Lorde's (1997) "The Cancer Journals" is illustrative of the usefulness of feminist autoethnography in documenting her experience as a Black woman diagnosed with cancer, as are Stern's (2014) accounts of her experiences with childhood trauma and abuse. The focus of my narratives on female farm labor aims to serve a similar purpose, wherein other women employed in the food system may identify with my own experiences of the gendered division of labor and meaning-making through food work. Feminist autoethnography further allows me as the researcher to be reflexive about my experiences doing farm labor and my role as a researcher when conducting autoethnographic interviews, engaging in conversation, observing in the field, and analyzing collected data (McNamara, 2009).

The narratives in the following chapters build upon and complement my experiences as a female food laborer in several aforementioned contexts. Throughout my experiences as a cashier at Grocer's Market, I explore my role as a laborer within the industrialized food system and at the point of sale, a workplace that was the most diverse in terms of those I worked alongside and customers I interacted with. This contrasts with my experiences with growing food and caring for livestock in my experiences growing up and working on other farms throughout my life, particularly in terms of participation within the informal economy, various ethics of food production, and the pervasive Whiteness visible on the small farms in Virginia and Ireland on which I have worked. There are also significant overlaps in the gendered nature of my labor experiences across these contexts, what knowledges are valued, and how meaning is created through labor throughout the food system. My participation as a laborer in the production and sale of food provides valuable insight into what it means to be a White female farm laborer.

These experiences provide lenses with which to examine common threads that run through participation in systems of food labor, to involve both “insiders and outsiders” in this analysis (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011, p. 110).

My thesis is situated within a critical frame, through the coalescence of stories with critical theory - complicating the notion that “real life” is not fraught with rich theoretical tensions (Holman Jones, 2016). Critical autoethnography is an “ongoing, movement-driven” process, in which theory gives us the tools with which to analyze the everyday (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 229). Throughout my narratives I seek to “bear witness to harmful social practices” in an effort to examine and dismantle them (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011, p. 111). The narratives throughout this thesis serve as entry points for both understanding gendered work and seeking to change these social processes (Holman Jones, 2016). These accounts seek to call into question hegemonic ideas regarding what is “valid, normal and right” through the lens of personal experience and reflection (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 232).

Throughout the process of crafting narratives that are representative of themes throughout my experiences, it is important to ensure that my work is speaking to larger systemic problems and identifying meaningful junctures.

Establishing Quality in Autoethnographic Scholarship

As a researcher, I am tasked with evaluating the quality of my writing and contributing to the conversation. Tracy’s (2010) framework for evaluating qualitative research describes eight criteria to assess its quality: worthiness of topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significance of contribution, ethicality, and meaningful coherence. These criteria allow myself as a researcher to continually assess the ways in

which I utilize autoethnographic methods in order to study the intersections of race, gender, and work in the context of food labor. These criteria serve as guiding principles for how I approach field work and in the telling of my stories and experiences, and requires continual assessment throughout the process of writing this thesis.

During and following my experiences in each field site, I journaled how I felt and what I had observed during the day's work. Depending on the day and the nature of the work, these notes would appear differently. While IOFing for example, there were days when I wrote out bulleted lists of chores and on some days I noted that we essentially repeated the usual routine we had in days before. There were also days where I noticed particular relational changes or wrote down memorable exchanges, and I attempted to capture as much as possible as I did not yet know what would emerge from the data I recorded. At times, gaps in my journal or things that I recall which I did not write down specifically also spoke volumes about the environment in which I worked.

While writing the narratives which appear in this paper, I utilized Tracy's (2010) framework to evaluate content that I considered including. In several instances I engaged in memory work as I reflected upon moments which speak to Tracy's criterion of significance of contribution to narrow down which questions were most salient to my thesis project and contributed to the field as a whole. There were many moments wherein I reflected upon the contribution of the methodology in particular, and how autoethnography offers a perspective which is distinct from other research approaches. Throughout this project, I found that autoethnography gave me the unique opportunity to reflect upon and put in conversation many instances from my own life which spoke to being a female farm laborer.

Though I had a great number of memories about my time spent behind a cash register and working on several farms, I constantly whittled them down to moments which I felt were most resonant, so that other women may identify with the feelings I aimed to evoke through writing. Another aspect of resonance is the evocative nature of the vignettes, as I reflected upon how to represent the experiences in ways which do not seek to capture “the truth” of any particular situation - but evoke particular feelings from within that environment. A primary goal of this thesis project is to produce work which is resonant with others, and sit with readers after reading it - perhaps even appearing in moments of their own experiences. I do not rely upon the resonant qualities of narrative alone, though, and have sought the feedback of others to hear their interpretations and feelings about the narratives within this document.

The arrangement of these narratives into this thesis document was a point of significant consideration, as I considered the criterion of meaningful coherence. Determining which narratives should be in conversation and in contrast with each other created significantly different stylistic outcomes. With the introductory literature review in mind as sensitizing concepts, I also sought to connect emergent themes from the narrative which situate these larger concepts within the everyday.

The criterion of ethicality is a prominent consideration that I kept in mind throughout all stages of the project, which I feel goes hand in hand with sincerity or self-reflexivity. When I first met those who are involved in a number of the field sites I discuss, I explained my project in the clearest terms I could conjure though I will not pretend it was clear-cut or easy. Though I had some initial research goals and questions, I did not necessarily know which ones would be most relevant and how I would analyze

the experiences I had there. I approached these relationships in the field in a way which I felt was authentic though complex, and have anguished over the ways in which I can represent them fairly. I hope to speak to my experiences in ways which balance both the responsibility I feel to those who I discuss in my narratives and also to those I share them with.

Relational Ethics of Autoethnography

Tracy's (2010) framework discusses ethics in terms of qualitative research as a centrally important theme, one which is further complicated by the nature of autoethnographic inquiry. Ellis (2007) describes the concept of relational ethics as a practice which "recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (p. 4). Ellis (2007) describes relational ethics as largely situational, providing several accounts of this practice and struggles within her own experiences as an ethnographer to illustrate how this may be considered throughout the research process. She describes several tensions, including: navigating her role as a researcher versus community member and friend within a studied population, what friendship means in the context of ethnographic research, and approaching how to write about intimate others. These considerations are particularly relevant to my thesis project and are particularly important to consider as I move forward with this deeply personal endeavor.

Relational ethics start with the equal consideration of researcher and participant, and what the implications of revealing information disclosed in this context may be. This is an incredibly complex and difficult process, especially given the numerous

considerations present in considering personal relationships and continuous re-assessment of ethical implications. Adams & Holman Jones (2011) piece positions reflexivity “as both an orientation to research and a writing practice” which addresses the complexity of relational ethics (p. 108). They define reflexivity as “a practice of holding seemingly contradictory ways of knowing in tensions”, with a particular emphasis upon stories and “identifying who and what they’re about, who can tell them and for what purposes, and what they know and might do in the world” (p. 108). This provides a meaningful and helpful ethical framework for my ongoing research which is co-constructed within my experiences with others.

In order to uphold the relational ethics of my project, I conducted autoethnographic interviews following the approval of the Institutional Review Board. Autoethnographic interviews involve purposeful interactions with participants who may contribute to the narrator’s constructed stories. As autoethnographic interviewing is often important to building robust and crystallized (Ellingson, 2009) narratives and enabling the writer to tackle complex relational ethics throughout the process, I conducted autoethnographic interviewing to help me to narrate my own experiences on rural farms that I lived and worked on in Ireland during Summer 2017 and then in Spring 2018 in my work on a rural farm in Virginia.

(Auto)Ethnographic interviews are informal conversations with a purpose, which are unstructured, not audio recorded and include observations. Ethnographic interviews are appropriate for this research project due to the nature of farm work, which is often varied and grounded in physical experience, which also dictates the environment in which I will interact with other IOFers. This style of interviewing captures alternative

ways of knowing which have been historically undervalued, such as the passing of knowledge in farming communities, and emphasizes that “knowledge construction is rooted in everyday, local contexts and local actions” (Mingé, 2013, p. 435).

Autoethnographic interviews were conducted once verbal consent was obtained upon arriving at the farm site. Throughout, participants were reminded that they could opt out of the research project at any time. Ethnographic interviews were driven by what we were doing, which is variable due to the nature of the IOFing experience and farm work. For example, interviews took place while herding livestock, harvesting crops, or over dinnertime conversations about the day’s work. The interview process was open to allow participants to guide the direction of the conversation and talk about information appropriate to the topic, in a conversational manner. Interviews were used to help enrich the narratives that I constructed from my experiences doing farm labor. Thus the interviews helped to add multiple voices, not just my own, to the final narrative.

Overview of the Field Sites and Central Characters

Throughout the narratives in this thesis, there are a number of places and characters which are de-identified representations of their real-life counterparts present in recollections of my own experiences. In this section, I will give a brief overview of each field site and the characters contained within them. Since the narratives have been arranged thematically, this overview is meant to provide the reader with context prior to reading through each chapter so as to reveal the gendered, raced, and classed threads weaving through these scenes. These have been arranged chronologically, in the order in which I experienced them, to situate the places and characters within a linear timeline to provide additional context about their development.

The first context I discuss is my upbringing on my parents' alpaca farm in rural Virginia, where I grew up with my two sisters, my mom, and my dad. My parents are both British immigrants, who came to the United States a few years before I was born to work with a startup software company, and had no prior experience in farming. My parents purchased our first alpacas and chickens when I was about seven years old, a decision I have heard my mom attribute to a desire to spend more time with me and my siblings and to live a subsistence farming lifestyle. Of my siblings, partially due to my age, I was the most involved with all aspects of the farm business including caring for animals, showing them competitively, preparing fiber and selling fiber products, and assisting with veterinary care and shearing, among other tasks.

During my time growing up on the farm, there were a number of fellow breeders and professionals whom I came to know and respect. In particular, Dr. Evans made an impression upon me and features in these narratives. She is and has been our large-animal veterinarian for many years and is well-respected in the field of camelid healthcare especially, also owning her own practice in the area. She served as a mentor for both me and my mom, as beginning breeders and later as more seasoned ones - a relationship which featured prominently in my formative years. Due to my experiences growing up on the farm and with Dr. Evans, I had hoped to pursue an education in veterinary medicine and as a result interned for several weeks with her practice and lived in her home. I had also travelled with my mom on several occasions to her practice with ailing animals, and had a number of emotional and educational experiences during these visits.

I am now in pursuit of my Master's degree in Communication and Advocacy with a concentration in Environmental Advocacy, where I have returned to my interests in and

passion for issues relating to food and farming. During the summer prior to my first semester as a graduate student, I began working at Grocer's Market. I worked at the grocery store as a cashier for three semesters, in addition to my employment as a graduate assistant for two sections of a group communication course and in customer service within my university's Information Technology department. My hourly jobs in I.T. and at Grocer's Market made up some of the difference, as my stipend was not quite enough, so I could pay down my credit card from living costs accrued over the summer and continue to pay rent on time. My total income each month came to about \$1,300 which meant I was able to pay rent, my phone and credit card bills, books for the semester, repay the remaining \$500 for my moped, and that was about it.

I realized that my stipend for teaching two courses each semester would run out in May and my I.T. job usually scheduled me for around 30 hours per week during the summer months. I put aside my tax return to purchase a plane ticket to go IOFing, a decision that I decided was legitimated by the pursuit of my thesis project, though I was panicking about it now. I was not scheduled for a portion of the summer prior to IOFing, which I believe was due to: the reduced patronage of the store after the student population left, prioritization of scheduling full-time non-student workers' hours, and the belief that my job at Grocer's Market was a secondary priority to my employment elsewhere. Though it is certainly true that I preferred and prioritized working for the university, the resulting lack of hours meant that my monthly income declined dramatically. It became clear to me in that span of time that I was employed largely out of convenience to my employer, expecting significant spans of availability of four or more hours during the day (during the school year and summer) for which I may not be

scheduled at all. My Grocer's Market schedule changed weekly, and I did not know my schedule for the following week until the Thursday or Friday of the week before. My work as a cashier was largely a series of mind-numbing, repetitive motions and it did not help to know that I was not valued by the corporate entity which employed me. I was seen instead as a series of numbers regarding my transaction time and raises were predicated on my ability to perform to a particular numerical standard. Though Grocer's Market trains their employees to prioritize customer service and assistance, slowing down your line to help a customer was frowned upon and was often reflected in your numbers.

When I began teaching three 29-student sections at the university, I was no longer able to keep up with my additional employment at Grocer's Market. I would genuinely miss those I worked alongside and the customers I became familiar with as they came through my line, but that was about it. I was incredibly grateful to take on an additional course section instead of working as a cashier, as I found the work to be more thought-provoking and motivational though not much better paid. My time at Grocer's Market helped me to realize my privilege as I spoke with my co-workers who recounted the struggles of not quite making a living from the work, and I could not imagine working the job for much longer than I already had. For me, this job was a temporary solution to fill the gap, and hopefully I will not have to return.

There was a point during my employment with the university and Grocer's Market where I desperately applied to the Food Stamp program in my area, as my income dipped below federal poverty line limits. I was able to utilize this program for several months, which was a relief to me as I no longer prioritized other bills over purchasing food. The EBT card only allows for the purchase of a specific range of food items and the

credits cannot be used for anything else. When I was no longer eligible for the program upon taking the third section to teach, I looked to PharmaHeal for a way to earn additional money for grocery costs and miscellaneous purchases I would often put onto my credit card. I was determined to make up the difference elsewhere, though I had no additional hours to spare. My mom had loaned me \$2,000 to pay off the credit card costs I had accrued over the summer and during a transitional period where I was responsible for moving cost, housing deposits, and increased rent payments. This was another reminder of my privilege as I had a family member I could rely on to loan me money in a time of need, which kept me away from the vicious cycle of minimum payments and credit card fees.

PharmaHeal is a plasma donation center which advertises that it compensates donors well for their time, and often promoting time-sensitive cash-incentivized deals to do so. It felt strange to tell others, if I did at all, that what I was doing was “donating”. Though at first I felt the excitement of being able to make decent money in about an hour and a half, after the “new donor” special expired it became far less lucrative. During the new donor period I would make \$50 to \$80 per donation, but when I shifted into the regular donor category the compensation dropped and I was required to donate twice a week to make it worthwhile. I would earn \$20 for my first donation and \$50 for my second of the week, hydrating and eating much more mindfully than I ever had before in graduate school. I began to question if it was worthwhile after I developed a track mark on my left arm and had a reaction during one donation session to the anticoagulant agent. The process was uncomfortable and demeaning but not unbearable, and it was difficult to

turn down considering the cash incentives. I felt that Grocer's Market and PharmaHeal were in many ways outcroppings of the same rotten core.

Grocer's Market, PharmaHeal, and my other jobs provided the financial means for me to attend graduate school and pursue my interests, which in large part have led to the culmination of this thesis project. In my first semester of graduate school I pursued a project relating to migrant farm work in the Shenandoah Valley, after watching the documentary *Food Chains*, which highlighted my ignorance of issues relating to laborers with the globalized, industrial food chain. My lens has since shifted to examine labor within food systems in a number of contexts, and when considering the focus of my thesis project I decided to pursue an opportunity through the International Organic Farming (IOF) program to broaden my knowledge of different farming systems and set-ups. This was also a soul-searching exercise for both me and my IOF partner, Caitlin. As I grappled with the focus of my thesis project and reflected on what about food systems I wanted to study, she took the opportunity to travel and experience a new culture. We decided that Ireland was a destination which was well-suited to our wants and needs considering the primary language spoken is English, neither of us had been to Ireland before, and Caitlin had not travelled outside of the country previously - so I felt comfortable transferring my experiences travelling in the UK to planning this trip.

Ireland also seemed like an ideal place to IOF, as agriculture as an industry has particularly significant historical, cultural, and economic implications for the country as a whole. We joined the IOF site and selected Ireland as our host country, and soon after began our search for hosts. Caitlin and I both have experience with livestock, due to our upbringing on livestock-oriented farms, which we highlighted in our IOF profiles. Caitlin

grew up on a cow dairy farm and was involved with a number of everyday animal care tasks such as milking and veterinary treatment, in addition to experience with competitive showmanship activities. We noticed that many IOFers seemed to pursue this experience for language-development or travel-oriented goals with few who had prior farming experience, and thought we both stuck out in this way as we brought a particular skill set to the table.

We coordinated with two farmers for our four-week voluntary work experience, spending two weeks at our first farm (Greg and Helen's) and ten days at the second (Molly's). We arrived in the town center by bus after a few days of touring Dublin, and were picked up following the conclusion of a Gaelic football game. We soon learned that Greg and Helen's farm focused primarily upon cattle and fruit and vegetable production, and was family-owned. They relayed to us that their primary goals are to produce all that they eat on the farm, for themselves as well as a few of their children who live at home, and to do so organically. They have many IOFers come year-round who they educate and work alongside, and also feed with fresh produce from their farm during family style meals. Caitlin and I lived in the upstairs portion of their home in a spacious shared bedroom.

Our primary tasks on the farm were largely dictated by the season, organic methods of production, and Greg and Helen's focus upon livestock and crops. We often weeded within the polytunnels and in a larger field where we also planted new crops. So as to avoid the use of harsh pesticides and herbicides, we fertilized crops in the polytunnels with homemade organic fertilizers. We also helped with the care of their cows, though they required little maintenance, by feeding them potatoes, moving the

fencing outwards to strip graze them, herding them between fields, and corralling a young bull to be sold.

After our first week, we were joined by a second IOFer from Germany, named Elyse. Elyse is a university student who wants to be a teacher, who participated in a similar voluntary German program called “workcamps” which led her to try IOFing. She was participating in IOFing for relatively long-term stays of about four or five weeks per placement.

After leaving Greg and Helen’s farm, we travelled by bus to meet Molly in Dublin as a central pick-up point. Molly is a single, recently separated mother of a young girl named Daisy. She leases land on which she grazes her herd of about 200 sheep, in addition to maintaining a thematically and color arranged garden within which include a diverse array of species for particular aesthetic or functional purposes. We were used to identifying plants among rows of weeds at Greg and Helen’s, but Molly’s garden presented a particular challenge as we had to identify a wide range of beneficial species that were not arranged in rows. We learned that we were her first IOFers, so she was unfamiliar with expectations overall but explained the general setup of the farm and garden. She also offered several ideas about places that she could take us to visit and experience Ireland’s history. She would often drop by small historic towns in the afternoon after finishing work, sending us on our way with recommended points of interest. Though we only were able to visit the sheep a few times, as the farm was an hour’s drive away, we were able to get hands-on experience with caring for and assessing their health. Molly was enrolled in a farming certification course at the time of our visit, and we assisted her in taking soil samples in order to test soil quality in her fields to

assess what should be added to it. Caitlin and I grew particularly attached to both Molly and Daisy during our short time with them, and it was during our time here that I discovered the topic for my thesis project.

Upon returning to the United States and starting my second year of graduate school, I was extended the opportunity to enroll in an Integrated Science and Technology course wherein you work alongside a local farmer. Through this class I met Leanne, a dairy goat farmer with a herd of around 70 goats which she milks, cares for, and kids almost entirely on her own. She was looking for a student to work on a herd health project that she had been conducting for over a year, which involved examining fecal samples for the presence of parasites. She had a number of questions that she hoped to answer through the project, about wormer resistance in her herd, the efficacy of particular treatments (natural alternatives and prescribed/over-the-counter medications), the life cycle of a number of common worms, and the effects of worm loads on particular goats. She taught me the 20 minute fecal float process which I conducted in her barn once a week with six samples. I then passed along this information to another student, Klara, who worked with me in the Spring semester as well. Klara is a Biology student who has a particular knowledge of and affinity for botany, which I was excited to hear as I felt we could complement each other's knowledges. In addition to conducting fecals, Leanne taught me and Klara about kidding, milking, what makes a good quality goat, and her business plan and goals. Leanne is also a single woman farmer who works full-time on the farm, similar in some ways to Molly, and we have also discussed the challenges she has faced and overcome due to her own physical health and being the only laborer on the farm.

The narratives in the following chapters begin with the question, “how was gender salient in my experiences of food labor and farming?” This question presented itself in more complex ways than I had anticipated, and follows me throughout the sites I describe above. The narratives that emerged are arranged around four central themes: what we do to make do, vulnerable and gendered labor, women’s bodies and work, and women mentoring women. Throughout my work as a food and farm laborer, vulnerability presented itself in number of complex ways as I reflected upon experiences where I felt powerless and/or uncomfortable. In “what we do to make do”, I reflect upon memories of food and farm labor wherein there was a sense of necessity and duty which lay beneath the ideological foundations for particular lifestyle choices/forced choices. Women’s bodies and work discussed the ways in which myself and other women were constrained by others as a result of our physical bodies’ aesthetic appearance, while also highlighting experiences which refute these constraints in recollections of the ability of female bodies. Finally, I discuss the relationships between female farm owners and myself, as well as the young women who worked alongside me, and described the nature of their mentorship roles.

CHAPTER THREE: VULNERABLE AND GENDERED LABOR

New IOFers: First Impressions & Lasting Ones

One morning, Greg told us that we would be getting a new IOFer, and she would sleep in the third bed in the far corner next to the wardrobe. A German girl - one of the nationalities that Greg had described as the most hardworking and precise - she represented his “preferred” groups of workers. Apparently many of the French IOFers were IOFing to improve their language skills and generally had little interest in farm work, but the Germans were very focused on working but sometimes less so on conversation. Caitlin and I looked her up on the IOF site after Greg told us her name, Elyse, and we jokingly made “judgements” about what she might be like. She was a few years younger than we were and her profile suggested that she was studying to be a teacher. She looked remarkably well-adjusted and nice, so we couldn’t say much.

Greg mentioned that she was coming early, leaving her previous placement as she had run into problems there. He’d heard the same about this particular farm in the past. I wondered what had happened or what the expectations were at her previous placement, as this is the only IOF farm we had any experience with. Greg and Lydia went to the bus station to pick her up, where they had retrieved us about a week earlier. Helen asked that we vacuum and clear out our trash before she arrived, which we happily did, as “first impressions are important”. Although it had happened only once or twice, they’d had IOFers leave after a few days upon getting a negative impression, though it seemed to have more to do with the attitude of the other IOFers staying at the time. Caitlin and I wondered, in their absence, if having Elyse stay and work would change the nature of our relationship with Greg and Helen - for better or worse.

We came downstairs to meet Elyse, who was giving Helen and Greg gifts upon her arrival. She had short, straight brown hair tied back into a ponytail, and was wearing athletic-style clothes. Her accent was difficult to place, and at first it sounded a bit Australian, it certainly wasn't the image I had in mind when I thought "German". I had thought about bringing small "American" gifts for our hosts, but hadn't managed to find anything particularly evocative of American culture. Watching Elyse, I was kicking myself for not looking a bit harder.

I noticed that Greg would tell stories about past IOFers as a sort of ritual to welcome new IOFers, as he did with us and now Elyse. He showed her the blue book, filled with notes from (mostly female) workers from over the past few years. Greg pulled out the picture of "L&L," a pair of German girls who came back to visit several times.

"They're the American L&L, these two - good craic," he said, chuckling to himself. I wondered if that was how they would talk about us, once we left. Caitlin and I wondered about that quite a lot.

Greg came upstairs and sat on the spare bed with us, chatting away. He'd told us that he'd actually built the room we were staying in, and the whole second floor. He checked his phone quickly, and added that he'd gotten a message from the original L&L - he had told them about us. He asked me and Caitlin if we would pose for a picture so he could send one to them, as he'd shown us many pictures of them. I wrote in my journal later, "Caitlin and I said we're going to cry when we leave here. It's so nice to be here."

After dinner, Greg brought all of us out to the cow field so Elyse could see them. He seemed fine with sacrificing some productivity on the farm to make sure we were all having a good time. His most common question to us was, "Are you learning

something?” to which Caitlin and I always replied affirmatively. He warned all of us quite apologetically that our days would be filled with weeding at this time of year, which Caitlin and I could attest to, which was not difficult work but was certainly repetitive. We were learning quite a lot though about organic techniques, plant identification, and the lifestyle Helen and Greg led - and the pace of the days was a welcome respite from the drudgery of wage work back home.

“Caitlin, could you go get some lettuce from the polytunnel for lunch, please?”

Greg asked, looking down at the newspaper.

“Which tunnel is it in?” she asked.

“I’m glad you haven’t learned anything since you’ve gotten here.” he retorted, annoyed.

When we arrived back at the house, all three of us went upstairs to our shared bedroom. Elyse requested the first shower, which we were happy to oblige, as Caitlin and I wrote in our journals. Elyse was remarkably quick, returning about 10 minutes later, and Caitlin followed after her towel over her arm, shuffling over towards the bathroom. I turned to Elyse, quite eager to hear from another IOFer -

“Greg told us that you came early from your last placement, how was it there?” I asked.

“It was very different, we actually lived in a communal cabin away from the host family, and we made our own meals. I think it’s nice that we live and eat with everyone.” she added.

“Yeah, Caitlin and I have learned a lot from Helen and all of her recipes, and they treat us really well. I feel really included and a part of things, Caitlin and I talk about that a lot.” I replied.

“I’ve found that the relationship with the host family changes things quite a lot.” she paused, looking upward to the ceiling. “When I left the last farm, they told me that I didn’t get involved and that’s why she didn’t have a good time there. I came down every night with my journal, though, and the host family just ignored me. They seemed to talk about past IOFers that didn’t do well there as some fault of their own, and they would show us that book -- like the one Helen and Greg have -- to show us how much other IOFers liked it there. ‘We’ve had 80 IOFers!’ they’d say, proudly of course.” she scoffed.

“I hadn’t thought much about that before, I see what you mean.” I wondered how edited the recollections I had flipped through were, and how much you couldn’t see.

“I think the problem with IOFing is that you can’t really give honest feedback about the placement. The IOF farmers all know each other so you can’t leave an honest note in the book, and the reviews on the site are all monitored as well. I think they want more people to go IOFing, so they wouldn’t want negative ones up. I think when I left I wrote something that hinted towards some of the issues there, but couldn’t say it outright because they’d think I was being rude.” She added, matter-of-factly.

“There’s ‘all craic’ Katie, and then there’s ‘can’t run a comb through to get everything out of your head Katie’. I want to hear more about that part.” Greg chuckled, looking over from the row beside me, weeding away.

“I mean, I don’t know. I don’t know what you want to hear. You can ask.” I laughed. I remembered what Elyse had mentioned about the relationship with her previous host family, and how quickly things could turn sour. Maybe it was better to keep my thoughts to myself. All-craic Katie wasn’t very controversial or critical, but she was probably better-liked.

Hay Baling

It was a particularly warm day, and quite sunny, so our primary task for the day was to help Greg flip and toss the freshly cut hay so it would dry evenly. Greg was watching the forecast closely and saw that it was due to rain in a few days, so made the calculated decision to cut the grass a few days earlier so as to catch the window of dry weather. He taught me to drive the tractor and go around in a methodical fashion to ensure I had covered the entirety of the field. He took a video as I drove around, which he later sent to me over Facebook, and I felt impressed with myself as I had very little experience driving them at all before. Caitlin wasn’t interested in learning to drive it - I think she was scared to, which I could understand as I felt quite nervous doing it at first. I shut off the tractor after about 30 minutes and helped Greg, Caitlin and Elyse spread the hay evenly over the field. If it sat in clumps, it wouldn’t dry out well.

He pushed me over into the freshly cut hay, taking me down in a fashion that I could only describe as a wrestling-type move. I’d discovered some years earlier, when I was about seven or so, that I was mildly allergic. My first reaction was to push the hay off of my face, so I wouldn’t get itchy, red dots spreading along my body. He had done the same to Caitlin the day before in the cow field, and I hadn’t thought much of it - other

than the fact that it was surprising. I let out a laugh then, and I was laughing now, though I didn't know what to make of what had just happened. He hadn't done the same to Elyse, yet.

Cowboy Hat

I always saw his cowboy hat before I would see his face, and he always looked down to avoid making eye contact. He actually reminded me of my Dad: his long, dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, his demeanor shy and reserved, and he was probably about fifty or so. I made a point to say hello and ask him how he was doing, after going through the robotic motions of asking him for his loyalty card and whether or not he wanted bags. I made a point to follow up on a previous exchange we'd had, in an attempt to break away from the otherwise de-personalized and monotonous routine of scanning items behind the register.

He was one of about a dozen or so customers with whom I often talked, and I saw his shyness slowly fade each time he came back through my line. He was Cowboy Hat - he must have had cats as he bought cat food and litter a few times, usually had no more than ten items, and often went RV-ing in West Virginia. There was Bus Driver who reliably bought a 24-pack of Coors Light sometime in the afternoon, an indication that he was setting aside time to work on his biplane. Bus Driver commended my decision to purchase a moped. He drove a route near my apartment and I often waved to him on his way past. Pretzel Guy was also an older man who always asked for paper bags, bought Grocer's Market brand yogurts and two bags of pretzels, was friends with someone over in the grocery department who had sold him his house, and had a very matter-of-fact

demeanor that made me laugh. A young, curly haired employee from the nearby vape shop often bought a drink and a snack in my line before work.

I felt that I was a part of their routine, and we were a part of each other's lives - a rhythm we did not necessarily control or dictate but was something we all had to live with. It was a decent coping mechanism for my four to six hour shifts behind the register, which I would dread every week. When I first started, it was difficult to stand for that long - I rocked from one foot to the other on a thin, black rubber mat that didn't appear to mitigate the pain of standing on hard tile. The only relief came from my ten or fifteen minute breaks - I would go to the bathroom just to sit on the toilet - the only time I was allowed to sit down at all. If it was busy, which varied depending on the time of day and who was scheduled, I was unable to drink either - drinks weren't allowed to be kept at the register at all. In an effort to entertain myself, I drew notes and traced pictures on the back of Grocer's Market receipts and continually re-calculated my monthly budget in my head. Staying out of the red with regard to my limited budget was the only reason I stood behind that register at all.

Cowboy Hat only had a couple of things, and we had our usual conversation about what was new - I was teaching this semester and working on a couple of projects, and he was headed to West Virginia again. I bagged up the rest of his items and leaned over to hand him his receipt. As I handed it to him, he reached into his wallet and pulled out what appeared to be a business card. He handed it to me.

“Call me sometime. And don't lose it!”

“Haha, I won't!” I turned on the conveyor to beckon the next customer in line.

I cringed, and an ice-cold shiver shot through my body. It was a plain white business card with his name and number printed in Verdana font on the back. Was this my fault? Was I being too friendly, and deceiving him in some way - making him think I was somehow interested? Why would a man old enough to be my father say that to me?

Every time he came back to the store, a fight-or-flight response shot to my gut. I was trapped at the register, and I had no choice but to see him.

Breeding Season/Kidding Season

It was beautiful outside, so I rolled up the garage-style barn door to let in the sunshine and the gentle breeze. I could see the neighbor's cows from here, and the buzzing of the power lines overhead droned on in the background. I put on some Talking Heads on a low volume, as I counted the strongyloide eggs in the fourth sample of the day. 486/NO, I wrote next to Marley's name. 486 indicating the number of strongyloides (a sort of umbrella term for common roundworms) and "NO" as I saw no evidence of tapeworm eggs in the sample. I prepared the next slide, and placed it below the lens.

To my surprise, and excitement, I noticed that there was movement underneath the slide. I zoomed in using the next magnification setting, just to see. There's something moving within the egg casing! I scanned around and noticed the same in a couple of others. I sent a text to Leanne with a short video of what I saw, and she asked if it was Flower's sample. How did she know? She'd accidentally left it in the pocket of her jeans, and apparently that happens when the samples are left out for a bit. So cool.

After I finished the last sample, Leanne came out and showed me her does and bucks. She had gone out to breed a couple as I was finishing fecals, and somewhat comically she was leading around one of the males with a dog collar and leash. Leanne

had mentioned to me that it was difficult for her to find higher quality males than the ones she had already, though was in talks with another breeder to purchase a partial share in a high quality buck who had recently come up for sale. Her bloodlines were an essential part of her business, as her goats were scored by the American Dairy Goat Association (ADGA) and were ranked very highly in terms of confirmation and therefore also their breeding quality. Her niche in the market is the quality of breeding stock she produces, so ensuring breeding success and quality is paramount.

She walked around the youngest buck on a leash to test and see which females were in heat, characterized by a generally interested demeanor and tail-wagging. He mounted one female and I saw for the first time what breeding goats looked like, which in my opinion resembled chickens breeding as it only took a second or so unlike the 20 or 30 minutes for alpacas. I couldn't help but laugh. They were certainly more efficient creatures.

“I think he's done, he needs some time to recharge and then he can breed again.”

“Really? He can breed again today?” I asked, intrigued.

I was surprised, as usually we would have to trade out the males between breedings, as usually they would only have one good opportunity in a day. We wanted to maximize the potential, too, as the breeding process was a bit involved. I'm amazed alpacas have survived this long.

We went back around to the barn as Leanne checked over her clipboard, which kept track of all the breedings she had conducted in a day. I could see why a spreadsheet would be necessary, as she had to check if the does were still in heat or if they had been bred at all.

“She hasn't come into heat yet.” Leanne pointed to a doe's name with the end of

her pen. “She should have by now.” She walked over to the workbench where she began to draw up some shots.

“I sometimes use Estrumate in this situation, to try and stimulate ovulation. I have to be really careful though, because it can induce abortion if the doe is pregnant. That’s another reason why I keep careful notes on the spreadsheet.” She pointed over to the door, where it hung on a nail. “If you read the side here with the warnings, it says:

“Women of childbearing age, asthmatics, and persons with bronchial and other respiratory problems should exercise extreme caution when handling this product. In the early stages, women may be unaware of their pregnancies. Estrumate is readily absorbed through the skin and may cause abortion and/or bronchospasms; direct contact with the skin should therefore be avoided. Accidental spillage on the skin should be washed off immediately with soap and water.”

“Oh my god, that’s crazy.” I replied, surprised how at risk women in farming could be, in a seemingly routine operation.

A nagging guilt pulled at me, a familiar one at that, as I saw the parallels between myself and the animals we bred at home to sustain our livelihood. Though we treated them as well as we could, loved them, and respected them there was still an underlying tension present there. We depended on the reproductive labor of female animals and their success determined their futures in a number of ways. The ways we valued them and utilized them as livestock seemed to parallel at least in some ways how our society values women and sees them as ‘productive.’ Estrumate served as a visceral reminder of that, as I imagined the fears that pervade the protection of a pregnant human body - and how we manage the fertility and reproductive capabilities of female animals.

Klara and I pulled up to the farm, hopping out of the Jeep and putting on our jackets. We walked over to the field entrance, and I noticed immediately that the set of gates behind it, usually left closed, were wide open. She'd had a farm day the previous weekend so I wondered if that had anything to do with it. I looked over to the barn and saw Leanne emerge from the back door, her hood up and drawstring pulled tight to keep out the cold. We walked through the gate, making sure to push it securely closed, and met her before we got to the back door of the barn.

“You just missed it, the vet came and had to give Shimmer a C-section.”

“Aww.” We both replied, looking over to each other. We only came for a few hours on Friday afternoons so it was very unlikely that we would catch one of the girls giving birth - but it was disappointing to know we had just missed our opportunity.

“The babies didn't make it. They were boys though, so.” She shrugged. “I'm sorry - that probably sounds horrible.” She looked over to Klara.

“Oh no, I mean from a business sense I haven't been in that situation. I could see why.” She gestured outwards with her hands, to indicate a sort of “I don't know”.

I jogged up to the barn to help Mom load up Ishbel into the trailer and take her on the two hour journey up to Dr. Evans. She had been shifting around uncomfortably all day, her stomach bulging on one side as she was incredibly pregnant. She was a few days away from her due date.

“She looked over at me and just gave me this look, she looked right at me. I went over to her and she touched noses with me. They tell you when something is wrong.”

We walked over to the back door of the barn, both of us entering one at a time to

ward off the horde of goats trying to get into the milking area. Klara and I both thought that they were rushing in because they wanted to be milked, to relieve some pressure on their udders or something. Wrong. They were really just interested in the grain on the other side of the door, Leanne told us - adding that it's a common misconception.

"I'll go check the fridge and see how many samples are there." I said, walking towards the back of the barn, past Shimmer who was laying down in a kidding pen post C-section. When I would come in the fall, Leanne would often have five or six samples ready for me, which she would have collected earlier in the day. This semester there may be one or two, as kidding season is so hectic for her. She has birthed 102 kids this year already - and there are still a couple dozen to come!

"Okay, there's one here for Hopscotch." I noted, reading the name scrawled in Sharpie on the plastic glove.

"Alright, I'll grab some gloves." Klara said from the doorway.

I walked back over to the trash can where we usually dumped out the remainder of the fecal samples, so as not to block up the sink. Leanne had mentioned that the bodies of the two baby boys were in the trash can, as a sort of forewarning. I'd seen many stillbirths and birth defects over the years in the alpacas, and I'd also helped birth many healthy babies - each a learning experience. Alpacas very rarely had twins, though, and I'd learned that it was quite common in goats to have two or even three.

I walked over and pulled up the discarded feed bag lying over top, curious to see what they looked like. Their small hooves poked out from underneath, and I wondered if they had the same waxy caps on their toes as newborn alpacas do - it looked like it. They

looked perfect and identical, laid out beside each other. Sometimes these things just happen.

Klara and I delighted in collecting fecal samples. It provided the opportunity to go out and watch the goats, especially as the tiny babies raced around the pasture. We had taken it upon ourselves to give a few of the kids honorary names that we felt suited them best. Klara named a small black male who enjoyed putting his hooves on your thigh awaiting pets, Zeus. A pair of black and white twins, at an age where they looked quite rotund and not quite goat-like yet, were Jellybean and Jellybelly. I had mentioned to Leanne before that Fridays were therapeutic respite from Grocer's Market and graduate work - and a welcome break from writing my (this) thesis, a time to relax and reflect. I could tell that Klara felt similarly.

We had collected five samples between us, after comically sneaking up behind a goat as they raised their tails and collecting as many beans as we could before they hit the floor or the goat was spooked. It was quite honestly a skill. We had a different sample in each pocket to keep them in order, and showed Leanne pictures we had taken of the goat whose poop we had managed to collect. Although I knew a few of the girls, it was difficult for me to remember all 70 as of yet.

“Yep, that’s Hideaway.” She looked over at Klara’s phone.

“Is this Olive?” I asked.

“Yep, that’s her.”

We labeled all the samples appropriately, placing them in order before starting the familiar fecal process. Luckily, Leanne was milking at the same time as we were running

samples, so we could talk without interrupting our productivity on either end. Often, Leanne had a long list of things she had to do and I didn't want to pull her aside for a conversation out of respect for her time.

“Why did you decide that goats and dairy best fit your lifestyle?” I asked, reading from a drafted question in my journal that I had written post reading a government document on Whole Farm Planning.

“It didn't. It IS a lifestyle. One that I chose. I don't think dairying can actually fit anyone's lifestyle. It is such a demanding lifestyle all within its own. It's hard to imagine it as just a part of another lifestyle... unless maybe being done on a hobby scale.” She had told me on a prior visit that she used to work in I.T. as a programmer, curiously similar to my parents' background in some ways. I realized then how clinical the question sounded and that I liked her answer.

“I work from 5:30 in the morning and usually go to bed around 11 at night.” She sat beside one of the females, adjusting the milking machine as necessary. “There's no sleeping in for me, ever!” She laughed.

“Dr. Evans slept in the hay beside her.” I could tell Mom was grateful to her. You wouldn't expect that level of commitment from many people - but Dr. Evans took more care than most would. It was more than just her job.

“Ish delivered the baby, a girl, but there was nothing she could have done. The cria had no diaphragm. So, basically, there was nothing keeping her organs in place. Of course, it's always the girls that this happens to.” She was obviously disappointed about the cria, which meant the loss of potential income, especially as it was a female cria, and

11 months of gestation time. It would be over a year until the possibility of another cria presented itself, if everything went well and the breeding took the first time.

Blue Convertible

“Hi! Do you have your member card with you today?”

“Uh, yeah.” He avoided eye contact, casting his eyes down to the floor.

“Would you like a bag for these?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Okay, sure!”

I made it my personal mission to reduce the number of plastic bags I distributed, putting the maximum number of items into one bag and hoping to eliminate any “unnecessary” bags. Though Grocer’s Market also shared this goal, for cost-cutting reasons, this had much more to do with my own interest in trying to limit the already excessive and unnecessary plastic waste. There was a twinge of annoyance in my tone as I handed him three small items in his requested bag. He handed me a ten dollar bill, and I glanced over at the till to see how much change he needed: \$2.73. It was very much a robotic movement at this point, as I reached over from quarters to dimes, and then pennies.

“Have a good night!” I said, as I handed him his receipt, coupons and change.

It was around 10:15 PM on a weekday, and there were probably three customers in the store. I looked down at my phone, on which I had recently installed an eReader app

as a sort of coping mechanism for the level of boredom I experienced working slow night shifts.

I leaned over to the store-wide microphone system, “Attention Grocer’s Market shoppers! The time is 10:30 and Grocer’s Market closes in 30 minutes. Please make your final selections and head up to register 7 to check out. Thank you for shopping at your local Grocer’s Market!” My manager, Tom, looked over and gave me a nod of approval.

“You know - you’re actually pretty good at that.”

“Ha - thanks!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a lanky man in a blue sweatshirt headed towards my register. As I looked up, I noticed he was the same guy from before. It wasn’t uncommon for a customer to come back through the line if they’d forgotten something, but something about this guy just felt off.

“Hi again! I can go ahead and scan your card for you.”

“Thanks - forgot this.”

“That happens to me all the time, you always forget that one thing.” (No, I don’t.) A faint smile appeared on his face. This time, I handed over his one item without asking about the bag. That usually circumvents them asking for one. He took the lemon juice and wandered out of the store.

My manager called over to me, “Hey Katie, can you count up how much change you have in your register when you get the chance?”

“Yeah sure, let me just do the announcement quickly.”

I went through my usual script and then counted up my remaining change, a nightly ritual. Breaking open a new roll of quarters was my favorite boredom-curing habit.

The sliding glass doors opened and a wave of cool air drifted over my body. It was the same customer again - and he was headed straight over to me. I locked eyes with my manager and then looked back towards the register.

“Do you sell stamps here?” he asked.

“Oh, um, yes. We sell a sheet of them for about 9 bucks.”

“Do you sell them individually?”

“No, I don’t think so. I think maybe the post office does, but I’m not sure if they’re open now.” It was nearly 11 PM.

“I’ll just get the sheet then.”

I handed him the book of stamps -

“Do you get off soon?” he asked.

“Yeah actually, not long now.” I was careful not to disclose the time.

“What are you doing after work?”

“Well, I worked my other job at 8 AM so probably just going to sleep, I’m exhausted,” I said, following up with a half-hearted laugh.

“Well, have a good night.”

“You, too!”

I hurriedly cleaned the register and Tom looked over at me from behind the customer service counter. “What was up with that guy?” he asked, an incredulous look on his face.

“He went through my line THREE TIMES. And the last time he wanted some stamps. It’s 11 PM dude, what are you gonna do with some stamps?”

We laughed and continued closing everything down. I was hoping to get back home before 11:30 to get some sleep, my feet ached from standing for so long. Tom went out to get carts, but came back in moments later.

“Was that guy wearing a blue jacket or something? Kinda tall?”

“Yeah I think so, why?”

“He’s standing out in the parking lot next to the carts.”

“You’re kidding.” I moved away from the store window to avoid his gaze, the glare from inside the store making it difficult to see outside.

“How about you go and do some re-shop while I get carts?” he suggested.

“Sure, I’ll go grab everything to put back.”

I ran quickly to put back the assorted unwanted items from each register, with my phone in my other hand. I sent a text to my boyfriend hoping he was near his phone, asking him to come walk over and get me. I usually walked home, but today I didn’t want to risk it. I was walking back up to the front when I saw Tom turn the corner and walk towards me at the end of the aisle.

“When I went out, he turned off his car. I think he thought that I was you leaving or something and wanted it to look like he just happened to be there. When he realized it wasn’t you, he turned the car back on again and is just sitting there. The only cars in the lot are mine and Taylor’s - and the third one is that blue convertible. I think you should probably stay for a little bit.”

I stayed until after midnight, and my boyfriend walked over to accompany me. I felt vulnerable and nervous, scanning my field of vision as thoroughly as I could in the dark as we walked back home. I wondered when I would see the blue convertible again. At my university? On the road? Outside of my apartment?

CHAPTER FOUR: WHAT WE DO TO MAKE DO

Mom's SpagBol

"I'm going to make a couple of batches of SpagBol to freeze. Go down to the freezer and grab two things of tomatoes and a bag of green peppers."

"Where in the freezer?" I asked, reluctantly.

Brittany was sitting on the couch but it would take her so long to do anything, I figured I might as well just go. Mom, Dad, and I joke that she can't find something in the freezer if it's staring right at her.

"Right-hand side. In the stand-up one."

I pushed the swinging kitchen door open, floorboards squeaking as I walked through the dining room to the basement door. As I twisted the knob, the familiar squeal of grinding metal suddenly pinged, lurching open. The smell of wood shavings and damp chicken meal drifted up the stairs, a cacophony of chirps and squawks coming from just around the corner.

"Hey guys -- you knocked over your water again? Unpredictable."

Mom is obsessed with the chickens – I tell her all the time how stupid they are, but she just has this thing for them. We hatched another batch in the incubator a couple weeks ago, and snakes would get them if we put them out now. But it stinks like hell in here when they knock their water into their shavings.

I walked over to the freezer, pulling out two quart-sized containers of frozen tomatoes in those tall, Chinese take-out tubs. I grabbed a small freezer bag with GREEN PEPPERS – 07/14 written in black Sharpie on the front and put them under my arm. I

went back upstairs and put the tomatoes in the microwave to defrost them, while Mom got out the mince.

“Is that the most recent batch of mince we had done?” I asked.

“Yeah, you can use it in pretty much anything. They added some pork fat, because the alpaca was a bit too lean. The sausages didn’t turn out so well, but it’s just nice to know where it’s coming from. Almost everything in the SpagBol is grown right here.”

I know Mom is proud of that, but my little sister Val won’t eat it if she mentions it. I don’t pretend it’s easy, but we both know that the choice has to be made. The alpaca industry has become so saturated with junk animals that people will leave them to starve instead of feed them, leave their corpses to rot on their property.

We found out, months later, that a guy bought a young female from us and was going around to other farms doing the same. Apparently, care of the animals got caught up in some bullshit custody battle. They became possessions, items, which failed to be divided up as no one wanted the responsibility of the animals anymore. A few females jumped the fence and made it into a pen with some grass and hay, others were not so lucky. The girl we had sold him was one of the lucky few who managed to jump across and survive, though she was emaciated and had become pregnant.

I start eating some of the mushrooms Mom just washed. “Hey! Get off!” – she jokingly flicked my hand away.

I love the smell of the garlic when she fries them, but it’ll be a couple hours at least until then. I put on Mom’s wedding mix CD from the cupboard, and we both start to sing to “Brown-Eyed Girl” together while the mince boils on the stove.

690 ml

I pulled my helmet over my head, placing it on the plastic seat of my Chinese-made moped, Winona. It was freezing today, about 20 degrees Fahrenheit, and even colder with the wind chill. I recently bought a ski bib, as per the recommendation of one of my farmer-coworkers in the I.T. department, but didn't wear it today. I didn't feel comfortable locking my helmet to my moped in this part of town, and it wouldn't fit in the compartment underneath my seat if I had brought my ski bib, too. I took one last sip from my water bottle before heading inside. I think I'd peed about eight times today already, but wanted to hydrate as much as I could.

I walked to the front doors, plastered with stickers about which deals they had on this month. \$300 for five donations in January. I made sure to wear a sweater that I could roll up above my elbows, so they could check the fronts and backs of my arms and put on the blood pressure monitor correctly. I had been here a few times in my junior year of college with my roommate, just to earn some spending money for clothes - I felt less guilty about using my PharmaHeal card than using up my paychecks. Every time I had gone then, though, they had to hit a vein in both of my arms for one donation. This time, I had realized that plasma donation was the only viable option to earn money to put into my savings, in addition to my other jobs. The time to earnings ratio was ideal. I had to get better at it.

I walked over to the monitor and scanned my fingerprint - apparently a scan was equivalent to my signature. I read through and signed off that I hadn't come into contact with particular vaccines or diseases, and reluctantly agreed to some terms about how my

plasma would be used. I didn't really have much of a choice if I wanted the money. I completed the questionnaire and walked over to the counter where a young woman greeted me and asked me to roll up my sleeves. Interestingly, all of the workers at the counter were women and all but one was white, and their jobs seemed as remarkably routine and boredom-inducing as mine at Grocer's Market. They were more qualified than I was though, I assumed - they had medical training. One of the technicians asked which finger I would prefer pricked, and I gave her my right index finger - I could still see the small cut from last week there. I looked across the counter and noticed a man with a "Make America Great Again" hat on across from me, and the older lady beside me mentioned something about working at a nearby truck stop. I stared off into the middle distance as the woman who pricked my finger ran a few tests to check my iron and plasma levels, and cleared me to head over to the blue section.

I placed my coat and scarf in the cubby underneath of the seat, taking out my phone and earbuds to accompany me for the next hour. A young woman with a name tag that read "Hannah" came over to me with all the required materials - tubing, blood bags, and needles.

"Hi, how are you?" she asked.

"I'm good, thank you." I smiled back.

"Name and last four?"

"Kathryn Shedden, 8457."

She applied iodine in the crook of my arm, over the vein she had just identified. The circular motion was soothing, I followed the cotton wool and watched the timer count down from 30. I knew what came next, and felt a tingling sensation in the pit of my

stomach. She picked up the needle and removed the cap, and I looked at the floor in the opposite direction. I felt a stinging pain in my right arm.

“Sorry about that, looks like they moved on me.” She said, adjusting the needle in my arm.

“Oh yeah, they tend to do that.” I replied, forcing a half-hearted laugh.

“You can tell your technician next time that your veins roll, and we actually try to hit the vein a little faster,” she added, helpfully.

“Thank you, that’s good to know.”

I pulled up Spotify on my phone and put on my “thumbs up” playlist - the one with Smashmouth and Green Day on it, to distract me. I watched as the machine started to whirl and the clear tubing turned a bright red, feeding into a clear plastic box. The monitor read 46 ml of 690ml, and soon after started to return my red blood cells to me - a familiar sensation signaled by pressure near the needle and a metallic taste which filled my mouth. I took several deep breaths, and sent a text to my boyfriend to ask for reassurance. After a few minutes, I was distracted by a video on my Facebook feed and my nerves began to subside.

I noticed a woman walking over to my section who sat down across from me as the nurse attended to her. She was a black woman who looked to be in her late forties, her face and arms covered in splotchy freckles. She was wearing a familiar uniform - khaki pants and a blue shirt emblazoned with the Grocer’s Market logo. She wasn’t wearing her nametag. The machine beeped, signaling the end of the blood draw process and the beginning of the saline injection. Ice cold saline fed into my arm, as I rolled down the sleeve on my right arm to keep warm.

Sometimes using my PharmaHeal card felt just as embarrassing as using EBT.

Simple Eating

Caitlin and I sat down at the breakfast table with our regular morning meal: plain, warm porridge that Helen had made for us in bulk. I always topped mine with brown sugar and gooseberries, and Caitlin filled hers to the brim with fresh strawberries from the polytunnel. Caitlin usually drank water, and I had tea with just about every meal.

“Good morning, girls!” Helen chirped as she came in from the back door, wearing her apron.

“Good morning!”

“Morning!”, we replied, as always.

“Morning, girls.” Greg came and sat across from us at the table, newspaper in hand. The radio was a dull background noise as we scooped porridge into our mouths. Although peculiar at first, we soon got used to the daily “Death Notices” portion of the radio segment and Greg would comment on various political developments as they were mentioned. We finished up our breakfast and brought all of our bowls, cups, and silverware through to the sink. Helen would wash them for us in the mornings, as we would head out with Greg to start on the day’s work. We would usually go out to check on the cows first, sometimes bringing them a sack of potatoes that Greg would sling over his back and carry to the field.

We came back in around 10AM for a quick snack and tea, and today we had scones with strawberry jam from last year’s strawberries. Helen’s freshly baked scones were a favorite, we would eat them for breakfast and lunch days after she had made them.

Caitlin particularly liked Helen's bread, too, and we would often see her preparing the dough in advance.

"Everyone should make their own bread. People nowadays are just too lazy." she said, shuffling over to the kitchen.

"How do you make it?" Caitlin asked.

Caitlin took meticulous notes, always being sure to ask Helen for any recipe we enjoyed from the day's meals. She promised to share them with me after our trip, so we wouldn't be writing down duplicate recipes whenever Helen relayed them to us. Neither of us had made our own bread before and thought it was one of the many things we would bring back from Ireland having learned.

We would come back in the afternoons, around 12:30, for lunch. Helen made us scrambled eggs on toast with scallions, tomatoes, and salad from the polytunnel. She made a point of asking us how we liked our eggs done. She also showed us a jar to the right of the fridge where she was making kombucha - and walked me through the fermenting process.

As we all sat around the table, I asked Helen and Greg why they decided to farm organically. They start explaining to us about Monsanto, toxins in food, and RoundUp -- which seemed to get at the heart of their motivations. Helen reminded us to take the skin off of the store bought potatoes for that reason, as they had been exposed to numerous pesticides and herbicides, which I had never done before.

Their goal was to be as self-sufficient as possible, and they did produce almost everything they ate, including beef from their herd of angus cattle. Helen sold their excess vegetables at the local market. Greg mentioned a similar process with excess

cattle, sending a whole bull to be slaughtered and then having families or individuals order steaks to keep in their freezer once the bull was processed. I'd met one of the bulls earlier that day who was destined for that fate, he wasn't of a high enough quality for breeding.

They also assured us that a poor diet was the leading cause of most health problems, and the lack of particular nutrients and vitamins caused a number of chronic health conditions. If you're missing vitamin B from your diet, they said, that was likely to be the cause of a mental health issue. Caitlin and I exchanged glances, as neither of us were willing to accept that last bit.

"Simple food is best", Helen added. I had been having digestion issues for the last few months, but while I was here I was beginning to feel much better. Simple food seemed like it was helping me, anyway. I hadn't been able to eat very much at all in a single sitting over the past six months, a strange development considering my family's nickname for me: "hollow legs". I attributed it to the stress of grad school and working three jobs, I often ate very little if at all, skipping meals as they slipped my mind. The pace of farm work was a welcome change from the long, jarring days of shift work and the constant treading water of paying bills and catching up on readings.

Dinner signaled the end of our day: now it was time to retire from the day's work, which usually involved quite a bit of weeding. We had parsley and carrot soup to start, followed by angus beef, tomatoes, mashed potatoes, carrots, and peas in their pods. It reminded me of a family meal that my mom would make back home. It didn't take long at all for it all to disappear, and Caitlin and I shared some scones to finish. It was my turn to wash the dishes after dinner that night, and Helen had left the kettle on the stove for

me. One of Helen and Greg's daughters, Lydia, helped me finish up the dishes - a much appreciated gesture which allowed me more time to journal and watch Gaelic football with Greg.

Death

My bare feet press against the worn red brick step – I should really be wearing socks, I know I'll get a blister. Mom has already gone up to the barn and I managed to put it off for about twenty minutes. I shouldn't have waited – the humidity smacks into me, passes through my lungs like warm butter. Late July in Richmond, Virginia, 9AM.

I walk up to the barn through the overgrown weeds, and reached forward to protect my face from an outstretched branch. Maggie, my Great Pyrenees, comes racing down the hill to greet me – her tongue falling out of her mouth. I climb over the green gate panel and jump down, bending over to run my hand down her back, pulling out white, matted tufts stained orange with Virginia clay.

“Good girl, Maggie.” She wags her tail vigorously, her head between my legs, as she lets out a faint, high-pitched whine. She always lets me know that she's happy to see me, and I make a fuss of her every time I'm home. She sits down and looks up at me, her golden-brown eyes staring deep into mine. Her demeanor has changed in the last couple of years since I went away to college, I can tell she's getting older now, she must be about ten. She used to jump the fences and run around the county, much to the dismay of my parents, and it took her about three years to settle down – but now she's our best livestock guardian. We walk together to the top of the hill, trudging up the eroded gravel path my parents laid the year prior. The green and white Dutch door fell slightly ajar, and Maggie slips inside as I pull the door back until it catches in the wet clay.

“Mom?” I can’t see her. Maybe she’s out back, watering the tomatoes and peppers. I see the ducks and chickens pecking away at the floor and around the compost pile, she must have already thrown out the corn and the leftovers from yesterday. The loud hum of the drum fans drowns out the sounds of animals nearby, until I step outside the back door. Hunter, one of our first Muscovy ducks who must be about six by now, looks up as I walk past – wagging his tail in delight, whistling in my direction. “Hey, Hunter.” She isn’t here either – I peer through the dense growth of tomatoes and peppers, and it looks like they’ve already been watered. The blue tap handle is pulled upwards, a steady flow leaking from where the hose meets the faucet, and I follow the hose over to the fence. I see her now, sitting down in the grass.

I pull up the black gate and disconnect it so I can pass through into the field with the alpacas, slotting it back into place. A gentle breeze passes over the field, a welcome relief from the otherwise stagnant air. “Wait –.”

I can feel the rubbing of my boots against my jeans. “Bronwen?” Mom turned towards me, her eyes noticeably reddened, “She’s gone, I’m sorry Katie.” I knew as soon as I saw her. Laid out on her side, eyes closed, legs bent beneath her. She is gone. All that is left is a shell of what was once Bronwen. An empty casing. I feel warmth rush to my face, blurred vision, a drop escapes and rolls down my face. I think she was eleven.

Mom looked over towards her, “I wanted to keep her here until she died, just like I will with Dhui. She was one of the forever ones.”

“I know, Mom.” I stifled tears, steadying myself with my right hand and sitting down beside her.

“She just wanted to have babies, you know how she was. The lameness from the meningeal worm on her right leg was getting worse, and this was her last one. I think she just wanted this last cria. And then she just laid down here.”

Mom and I lifted her onto a tarp – it’s easier to move her that way. I look at her legs, mid-section, anywhere but her eyes. I need to help Mom, she’s had a bad back since the car accident and really shouldn’t be moving her at all. Dad will dig a hole with the post-hole digger later once it’s attached to the tractor, and the ordeal will be over.

Animals larger than chickens are a pain to dispose of – we sometimes had them sent off for necropsy just so the lab would dispose of them for us. I wonder how her cria felt, and see her over with the others on the far side of the field grazing. Bronwen waited until she was weaned, at least. I think she was there long enough for her baby to see her, so she won’t be looking for her tomorrow morning.

I helped Mom gather the food bowls and bring down the ripe tomatoes and eggs in one of them. We push the dutch doors shut behind us and Maggie walked beside us to the gate. I rubbed behind her left ear, “Good girl, Maggie. See you later.” Mom and I solemnly trudged up through the undergrowth to the house, both tired, sweaty and ready for lunch. Mom patted me on the shoulder, we’re both too warm to hug. I slide off my boots and feel a small blister forming on my heel, and make a mental note to put a bandage on it later. I push the tap up and to the right, squeezing dish soap into my hand, and washing up to my elbows. I have a deep-seated dislike of feeling unclean, especially after today.

I flip back through my phone for pictures of Bronwen as I walk upstairs to change. Sometimes I forget how long we’ve had our animals, how much of my life I’ve

known them. I remember her mom, Jewel, and all the babies I helped her birth. Mom and I talked at length about which herdsire to breed her with, Dhui, and we could always expect a good-looking, well-conformed animal from the pairing. She was one of my first performance alpacas, too, and I had taken her out with the next group of show animals the following year to train them on a halter. She and I entered the costume competition and went as fairy princesses with matching wings, my Build-A-Bear rabbit sitting on her back. No matter how long I went between visits home, I could always come back up to the barn and lean over to Bronwen nose-first, and her soft, fawn nose would press back against mine. She had a gentle, quiet hum – one of my favorite sounds.

Bronwen was not the only one. Dhui would pass a few years later, my “little brother” of sixteen years. Raja, my first “official” pet – a rat, at the vet clinic while I was away visiting family. Chickens. Rabbits. Countless others.

While I return to the study of food from these formative experiences, and have Bronwen and Dhui to thank for it, what about the animals who fed my family, those we raised and those we did not? Whose passing went unnoticed, for which there was no forever home? For those who were sold on unknowingly to neglectful homes – pangs of guilt and pain resurface as I read a news article about that man - Blush’s daughter was lucky to survive at all.

And how do these experiences better inform what I eat now, how I live in this world? As Wendell Berry notes, eating is an agricultural act and in doing so, we dictate how the world is used. Eating is also a deeply intimate act, a realization brought about by my experiences in agriculture and education. As my interests shift to the “who” of food production, more specifically the often-invisible force which feeds us, I am still moved

by the ongoing experiences I have with people and animals alike. Though Bronwen is long gone, our experiences together inform my ongoing understanding of our world, our food systems, and my relationships with others. In coming to know and understand cycles of life and death, I have come to better understand the rhythms of my own life, and how my environment has shaped me.

I initially was set on writing about tomatoes, and my experiences with my Mother growing and cooking them. Recently, however, I went home to check on my parents' farm with Mark and found Belle, our Great Pyrenees guard dog, lying at the base of a tree – a scene which I transposed onto the loss of Bronwen. We took her for a necropsy, which Mark performed, and found that she had died of bloat – a condition which could not have been prevented. That experience illuminated my ability to disassociate Belle from her physical body in an ability to provide her a proper burial, continue and complete the task of taking her for a necropsy, and carry out my duty to her and my parents. Though a grisly image for some, it is a familiar (though solemn) one for me – a reminder of how my environment has shaped me and my relationship to the living world, and how it continually educates me.

Everything We Needed

Caitlin and I pulled our granny flat door shut behind us, venturing out into the cool morning air. Molly leaned out of the kitchen window, which overlooked the patio by our bedroom.

“Oh, I didn't hear you both getting up, so I had a bath. Is it alright if we have a 10AM start?”

“Yeah, no problem!” I replied, happy to have a nice lie-in after prompt 8AM starts at Greg and Helen’s.

Caitlin turned to me, “I’m gonna catch up on some journaling now that we have some extra time.”

“Good idea, me too.” I added, grateful for the time to fill in some more details about my feelings, impressions, and descriptions of our routines and adventures. Our days were much less structured with Molly and Daisy, and Molly made a real effort to show us around local towns and historical places in addition to teaching us about gardening and farming. We were also her first IOFers so I think that was part of it, but she also went out of her way to share information and stories with us that she thought we would find interesting. She had this overflowing wealth of knowledge about farming and the cultural nuances of Ireland which really enriched our understanding of where we were. We picked those things up from living with Greg and Helen through our day to day experiences, but Molly seemed like a Wikipedia of Ireland in comparison.

“What were your work hours like at the last farm?” Molly asked Caitlin and I.

“We worked from 8 to 5, with one and a half hour-long breaks for meals during the day. We got the weekends off, too.” I answered.

“Oh, really? Wait, so the IOF organization says something like 25 hours of work per week is the expectation. I was afraid I was having you all work too much. It sounds like you two were doing more than that.” She appeared puzzled.

“What?! Greg never told us anything about 25 hours. He said something about other farms, commercial farms, being worse - basically that we were lucky.” Caitlin replied, annoyed and taken aback.

I looked back through my journal, noticing a number of half-empty dated pages. There were some littered with quick bullet-points about things which had stuck out to me from the day, so as not to lose the thoughts. I sat on my bed, placing a pillow behind my spine to create a sort of makeshift chair. I flipped to the latest page of my green Zelda journal, and started to doodle small cartoon sheep in the margins. I jotted down a few memorable moments from the day before, and then began to reflect, putting pen to paper.

*I wish now that I'd written more about my feelings every day at the last host farm. I'm really relaxed here and I have time to be by myself a bit more, without needing to be social or conscious of what I'm doing or saying. I also feel a major bonding thing with Molly because she's a female farmer, single mother, general badass. SHE'S A FEMINIST!!! ** Caitlin and I talked earlier about when we chose to IOF here - she reached out to me on the IOF board after seeing that I had experience with alpacas. She mentioned thinking about getting a couple to guard her sheep, and thought my experience with them would be helpful to potentially pick them out. We both got hyper-excited about her description in the initial email: “I'm a separated mum (one child) looking for help at the end of June. I have a sheep farm with about 200 ewes and an organic garden. We also have good bus service here, and it would be a great base to see Ireland.” Her description was proving to be accurate, and we definitely made the right choice in coming here.*

I looked up to a knock on the door, a white frame made of about 8 panes of warped glass which let in the morning sun, and Daisy's petite blurry outline appeared to be peering through. Daisy was a little round-faced, fair blonde-haired girl with a cheery, bubbly demeanor. She was quite curious and well-mannered, which surprised me as my impression of only-children was that they were usually spoiled and expected their own way. Daisy wasn't that way at all, she had her moments of grumpy tiredness and contrary behavior as expected from any young child, but was otherwise by all accounts an amusing and intelligent companion to myself and Caitlin. We were quite impressed that she also knew some Gaelic, and Molly had mentioned to us that she had been to a school where they taught the language alongside English.

I have always felt a bit deficient as a woman for not having an affinity for children, though it doesn't bother me much as my Mom expressed a similar sentiment for small infants. Caitlin seemed to be much more interested in the idea of kids than I was. I just don't feel as though I really understand how to interact with them. Hand me a baby animal and I know what to do with it, but my inexperience with young humans left me feeling as though they were confusing, irritating, and an overwhelmingly daunting charge. Daisy was one of the remarkable few who I felt I understood.

"Cait-ling, could you braid my hair?" She asked from the doorway. Caitlin would sometimes braid my hair for me in the mornings, too, a much-appreciated way of keeping it out of my eyes.

"Yeah, come over here and sit." Caitlin said, pointing to the edge of her pull-out bed.

"Can I have some juice?" She asked, looking over to the cup in my hand.

“Yup, let me get you your own cup.” I said, reaching for the see-through blue cup on the counter.

I handed Daisy her juice as I heard footsteps approach from around the side of the house. Molly was walking up the path alongside her giant Schnauzer, Tigger. He was an enormous and regal-looking black dog, though still quite puppy-like in his demeanor, as he bounced around the back garden.

“Morning girls.” She stood at the door, smiling and looking over towards Daisy. She was a young, attractive woman about my height with wavy blonde hair which sat a bit lower than her shoulders. She had a sort of professionalism about her; she was quite matter-of-fact about things and she always seemed to have something on her mind. At first it felt as though she was quite reserved, though we would later get to know more about her - more than the outward self that she showed to everyone.

“Morning!” We both replied, as Caitlin finished braiding Daisy’s hair.

“I was thinking that we could do a bit of weeding around the garden today. There are a couple of places, I’ve been meaning to put up a washing line over behind the house but need to get rid of the weeds there first.” She said, leaning around the corner of the house.

“Sounds good, we can go get the wheelbarrow and stuff.” I replied, putting away my journal.

“You know, it makes me sad looking out at the garden now.” Molly said, her hand placed squarely on her hip. “People used to come here as a sort of day trip, I’d get calls from groups who wanted to come and see the garden. It was on television, too. I just haven’t been able to keep up with it.” Her mouth was downturned, a distinct sense of

disappointment rested in her words. She had showed us around the other day, pointing out the color-coordinated arrangements and plantings she had carefully devised.

“I mean I think there’s a lot of it still here, just underneath some weeds and stuff.” I replied, in an attempt to cheer her up a bit. She reminded me of my Mom, in that I felt she was really too hard on herself. She had accomplished quite a lot with the garden, it was still largely intact, and she had a vast number of other responsibilities to tend to on a daily basis.

“Well, girls, I have to run a few errands this morning. I’ll take Daisy with me and leave the dogs in the house for now. If you could just keep going on this area here, and the area over by the hedge, that would be great.”

“Okay!” We both replied, returning to the weeds as she walked back down the gravel path, Daisy skipping behind her.

“Ugh, I love her.” Caitlin added, bending over to pull up a few deeply-rooted nettles.

“I know!!” I replied, hedge trimmers firmly grasped with both hands as I cut back some overgrown lemon balm.

“I just want to help her out.” she said, standing back up, nettles in gloved hand.

“I’m trying to brainstorm some more ideas. I don’t want her to have to worry about figuring out things that we can do - and I think she’s worried about whether or not it’s super ‘IOF-y’. I mean, I’d just be happy to help her deal with some things she’s been meaning to do but hasn’t gotten around to yet.”

“Yeah exactly. She goes out of her way to take us on day trips and stuff and I just want to say thanks for that.” she added, chucking a handful of nettles into the wheelbarrow.

“I hadn’t really thought about it before, but when she mentioned the transition she went through during the separation from her husband - like being a single parent to Daisy - I was like damn, that must really add up. Just not having anyone to help.”

I hadn’t given the realities of parenthood much thought, nor what it must mean to go through day-to-day tasks as a single woman and mother. At home, Mom and I would go out and do farm chores together, as there were some things that simply *required* two people - and many other chores which were ten times quicker with some help. Raising Daisy seemed to be a full time job in itself. I could only think of trivial comparisons, but even back at college my boyfriend could help me out with my workload by prepping food, packing my lunch in the mornings, and picking up groceries. I’d be much hungrier and stressed out without the help some days.

We finished up clearing all the weeds and dumped them in a wooded area behind the house, arranged in a pile so that they would compost. As we walked the wheelbarrow back, we noticed Molly’s car had pulled in and she was unloading groceries, carrying several bags on each arm.

“Do you need any help?” Caitlin jogged over to the gravel path where the car was parked.

“Oh no that’s alright, here are the groceries for your room. I got you this yogurt, specifically because it’s very Irish.” She proceeded to tell us some background information about the company and how it was founded, one of many tidbits that she was

sure to share with us. Caitlin took the groceries around the back, and we both unloaded them into our small fridge and into the cupboards below the cooker and sink. We were careful to put everything into a cabinet so as to keep away bugs and mice, as Molly had warned us to specifically. We walked back around to the front and Molly welcomed us inside.

“Thank you both, you did a great job around the side of the house.” She added, putting away various grocery items into storage cupboards. Caitlin and I both smiled in response, with a quick added “no problem!”.

Daisy walked up behind her with some plastic food items in hand, placing them beside a toy cash register on the table in the living room.

“Katie, would you like to buy some food?” Daisy smiled, with a pronounced Irish twang.

“Sure Daisy. I’ll take the ice cream!”

“Okay, that’s fifty cents. I only take real money.” She said, a sly smile creeping across her face.

“Oh, well I don’t have any!” I laughed. She was definitely a schemer. I admired her attempt.

Molly came through to the dining room, and turned to Caitlin and I, “Would you like tea? Coffee?”

“Coffee, please.” I responded.

“Tea would be nice, thanks.” Caitlin replied.

I glanced over to the living room, as Caitlin and I hadn’t actually come in much further than the front door previously. Molly was making dinner for us tonight, which

was different from our usual schedule as we would have put on some potatoes to boil by now. We were used to family style dinners at Greg and Helen's, but were now used to being much more self-sufficient here. She mentioned that she makes a nice curry, and we were both eager to try it. In true Molly fashion, while we were waiting she brought us through some cookbooks with some Irish recipes within them. She told us that we could copy down any recipes we pleased, pointing to a few favorites. Caitlin and I sat in the kitchen, poring through them and taking pictures on our phones.

“Molly, we were thinking - do you think it would help to make a list? Like of things we could help you do?” I asked.

“Well, actually, maybe.” She leaned against the kitchen window.

“We just want to do whatever is most helpful to you. I know you mentioned Daisy's room needing finished.”

“Well, let me show you, it's through here.” She led us down the hall, gesturing towards a room by the front door. “Daisy sleeps in my room with me right now, because her room isn't finished. My ex was a carpenter and did up a lot of houses, and was supposed to do the same with her bedroom. Obviously he hasn't done that.” She said, with a combination of disappointment and annoyance in her tone.

Molly opened the door slowly, revealing half-wallpapered walls with patchy paint and debris littering the floor. There was a small section of green vegetable themed wallpaper remaining, which I actually thought was quite cute, but was a far cry from a child's bedroom. The only source of light came from a single exposed light bulb dangling precariously from the ceiling, and various tools were placed in nooks and crannies around the room.

“It really needs to be painted.” Molly glanced upward to the ceiling and then walking over to pick up some discarded newspapers, which she placed on the windowsill. “I have some paint here, and can get some more tomorrow actually, as I have to go into town anyway.”

“Well, we can do that tomorrow after we do some weeding.” Caitlin added, her tone a bit solemn as she glanced around. It was difficult to imagine that her room would be left in this state, and we were both a bit shocked by it. It was certainly a project. We would begin painting tomorrow, applying several coats of whitewash around the room - on the floors and ceilings. A few days later, we moved into the kitchen - standing on counters with paint rollers and covering all of the surfaces with tape and paper. Neither of us had actually painted an entire room before, and we both felt as though we had gained some valuable ‘life experience’ in that department. We were mostly happy to have helped Molly with the projects that needed doing, and looked for any opportunity to do her a favor.

I sat in the front seat beside Molly as she drove us to the bus station. Caitlin and I sat in bed on several nights discussing the eventual reality of this day, and it certainly felt solemn. We had already planned to send Daisy a postcard from Edinburgh when we arrived, as her birthday was coming up soon and we wouldn't be there for it. When Molly dropped us in town, as she had on many occasions, we made sure to print out several pictures of our work with the sheep and a group selfie of the four of us in front of the house. We didn't know what either of our placements would hold, but it was safe to say that this one had moved us both in a particular way that we could not have anticipated. We arrived at the bus stop with about ten minutes to spare, and I helped Molly unload

our cases from the back of the car. I could see, even from behind her sunglasses, that she was tearful.

“You girls were just what I needed. And you were lovely with Daisy.”

“You were both what we needed, too. We’re really going to miss you.” I made a conscious attempt to hold eye contact, as tears came rolling down my face. We hugged, briefly, and exchanged knowing smiles. I opened up the car door to Daisy’s smiling face.

“Bye, Daisy. We’re going to miss you! Take care of Tigger and don’t eat too many sugary gummies!” I tried to maintain my composure as I leaned over to hug her in her car seat. I don’t think she quite understood that we were leaving.

Caitlin and I both collected our things and waved goodbye, as Molly sat back in the driver’s seat and drove away. I dragged my heavy luggage over to the sidewalk, leaning against the wall of the local post office as I held back tears. I was glad to have been one of her first IOFers, and hoped she would have many more after us. About a week after I arrived home, I printed out our group picture and hung it in the living room of my new apartment - a pleasant reminder of Ireland and all we had done there together.

CHAPTER FIVE: WOMEN'S BODIES & WORK

Weeding as Women's Work

Greg drove us out to “the labor camp”, as he jokingly called it, a field characterized by tens of rows of crops. We pulled up to the middle of the field, by the rows of carrots we had weeded by hand in the days beforehand. Caitlin and I both hopped out of the old Volkswagen as Greg and Helen walked down the 100 foot rows to start up again. Helen liked to weed by herself, she was the fastest of all of us and it appeared to be an opportunity for her to have some much-needed alone time. Greg was the opposite - a slim, chatty older man with a distinctively toothy grin. He was an immediately likeable character. He had said to us already that we were IOFers he would not forget.

We worked harder so we might leave a positive impression, but also knew that Greg really looked forward to ‘good craic’, which we eventually learned was an Irish term for jokes and conversation. Weeding in the fields always left hours of time for reflection and deeply involved conversation, my mind is turning while my hands pull weeds from the damp ground. We took turns choosing songs to play through a small, tinny portable speaker, all of us compromising a bit and taking jabs at the choices of others.

“What makes a good IOFer?” I asked, half-jokingly.

“Well, good craic of course.” We all laughed. “A real interest in organic principles, in learning. We've had a lot of good workers that aren't necessarily interested in learning all that much, just put in their time and move on to the next place. They were nice girls and all, just some you forget, and you feel bad about it. But we won't forget you girls, no.”

Greg told us about a particular IOFer who had no experience before coming to his farm, and described her as one of the better ones. She hadn't seen lettuce growing in a field before.

“So because me and Caitlin already know some things about farming, like what lettuce looks like, we aren't going to be great IOFers?” I joked, knowing he appreciated the challenge.

“No, not saying that. You know, you all have different reasons. Caitlin I think she wants to have time to think about what she wants to do. Katie, I think the main thing for you is your thesis. You're going to be a teacher.”

I laughed, as I was just as uncertain as Caitlin.

“Well, I also noticed that a lot of IOFers appear to be female. That's what I noticed online, when I saw postings about looking for placements. Is that true for you all?”

“Well, yes, we do get more women. If we have male IOFers, they usually stay up the road with my son. If we have female IOFers in the house, we wouldn't have any men.”

It made sense to me, Caitlin and I had wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that he had daughters, but it didn't seem to. He had mentioned having a male IOFer in the house, and one of his daughters recounted his frequent early morning walks around the house, his flip flops smacking against the wooden floors.

“We usually get in some guys when there's tougher work to do, lifting and things like that”, he said, a quite serious look across his face.

“Something we wouldn’t want to impose on a girl, no. Okay for a man.” Helen said, lifting her head from the weeds.

“We had heard of one farm owners had his IOFers rake out all of the chicken sheds, and it’s very hard work. One of the girls slipped and cut her knee, and he wouldn’t let her go to the house with any of the others. They had to keep working while she went up.”

I was taken aback, though not entirely surprised. I thought how lucky we were to work here compared to other potential placements, and Greg and Helen said similar things throughout our time at their farm. I thought, though, that they surely thought less of me and Caitlin than they would a man IOFer - though perhaps they wouldn’t put it that way.

“How’s the weeding, girls? You bored of it yet?” Greg laughed, standing over the row beside me.

“No, not really. I think it’s relaxing.” I said, truthfully.

“Caitlin’s over there murdering carrots, though... don’t think you’re going to see many after she’s done with that row!” I teased, as she was weeding faster than I was.

“Girls, it’s starting to rain again. Bring your cushions over to the hedge for a bit, we don’t want you catching a cold.” Helen held the pillow covered by a feed bag over her head, as we followed her over. I thought it was funny, and kind, how Greg and Helen seemed to react to the rain. At home, my Mom probably would have just told me to finish up what I was doing and even when it rained much harder. Helen truly treated us like family, like her own children, and I knew that she cared for us. However, it was clear in brief moments that particular expectations rested on our shoulders - ones which both

limited us and reinforced the ways in which women “should” be. Helen left the weeding field that afternoon, as she always did, an hour before all of us to prepare our meals. A few days later I would, too.

Period Pains

I always woke up before Caitlin and used the bathroom, we shared it with several others in the house so I wanted to be as efficient as possible with turn-taking. I sat on the toilet and looked down.

Shit.

A familiar feeling of dread trickled down to my thighs. A bright red stain, a collection of splotches about 4 inches long, sat in my underwear. I had a feeling that it was coming soon, but nothing in particular had alerted me to its arrival this morning, so I couldn't have done much to prevent the stain. I dropped my underwear to the floor, lifting it with my foot and up where my hands could reach it. I dropped them into the sink and ran cool water over them.

I reached over to my wash bag and pulled out my Diva Cup, a small reusable plastic cup I had gotten into the habit of using about two years prior. I made the switch from tampons and underwear liners as this option required less maintenance - I could wait much longer between changing it out and I didn't need to worry about disposal. I did, however, need a sink - which at times has proven challenging. I was taking longer than usual as this added a couple steps to my morning routine, and I knew that Greg and Helen expected us downstairs - so quickly got changed and went down to breakfast with Caitlin.

“Morning, girls!” Helen greeted us with her usual smile. “There’s porridge there on the table for you.”

“Thanks, Helen!” we both replied, fetching some from the pot on the stove and adding fresh strawberries on top.

I sat down beside Caitlin and quickly scooped spoonfuls of warm porridge into my mouth. It was 7:50 and we were always meant to leave by 8. I didn’t have enough time to finish it, so tossed it into the sink and rinsed it quickly before running back upstairs. I pulled my socks on hurriedly, grabbing my portable bluetooth speaker to play music in the field. Caitlin followed behind and passed through our doorway, making a beeline for her bed.

“Gotta grab some tampons before we go.” she said, looking through her suitcase.

“Mine just came this morning - twinsies!” I joked.

I went quickly downstairs, as Caitlin went into the bathroom. I went to meet Greg so he didn’t think we were running too late or slowing him down. I didn’t want to be perceived as rude.

He was already in the car, as it sat running in the driveway. I grabbed my rain jacket from the back of the dining room chair and quickly pushed my feet into my boots.

I saw Greg through the passenger’s side window, pointing to his watch.

“Where’s Caitlin?” he asked, an irritated tone in his voice.

“She’s coming, I think she was just grabbing her coat.” I replied.

Caitlin emerged from the house, her jacket over her arm and phone in hand. She opened the back door of the Volkswagen and hopped in, scooting towards the middle of the back seats.

“Alright girls, we’re headed to check on the cows first. When the new IOFer comes, Elyse, I’ll just take one of you three to see them in the morning.” He said, turning left out of the driveway. Caitlin and I turned to each other -- “Aww.” Checking on the cows was our favorite part, though we both knew it probably wasn’t the *best* use of our time to earn our keep in exchange for lodging and food. Greg didn’t actually need much help to check on them, but he let us both come along as a sort of favor.

After we checked on the cows, we came back for afternoon tea and one of Helen’s freshly made scones. It was one of my favorite parts of the day, outside of seeing the cows and conversations with Helen and Greg in the fields. Mealtimes served as structured breaks throughout the work day, and I thought they were quite generous ones. I wondered if other IOFers had breaks like these, and what their work was like. I thought we must have been treated quite well though I had no other experience, nor even one that I had heard of, to compare.

I went upstairs to the bathroom and changed out my cup. The pool of blood fell from the plastic cup and sank down to the bottom of the toilet bowl. It was equal parts mesmerizing and gross. The water pressure in the sink upstairs was very poor, which usually wouldn’t be a problem, but I worried that it could make this task near impossible. I turned the cold water tap to the left -- a gurgling, suction noise came from the faucet and no water came out. Shit. I turned the warm water tap - still nothing. I glanced over to the electric shower and thought it would make too much noise if I turned it on, nevermind how out of place it would seem to everyone who heard it downstairs. This was the only bathroom in the house that we had access to, though, and I was running out of options. I turned to the sink again, pushing the cold tap as far to the left as I could. A faint trickle

came from the faucet, finally. I rinsed it out as best I could and re-inserted it, hoping I had it at the right angle as I would otherwise be met with a bright red stain in a few hours' time.

Caitlin knocked on the door, "One sec!" I replied, doing up my belt.

I opened the door and turned right into our bedroom.

"Sorry, I'm done with the bathroom."

"Ugh, I just bled through my tampon. I only have like three super ones left." She responded, frustrated.

"Crap." I obviously didn't have any to offer, and the nearest store was about 25 minutes away by bike, and we could only go biking after dinner. That probably wasn't going to be soon enough.

Caitlin went into the bathroom, and I sat on my bed flipping through my phone, looking at pictures that my friends had shared about their summer breaks. I was a little jealous of their trips to the beach and missed their company, though I knew that the pictures I had shared of my IOF trip so far likely inspired similar sentiments. My Instagram was filled with hues of bright greens, an array of images I enjoyed flipping back through. It felt as though I had something beautiful to share each day.

I went back downstairs and finished the rest of my tea.

"Hey Helen, is Greg outside?" I called out to her, as she stood over the table outside.

"Oh yes, I think he just went out." she replied, kneading some dough in the covered patio area.

"Are we having pizza today?" I asked, hopefully.

“Yes, Sean is coming this afternoon and we always make pizza in the wood-fired stove when he comes. He helps me a bit with the weeding as well.” She added, a smile across her face.

I slipped my boots on over my jeans, trudging out to the mud room to grab my jacket. Greg emerged from one of the polytunnels and waved over to me.

“Hey Katie, you ready to go?”

“Yep!” I opened the rear car door, as it was Caitlin’s turn to sit in the front. She hopped in shortly thereafter and we headed out on our way to the weeding field.

Greg parked the Volkswagen and we hopped out, grabbing the feed bag-covered pillows from the trunk. They served as kneeling mats for us, which relieved the pressure on our knees and rear as we weeded the carrots for several hours. Greg and I often took turns trading out the metal weeding stand, which I found more convenient and helped me weed faster. I wanted to be mindful, though, of Greg’s age and didn’t want him to overdo it by weeding from the ground. I thought it probably hurt his joints, though he didn’t let us know if it did.

“Katie--” Caitlin turned to me, a somber look on her face.

“Yeah? What?” I replied, looking ahead as Caitlin always weeded faster than I did.

“I’m --” her tone turned to a whisper as she pointed downwards, “It just went through my pants. I need to go home. Right now.”

“Um, okay, you could probably tell Greg that your stomach hurts or something.”

“Do you think he’ll be mad, though?” she asked.

“I mean I don’t think so, but I know what you mean.”

Greg drove her back to the house and I continued weeding away, making my way down the row. My next goal was to make it up to as far as Caitlin had, as we were nearly finished with the carrots. There was a real sense of achievement I felt when we finished the fifty-something foot row. About a half hour later, I heard Greg pull back up to the field. He strolled down past me.

“Good job Katie, nearly there!”

I laughed, “I think we can finish it today, bet I’ll beat you to it.”

I felt a sudden warmth in the crotch of my pants. Oh, shit.

“Hey Greg?” I called over to him, a couple of rows away.

“Yeah?”

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Okay, I’ll walk you.”

The bathroom was about a five minute walk away, and I think Greg felt he had to chaperone me as it the house actually belonged to his brother. I shuffled quickly behind him past rows and rows of sprouting crops, breathing in the warm air as we turned onto the road to his house. We had herded cows through here once before, and I remembered being struck by how easily cows can be persuaded to go in a particular direction. An alpaca would have darted underneath the white cordage we strung between the hedges, but cows seem to see it as an impenetrable force. Greg taught me a lot about “cow psychology”, and I totally understood what he meant by it. All animals have a different way of thinking, and you have to train yourself to be in tune with them - their movements, what scares them, what motivates them, and where they want to go.

We arrived at the front door and Greg let me in. I walked past the kitchen to the bathroom on the left, hurriedly shutting and locking it. I pulled down my jeans and looked down - the dreaded stain sat staring me in the face. Shit. I tried to re-position the cup and unrolled some toilet paper, putting a wad in my underwear to hide the red patch. That would have to do for the next couple of hours.

Caitlin didn't come back to the field. When I came back to the house and went upstairs into the bedroom, I saw her sitting down and writing in her journal.

"I've ruined three pairs of my pants, now." She looked over to me, visibly distressed. "I need to do more laundry, I only brought five total."

"That sucks, I'm sorry. I have a couple of pairs of underwear that are totally destroyed."

"I tried to tell Helen, and she eventually understood, but said she was going back into town after dinner. What am I supposed to do? I can't hold it." She sighed, turning towards the wall and laying her head onto her pillow.

Profile Pictures

We followed Greg over to the garage to the side of the house, adjacent to the polytunnels and parked family cars. He walked to the far corner of the garage, past a number of defunct machine parts and miscellaneous tools, emerging moments later with a bike, rusted in places but overall largely functional in appearance.

"See that one over there? We re-did it for Alannah's wedding, re-painted it and everything." Greg pointed to a bike leaning up against the shed. It was a beautiful, iconic-looking older bike, painted white. Helen had mentioned that Sean, a special-needs man

who visited the farm every week, had helped to sand it down and had taken it upon himself to complete a significant portion of the project.

Caitlin and I walked the bikes over to the side of the house where Greg had some oil and a few tools to tighten up some loose parts. Elyse emerged shortly thereafter, walking an additional bike beside her, light blue with dropped handlebars - one I was too nervous to ride.

I'd learned to ride a bike when I was about ten years old, and I rode in circles up at the top of the hill in front of the green barn. I remember the thrill of racing down the hill, not even having to peddle, feeling the air racing through my hair and whooshing past my ears. I would diligently walk it right back up to the top again, for the rewarding thrill of hurtling back down. I would always give up pedaling back uphill. I was never any good at sports and took no interest in physical fitness or any structured form of working out, besides moving hay bales and other farm-related tasks.

“Alright girls, go ahead and give that a try.” Greg grinned, pleased with his tuning-up job.

I swung my leg over the bike seat, stood on my tip-toes. “I think it’s too tall for me, could you take it down some more?” I asked.

He lowered the seat again for me as Caitlin rode hers in circles around the front yard, where we had picked fresh raspberries from the wild bushes the day before. “Ah!!” She quickly corrected, navigating sharply to the left, nearly falling off and laughing all the way. She was very excited to bike and was the initiator of the plan to go into town today. Her mousy blonde hair shone in the afternoon sun, and her usual bun sat loosely on the top of her head.

Elyse sat patiently on her bike, her long legs easily touching the floor. She was an avid biker and had been looking forward to riding, she'd told me that she often challenged herself to ride out into an unfamiliar place for about an hour and then find her way back. She was planning on riding across some part of the Netherlands, I think she mentioned -- an unfathomable challenge for me. She had helped fix one of the bike's chains the other day, as it was stuck in a particular gear so none of us could ride it. She got out her bike book that she had gotten from a charity shop and started right away. I was fascinated by her ability to pick out exactly how to fix it. Greg seemed to doubt her, though, as he leaned over to tell her which direction loosens a screw properly - I couldn't help but roll my eyes at that one.

After Greg had finished raising the seat for me, we were all ready to go. We thanked him and went on our way, turning right out of the driveway to head into town. We wanted to stop by the grocery store for a few things and get a beer at the closest pub. It was our weekend off and we didn't have much else to do - in the 25 minute bike ride to town there was not much other than cow fields. We had recently gone to the park, about an hour's bike ride or about 20 minutes in the car, with Helen and enjoyed that very much - picking flowers along our walk. Elyse mentioned that she would pick berries along her bike rides back in Germany, as we foraged for raspberries and strawberries along the way. None of us had the energy to go that far today, though.

I could tell that Elyse was grateful that we came biking with her, and though we both biked much slower she accommodated us without a word of complaint. Caitlin and I struggled to get up the first hill, both of us eventually stepping off to walk up the rest of the way. We pushed on, and I felt my legs tense and burn as I biked towards town. The

gears on Caitlin's bike were much poorer than mine or Elyse's, and she let us know in clear terms that she was struggling with the journey.

“God damn it!! How are y'all doing this? I can't!” She exclaimed, jokingly, in typical Caitlin fashion.

“It's not too much further! Come on!” I laughed, gasping for breath.

Greg pulled me aside in the kitchen after lunch, tea in hand. “You know you're her friend and all and I feel like you should really tell her. She's a bit unfit for a young person, you know?”

I laughed, uneasily, as I didn't know how else to react. “What do you mean? I mean, she works out more than I do. She weeds much quicker than me.” I'm sure I appear a bit slimmer to him than Caitlin, and thought maybe that had something to do with his attitude towards both me and her.

We eventually made it into town, parking our bikes securely behind a corner shop which Greg and Helen frequented. Several of their children had worked there over the years and everyone seemed to know the family, wherever we went we were questioned about the family we stayed with.

We walked up to the bar, entering the almost empty seating area. There were the usual patrons - elderly men and a few local teenagers who thoroughly enjoyed partaking in some pool and downing a couple of pints. I felt quite out of place upon entry. We all sat along the bar, journals in hand, taking the spare time to write about our experiences and catch up on days missed. Caitlin and Elyse are much better at keeping up with their journals than I am, as I flipped back through empty dated pages. We all had a cider and wrote away for about thirty minutes, eventually coming to a mutual stop. Elyse had

brought the coveted pack of cards, from which she and Greg had taught us a great number of games.

“Let’s play Mau Mau!” I requested, hopefully.

“Sure!” Elyse replied, dealing out the appropriate number of cards in order.

Cards was a much-needed social outlet for all of us, and gave us time to decompress outside of working hours. Lately, things felt a bit tense at the house between Caitlin and Greg and this gave us the opportunity to debrief about it all. I’d felt a bit bad about it lately, as Greg and I got along better than him and Caitlin - and it was starting to take a toll.

“Haven’t seen you all morning.” Greg remarked from across the dining room table. Caitlin came down the stairs, journal in hand, and walked through to the kitchen. I’d just finished lunch and brought my plates through to the sink to rinse them.

“You okay?” I asked, quietly.

“Yeah. I’m not trying to be rude, I just need to have my own time you know? It’s hard for me to be around everyone all the time.” she said, a distressed look across her face.

“I know, just come and sit with us and we can play cards or something.”

We all played along the bar, joking back and forth, switching between Rob The Farmer, Mau Mau, and Snap. It reminded me a bit of my days as a camp counselor, and the bonding we had over the simplest of games.

“Elyse, how does Helen and Greg’s compare to your other placements?” I asked, leaning in.

“Well, the work is definitely different, I like it here much better. My last host farm was commercial organic, and we worked for two hours, three times a day. It was much harder work and they had a very specific way that they wanted us to do it. Since it was commercial, they were very concerned with losses and making sure everything was done correctly. I work the most amount of hours here, but the work is the least exhausting.”

“The weeding here is pretty relaxing, really. It’d be nice, though, to have more time in the afternoons to go and do whatever.” I added.

“I just wouldn’t recommend ‘businesses,’ if you know what I mean. They’re usually the ones looking for longer stays. I think my last placement really could have hired part-time workers instead of having us come and go.” She reached over and took a sip of her cider.

“Yeah, that’s probably true actually.” I replied, reaching to my phone to jot that note down. It reminded me a lot of a project I had worked on last year, with migratory workers. I wondered if we were displacing them, and thought we certainly were. All three of us were educated, white women who were travelling to have new experiences and have time to reflect. We served some other purpose in the grander scheme of things, though I couldn’t help but think of the consequences of our labor and the system which encouraged it.

“I think Greg and Helen have more of a focus on education, though, which makes it different.” she added.

We finished up our drinks and paid out our tabs, and I counted up what cash I had left. 75 euros and some change. Not much, especially considering I had to pay for a bus

ticket back, and they weren't cheap in Ireland compared to my other experiences in the UK. The thought always loomed in the back of my mind, though I pushed it back. We hopped back on our bikes again and rode back towards the house, as it was starting to get a little dimmer, and the sky more of a sullen grey. Helen had told us that she didn't want us out when it was dark - a previous IOFer worried her sick by doing so and refusing to wear a reflective vest. We all agreed we wouldn't want to worry her.

"You can write in the Blue Book tomorrow before you leave if you'd like." Greg added, looking over at me from his seat near the television.

"Thanks, I'll take it upstairs." I replied, fetching it from behind the dining table.

"You two are probably in the top ten. Top five, maybe." He gave a toothy grin, turning back towards the television. I thought his tune had changed a bit from the days of "American L&L."

Elyse and I pedaled ahead, with Caitlin trailing behind. She got off at one point to walk, as it was hurting her to sit on the seat. Elyse and I continued on, but tried to pedal slowly so she would be able to catch up.

"Is she okay?" Elyse looked over to me, arms outstretched, holding the dropped handles.

"Yeah, I think she just feels a little down. She mentioned to me the other day something about her IOF profile picture -- you know, the one we all have to upload? We both went back and forth on which one we would choose before we left. We wanted to show that we had experience with animals, and were looking for placements with

livestock. So, she chose one where she's holding one of her dairy cows and I chose one where I'm holding one of the baby alpacas."

"Aw, that's cute." she smiled, slowly meandering to keep pace with me.

"Both of the pictures were from a while ago. I didn't think that much of it, but she said something about her 'not being what they expected' because it was from a couple of years ago. She said she's gained some weight since then and thought maybe that's why she doesn't get along as well with Greg. I mean, I don't think she looks overweight - I think it's partially a cultural thing I guess. She just thought maybe they expected someone who didn't look like her." I added, tucking my hair behind my ear.

"I actually had a friend visit me at my last placement and I feel like something similar happened with her." she added.

"Really?"

"Yeah, she is a little overweight but not overly. If we had friends visit, they were expected to work, too, so she came out with me for a day. They were really particular with her, and poured out all of the vegetables she had picked and washed because there was a bit of soil in the bottom of the bag. She felt like she couldn't do anything right, and he seemed to really pick on her."

My brows furrowed, "It's kinda weird that they expected her to work, too. I guess I get it, but weird."

"The host farmer came up to me later and said something about her being lazy and falling behind. She didn't work any slower than anyone else, and I knew he was talking about her weight. She left the next day."

“Hey, Boss.” Greg came in through the back door, a cup of tea in hand.

“Boss?” I laughed, a bit confused at the nickname.

“Oh, you know. You’re the boss. Between you and Caitlin, you are.”

I looked back, searching behind me for a trace of Caitlin. I saw her slowly pedaling, about 500 feet away, towards us. Elyse and I dismounted our bikes and walked them up the next hill, waiting for her to catch up to us. We only had a few days left together before we headed out to our next host farm, which was a few hours away by bus.

Holly

Half a cup of rabbit. The grains slide to the bottom of the bowl.

A cup of llama 14 over top, speckled with bits of corn.

The plastic feed scoop dings against the sides of the cool, metal trash bin.

Half a cup of mare and foal, saturated with molasses.

Repeat 22 times, stacking one green bowl on top of the next. It was almost second nature.

“Hey Mom, I just finished the bowls. Can you take the rest through?”

“Yeah, one sec.”

I pushed the gate out towards the girls, making my way over towards the fenceline. I dropped them in groups of three, distributing them as quickly as possible, to avoid getting in the middle of an argument over grain. People would always ask me if alpacas spit - well, yes, they can. They would probably only spit on you, though, if you

got between a couple of competitive eaters. I walked back over to the auto-waterer, where Mom was finishing up tossing out her bowls.

“Have you seen Holly?” I asked, glancing around to all the bobbing heads.

“No... maybe she’s out in the field.”

She wasn’t an easy presence to miss. Her and Ish, the new herd matriarchs who emerged after Clara passed away, were usually quarrelling amongst themselves. Ish would push her way in front of a food bowl just so somebody else couldn’t have it. Holly was equally stubborn and assertive, a physically beautiful animal with a definite intelligence about her. She was a few inches taller than me as I stood at 5’4”’, which is unusual for a female alpaca, and she had an intimidating air about her. She was co-matriarch for a reason.

We walked down towards the oak tree, our boots squeaking as they passed each other in time with our rhythmic gait. We’d cleared this field about ten years ago after trading the parcel with our neighbor, and there weren’t many trees about. Forested areas don’t make great pasture, but they’d produce some welcome shade. The oppressive heat produced these undulated waves coming up from the ground, just an inch or so above the bare earth. I felt the damp sweat against the leg of my boot beneath my work jeans - a necessary, though incredibly warm, precaution given the potential for venomous snakes roaming in the tall grass underfoot.

My gaze shifted to scanning the fenceline, and I saw part of the temporary fencing had been shifted, partially downed. Something was putting strain on the fence, an ill-defined heap, unmoving.

“Holly? Holly! Mom, she’s here.” A panic rushed through my body, a rippling sensation hurling towards my gut. Her leg was caught in the flimsy, electrified temporary fence - alpacas seem to have an affinity for sticking their appendages through that damn stuff. We hadn’t gotten around to finishing the interior fencing yet, another task on a seemingly endless list waiting for completion, so the constant threat of potential injury had finally come to fruition. Why the hell was her leg in it? Why was she down here?

“Katie, help me get her out.” Mom reached down to untangle her leg from the fencing, and Holly didn’t protest. That wasn’t like her. I looked over towards her face, and could see pools of saliva and snot around her mouth and nose. Her loud, frequent snorts were her best attempt at breathing. Holly was always the first one to the water hose, pushing her way past all of the other girls, as she was a bit of an ass but also quite prone to heat stress. Alpacas are native to the Andes mountains and it’s imperative that they are shorn in the Spring and kept cool by fans, shade, and hosing down in the Summer.

“We need to move her out of the sun.” Mom instructed, urgently. We had come down after lunch, around 2PM, and it was hot as hell - we could barely stay out for more than an hour without feeling completely drained. We were the only ones home, Dad and my sisters had gone on vacation while we watched the farm. Someone always needed to stay to take care of things. The brace wrapped around Mom’s lower back was an ever-present reminder that she couldn’t stay alone.

“I’m going to bring the trailer down from the barn with the Subaru, go get the blue tarp that I left over near the hay bales. It’ll be easier to move her that way.” She yelled over to me, already halfway back up the hill towards the car. I jogged in the

opposite direction, towards the side door of the green barn, grabbing the tarp and shaking off the old, stale hay. I hopped over the fence with the tarp in one hand, making an attempt to lift it off of the floor so it wouldn't drag and rip. Mom had already pulled around and was backing the trailer over to Holly.

Grandpa built the trailer when I was little, in "Grandpa's shed" at the bottom of the backyard. I remember seeing its bare bones outline as he welded it together in places. The trailer has done more for us than any other piece of equipment on the farm: transported animals and farm produce to be shown and sold, rushed birthing mothers and ailing crias to the vet, and brought back hay bales for long winters among countless others.

I pushed the edge of the tarp under Holly's lower torso, struggling against the resistance of the grass underneath. Sliding her into the trailer using the low-resistance tarp material would reduce the physical strain, especially considering her 200+ pound weight and how tall she was, but getting it underneath of her was awkward. Mom pulled the tarp from the opposite side, both of us kneeling beside her and pushing upwards, making slow progress as Holly struggled beneath us. We had managed to push the tarp up to her mid-section, and push though we might, we wouldn't get it any further. We both sat back on the warm earth, brows glistening in the mid-summer heat, mouths open and gulping down air.

I got a phone call after school, and Dad was on the other end. "Come home on the bus with your sister." The frame of the white Subaru had been bent into an accordion shape, written off. The trailer had been thrown across three lanes of traffic. Mom was one turn away from delivering the 2 young male alpacas to their new home, when

someone ran into the back of the trailer at 55 miles per hour. One of the boys, George, died at the scene from internal bleeding.

“Okay, let’s try and get her into the trailer.” Mom said, elbow resting on her knee, head leaning on her hand. I looked over to the wooden ramp up to the entrance and thought how insurmountable it seemed.

“Mom, please be careful.” I bent over, one foot on the trailer ramp, straining to pull over her lower half a mere three inches closer. We managed to get her halfway up the ramp and needed to sit down and take a break. All of a sudden, Holly’s back legs kick forcefully back, hitting me in the thigh and pushing her down to the bottom of the ramp. I cry out in sheer frustration.

“God damn it Holly, you’re fucking dying and you’re making this impossible!”
“This is the *worst* time to be an asshole.” Mom looked over to her, exasperated.

We managed to regain lost ground, but had lost the vast majority of our energy. My limbs were powerless, numb, and hopelessly weak. I knew it had taken more out of Mom than me. The brace only postponed the inevitable. Her muscles would seize and cause her unbearable pain all the way up her spine, nothing seemed to work to ease it, and she could barely sleep.

“What’s that word? I can’t think of it. It’s right there but I can’t remember.”

“Um, I don’t know Mom -- can you give me some more words that might help?”

“It’s so fucking frustrating, it never used to--” A glistening haze covers her eyes.

“Every day I wish that it had never happened. I feel like it’s ruined my life.”

If anyone was going to fight through this, it would be Holly. It took us nearly an hour, but we managed to bring her up to the barn and prop her up with hay bales. We

doused her in cool water and set up a fan directly on her. She seemed, at the very least, content.

As the sun set, the rousing chorus of crickets and bullfrogs came from within the tall grass around the pond where we had found her. A soothing yet solemn song rung out through the night when we came to check on her, as we were doing our dutiful rounds. The occasional flicker of headlights passing by on a nearby road filtered through the trees, but otherwise all was still. The white glow of the moon shone down through the clear sky, barely a cloud in sight, accompanied by hundreds of tiny glittering stars. The walk to and from the house was a calm, familiar one.

We went up to check on her every few hours, but after a couple of days it became clear that it was just too late. It was a slow, dawning realization. All her organs had begun to fail. In cool air of the very early morning, after Mom had called the local vet out to kindly help her along, Holly died.

CHAPTER SIX: WOMEN MENTORING WOMEN

Building the Pen

The land Molly leased from a nearby farmer was a little over an hour away from the house, so Caitlin and I packed some cucumber and cheese sandwiches to bring with us for the day. We were starting to get a bit low on ingredients, and I was running out of creative meal ideas, so Caitlin and I wrote up a quick shopping list to give to Molly with some “essential ingredients” we had devised from our meals thus far. Potatoes, eggs, butter, tomatoes, cheese, green peppers, pasta, tomato sauce, chicken, beef mince, and mayo. We could make three full meals in a day with those items quite easily, and we had gotten into a sort of routine of putting on potatoes as soon as we started our hour-long break for lunch and dinner. I don’t think either of us had eaten as many potatoes in our life as we had during our stay in Ireland. It was hard to imagine we would stop eating them when we arrived back home in about two weeks.

We walked around to the front of the house, as Molly burst out of the front door with several bags in hand. “Daisy! Come out and get your shoes on, please.” She called over to her as she stood on the front doorstep. I could tell she was in a bit of a funny mood, and probably showing off in front of Caitlin and I.

“Come on, Daisy.” I sat down on the bench by the front door, tapping the seat beside me. She scrunched up her face and crossed her legs, casting her eyes downward. She eventually made her way over to the bench, and I helped her tie her shoes. Molly emerged from the house shortly thereafter, packing a few more bags and items of clothing into the trunk.

“Alright Daisy, come and get buckled in.” Molly added from the back of the car, shuffling a few things around. Caitlin sat in the back beside her car seat, and I sat to the left of the driver’s seat. We buckled in for the hour-long journey through the Irish countryside, buzzing past our window were visions of lush, green countryside along a series of winding roads. We passed through two or so small towns, and it struck me just how small and rural Ireland felt at times. I’d had images of England and Scotland in mind, and Ireland certainly was not that - and it was through travelling these country roads that I felt I had begun to understand what made Ireland unique. By bike, car, and on foot - I’d spent many an hour on them.

We pulled up to the front gate to the farm, and I got out to open the metal gate for the car to pass through. I turned the key within the padlock and lifted the metal chain from the post, walking it inwards as Molly drove past. I quickly pushed it back up the hill, looping the chain back over the wooden fencepost. Molly, Caitlin and Daisy piled out of the car as I approached, and I walked towards the trunk to fetch my rain gear. The sky overhead was threatening with rain at any moment, as the wind ran through the trees, swaying them from side to side. I helped Daisy with her welly boots as she put her arms into the sleeves of her rain jacket.

Molly headed towards what appeared to be a storage barn, and she had mentioned earlier that the previous farmer had used it for dairy cows. We followed behind her as she collected a few bits of wood and sheet metal, as we were aiming to build a pen for the sheep today.

“My ex always used to be worried about me coming up here by myself. Someone could hide in one of those buildings and I wouldn’t know they were here. I still worry

about -” she leaned closer to us, “being raped”. I knew her fear. As the wind blew through the barn, the creaks and groans of the building could easily be mistaken for, or overshadow, the sounds of someone else making their way through without any of us knowing it. Who would hear us out here?

We emerged from the barn, each of us holding an assortment of wooden stakes and tools. We walked over towards what I thought were several large round bales of hay, stacked two high on top of each other and coated in a thin layer of black plastic. We’d always used square bales at home and they were much smaller, never coated in anything either, and we had never had any use for them. I didn’t know much about how they were made.

“He was supposed to cut some hay for me from that field, but it rained so he ended up making it into haylage. I knew it was going to rain.” Molly sighed.

“Sorry, what’s haylage?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s sort of like the wet version of hay. The plastic coating keeps it wet and fermenting - we used to make silage back home for the dairy cows.” Caitlin replied.

“Ohh, okay.” I nodded.

“He texted me earlier about it, and was saying something about what he was going to charge me for it. I’m a little disappointed that it’s haylage though, as I was expecting hay. I think he was offering to trade some with me for haylage, though.” Molly added, as she walked back over to the car. Caitlin offered Daisy a couple of wooden pieces to hold, as well as the antiseptic spray for the sheep. We made our way past the barns and into the first field on the left, stopping every so often so Molly, Caitlin and I could regain our grip on the posts and sheet metal we were carrying to the sheep field.

“This is the part that the farmhand cut-” Molly studied the area, running her hand through her hair. “Does that look like five acres to you?” She asked, skeptically.

“No, I don’t think so.” I compared the area to a field we had at home, and it certainly looked like less than five acres. It would be difficult to know, though, without having someone measure the perimeter.

“I’ll look at it later online, there’s a national program that documents the acreage, so will see if I can figure it out from those maps later. I mean, it doesn’t really look like five to me, either.” She shook her head, looking out across the field.

We reached the entrance of the sheep field, where about a dozen sheep were grazing along the hillside. A few looked up towards us as we approached, warily.

“Alright, Daisy - when we go into the field, you *must* stay beside an adult.” she looked over to Daisy, sternly.

“Okay.” she replied, looking up towards the sky and holding her hands together. I reached over and extended my hand to her, following Caitlin and Molly through.

“We’ll go ahead and build the pen here along the gate. Caitlin, could you bring me the spray paint? First one goes right here. Actually, go ahead and mark it.” She pointed to the ground next to where she stood. She walked about eight footsteps, measuring with her boots, and they repeated this motion until the whole area was mapped out.

“My ex would kinda scoff at me when I tried to do anything like this. Since he was a carpenter he always did these sorts of things, though he never finished the fencing either.” Molly remarked, walking to the next post marker. “Caitlin, could you bring one of the posts over?” Molly called over, a roll of fencing wire in hand. “We’re a bit short.

Katie would you mind taking Daisy and going over to the far corner - there's a bit of extra fencing wire over there."

"Yeah, sure!" I replied, extending my hand, palm upwards, to Daisy. Her small hand was barely larger than my palm. She looked up at me with eyes wide open and an almost-too-excited smile. She started to pull and ran forward - "Come on, Katie!!!" she giggled, uncontrollably.

We walked around the perimeter of the field, lurching forward at the whim of Daisy's energetic bursts, and I took note of the sheep as I walked past. In a herd of 200, it would be easy to miss one downed or ill sheep.

I walked out to the field, searching for the mother of the bleating lamb. I kept counting 58, no, 59. I recounted at least five times, as I knew Dr. Evans would be irritated if I had simply miscounted. I walked out into the open field, probably ten acres in total. I wandered down into the creek, between the twisted limbs of trees growing within it. What was that? About fifty feet from me, I saw what appeared to be a sheep, laying down. I quickly jogged over, each breath more shallow than the last, and confirmed what I had feared. Her rigid, stiff form showed no signs of getting up.

I remembered what Molly had told me about observing the movement of the sheep to ensure they were healthy. As Ireland was so wet, the sheep were likely even more susceptible to foot rot than your average sheep back home. We'd had two alpacas get foot rot once after they'd gone up to New York to be bred, and had likely stood around in snow for extended periods of time. I looked around for limping, as well as sheep who were unable or struggling to get up. I made sure to walk over to any sheep

who were sitting down, making sure they got up as I walked closer. There were two or three who gave me a scare, but all eventually jumped up and ran off.

“There it is, Daisy.” I pointed over to a partially rolled up bit of fencing wire. “Be careful, I’ll get it.” I said, leaning over to carefully wrap up the wire and put it under my arm. Molly, Caitlin, Daisy and I had walked the perimeter over here before, and I remembered seeing it. Molly had just gotten the perimeter fences completed, and we were inspecting the finished product. To her dismay, the fencing was shoddily constructed in several places, completely lacking tension in some areas and poorly reinforced in others. She’d mentioned that the guy who headed up the fencing team had called about payment, and she let him know that the job had been very poorly done - they met a few days later and he apologized, agreeing to send down another team to fix what had been done. She seemed to be having bad luck with the fencing and hay-baling alike.

We trudged back over to where Caitlin and Molly were building the fence, successfully completing our mission. Molly was beginning to hit the fence posts into the ground with a sledgehammer, swinging it over her head and smacking it squarely into the post.

“Can I try?” I asked, eager to give it a shot.

“Yeah sure, here you go.” Molly handed over the sledgehammer - oof. It was heavier than she made it look.

“Alright, okay.” I readied myself, adopting a wide stance and lifting the sledgehammer above my head. I swung down as hard as I could, smacking off the side of the post and making absolutely no progress. “Oh, crap.” I laughed, “well, that was useless.”

“Let the momentum of it falling down help you.” she added helpfully.

“Okay, I’ll try.” I added, doubting myself a bit. This time I let it fall, improving a bit with the aim this time but not improving much on the “getting it in the ground” front.

“I should really just leave you to it.” I laughed, disappointed I wasn’t being more helpful.

I leaned against the sheet metal as Caitlin hammered nails in, pushing my thigh against the cool metal as the repeated thump reverberated through my body. We traded places as I whacked in a few u-shaped nails into the wood to secure the fencing wire to the post. The fence was a mis-matched assortment of materials we’d manage to gather up, which looked surprisingly functional considering. Caitlin and Molly had done a great deal of the fence-constructing, while I’d primarily hung out with Daisy and kept her preoccupied. She had gotten most of her energy out as we played a game of tag around the fencing-in-progress for the past half hour.

“Alright, I think we’re good to go. Katie, take the crook with you just in case we need to catch a sheep in the field. We’ll go up around to the far field and herd them all down. You have to keep moving and make sure they don’t turn around. I call out to them -- SHEEP, SHEEP, SHEEP! And clap my hands. You just have to make a lot of noise.” Molly directed, as she walked up the hill to the back pasture.

I held Daisy’s hand as we walked through the damp grass, following behind the tramped-down path Molly and Caitlin had cleared for us. I felt confident in my ability to herd, as I had done it many times with the alpacas. Sheep and alpacas seemed to have much more similar mindsets than alpacas and cows - thinking back to my previous host farm. I felt I could be an asset, here.

“SHEEP, SHEEP, SHEEP!” Molly called out, running ahead to divert a portion of the herd. We’d have to move them through about three different fields, collecting the remainder as we went. “Katie, can you stand there?” I moved over to block the path and directed about thirty sheep towards the next pasture. They reminded me a bit of a shoal of fish, moving all at once together in unison.

It was quite easy, though, to have them move in a direction you didn’t want. Molly ran up behind a group of ten or so and shouted her usual “SHEEP!” as she clapped to move them forward, as two darted behind her. They all quickly followed, as she ran around behind them to get them moving again - I could see that her face was quite red, as she had to do this several times. I knew, though, that if I moved I would be even less helpful, as they would run through the gap I was blocking.

After a couple of tries, she managed to get the remaining group through to the next field. She jogged past me, directing me to follow her. “Caitlin, could you take Daisy back down to the pen? Make sure you stay with her. When I signal to you, open up the fence so we can herd them all in.” Caitlin held Daisy’s hand and walked back down to the makeshift fencing area, as I followed Molly’s lead. I could feel my jeans becoming saturated as I ran through the knee-length wet grass, eventually forgetting about it as it was becoming an inevitability. I darted to Molly’s left, crook in hand, following behind another group of sheep. It was becoming readily apparent how out of shape I was, as I could no longer disguise my labored breathing.

“Make some noise!” Molly called back to me, though concentrating ahead. It felt admittedly a bit embarrassing to call “SHEEP!” out loud, as it didn’t yet feel very natural to me. I settled on a few loud claps and “Come on!” as I ran up behind them. We kept at

it for about 45 minutes, letting some sheep slip back and concentrating on the 125 or so we had managed to keep together. We were coming up on the final part: getting them into the pen. It was crucial that we caught them at the right time.

“Caitlin! Get the gate!” She called over, urgently. Caitlin ran over and pulled back the roll of fencing, standing back with Daisy beside her. I approached from the right, as Molly came up from the left. We hurriedly rushed forward, as the sheep followed the familiar path they had carved up the hillside - back down again. I could see they were hesitant to enter the pen, and the placement of both Daisy and Caitlin would also determine whether or not they would go in. They started to enter the pen, and then a few decided to dart back out again, bringing with them the entire herd.

“Katie! Go back around!” Molly yelled over, as I ran to stop the mass exodus. We managed to halt most of them, though losing about 20 who ran out and into a back field. We pushed forward, our faces red and my legs tiring from the strain. I extended the crook and hit it back and forth across the top of the tall grass, which created a harsh whip-like sound. A large group split off from the herd and attempted to head back up past me, as I ran over quickly to the fenceline to divert them. I smacked the crook forcefully into the ground, as it ricocheted back up -- “Come on!!” I shouted, running up to them in short bursts to propel them forward. We managed to re-route them, and a majority headed back over to the gate.

“Caitlin! Close it!” Molly called out urgently, as we closed in on the 80 we had managed to corral. She ran forward, securing the gate closed as Molly and I stopped to catch our breath. We’d managed to get a fair number of them in, at least. We walked up

slowly to the pen, as Molly observed the group shuffling around the pen we'd constructed earlier.

“Made it a bit too big.” She remarked. “It’s easier to catch them if they’re more confined, closer together.” She hopped over the corner of the pen, jumping in with them. “Would one of you like to help treat?” She asked, as I looked over to Caitlin. We exchanged glances, and she was happy to let me go ahead and help.

“Okay, we’re going to try to catch that one -” She said, pointing towards one female who was limping quite noticeably. “She’s got foot rot.” We walked towards her, pressing her into the corner. I managed to catch her by her neck, much shorter than an alpaca’s and more difficult to keep ahold of, and held her firmly to my chest. I wasn’t used to kneeling on the ground while restraining an animal, and I found it to be pretty difficult in comparison.

“Caitlin, can you pass over the spray?” Molly asked, looking over to her and Daisy. She ran over quickly to get the blue antiseptic spray, passing it over the fence to her. Molly put it in her jacket pocket, coming back over to help me. “Here, roll her over like this and put her on her back. That’s how you hold them to give them a check, so we can look at her hooves as well.” I rolled her back, holding her front feet and placing her squarely on her bottom. She looked quite funny in that position.

“Alright, yeah. You can see it here.” Molly held one of her back legs, trimming the hoof with a pair of secateurs. The bottom of her hoof was black and some bits were fleshy and exposed - and it absolutely stank. I held my breath, breathing in through my mouth only when necessary. “I’ll clear that off, and then spray it with the antiseptic.” I was quite excited, though admittedly simultaneously grossed out, to be helping Molly

with this particular task. I'd been looking forward to being more hands-on with the livestock, and this was an opportunity to learn more about handling them. I looked over to Caitlin and Daisy, who were standing by the gate, and saw Caitlin was taking pictures. I gave her an over-exaggerated grin, as Molly finished up and sprayed the ill sheep's hooves. We did a few other routine herd health checks, until one of the sheep noticed there was a weak point in the fence. They jumped over, releasing about five sheep, and we decided to call it a day. Caitlin opened up the gate and let them back out into the field, and we gathered up the rest of our things.

As we walked back up the hill, all quite damp and exhausted from the day's work, I thought how much we had all accomplished today - and how difficult it must be for Molly to do something like this on her own. It seemed near impossible for any one person to do what we had done today, so I think she was quite grateful for the help - and I was grateful for the experience. Caitlin and I both felt as though we got a real look-in on what it means to be a sheep farmer after our exploits with the pen, and were now looking forward to a well-deserved dinner.

Livestock & Breeding Knowledges

A warm rubbing pain wore on my right heel as I trudged up to the barn in my welly boots, a white plastic Grocer's Market bag looped over my arm. A loud, irritated yell came from the top of the hill - "KATIE?" My pace quickened as Mom had told me to come up at least a half hour ago.

I yelled back, "Coming!" taking a shortcut through the overgrown weeds, reaching forward to protect my face from an outstretched branch. The oppressive, humid heat of Virginia in mid-July pressed on my chest, as I climbed up and over the green

metal panel gate. Several chickens came barreling down the hill to greet me, their tongues flicking rhythmically in time with their panting.

“I’m gonna go chuck it up on the compost pile. You guys can have it, then.”

They diligently followed, a single-file line of hens trailing behind, some weaving between my legs. Mom was running off the hose, one hand on her waist, spraying slowly in an arc from left to right over the field.

“What took you so long? I told you to come up almost an hour ago.”

“Sorry, I was getting changed. I had to find another pair of jeans from down in the basement.”

“Uh huh. I want to transplant the tomatoes from the greenhouse to the beds before the heat of the day. I fed the girls, so we can start while they’re eating.”

I walked past the raised beds to the right of the greenhouse and held the bottom of the plastic grocery bag to flip it over, spilling food scraps from dinners past onto the compost heap. The chickens clamored over each other, squawking, in a predictably violent scuffle to grab the best bits. One rooster ran off with a large piece of bread, clucking loudly to call over one of his hens and give his prize to her.

“What an idiot,” I laughed as she ran into the undergrowth with it, smacking it against the ground, and turning it into bite-sized crumbs. He continued to cluck at her, extending his wing, doing a circular dance around her. She pecked hurriedly as another hen came up beside her, ignoring him entirely.

I pulled down the handle on the chicken shed, glancing to the nest boxes on the floor. I held out my shirt and scooped up the three eggs – two a rich, speckled brown, and one a dull white. I walked back to the barn, passing the compost pile where several

chickens were still scratching, squatting down to run my hand over one of the hens. I transferred the eggs over to a green feed bowl that we would usually use for the alpacas, but act as containers for just about everything. Mom came over and sat with me at the edge of the barn as the chickens and ducks pecked around for what was left of the scraps.

“I think I’m going to sell Blue. His coloration isn’t really what I’m going for”, she said.

“Aw, I like Blue. I picked him out at the Gilmanor show. He was the only drake in that color.” I remembered picking him out of a crate of about fifteen other birds.

“I’m really aiming to breed for more solid colors, he’s got a lot of white on him”, she said, getting up to make her way back over to the alpacas.

I followed behind her to help her pick up the bowls. Once we reached the alpacas, Mom said, “Katie - can you hold Mellie for me?” I reached over and put my arm around her neck, placing my body squarely in front of her and placing my other hand at the base of her shoulders. Mom parted her fleece and I leaned over to see, running my hand down Mellie’s neck as she stood quietly. She has nice crimp and density, but below average fineness in her fleece. Luckily Mellie had the temperament and look of her father, but unfortunately was missing some of the positive attributes of her mother.

“Who should we breed her to?” Mom asked. “I’m thinking Tundra.”

Tundra was a white male with fiber that would certainly upgrade Mellie’s. I wondered about what the coloration might be if we did that, though, as Tundra tended to produce multi-colored offspring.

“What about Fergus? When is he old enough?” I asked. He was our youngest male, and he recently won a championship in the brown color division of a large show.

“We probably need to breed her before he would be old enough.”

“Yeah, maybe Tundra then. Our options are kinda limited since she’s related to all the other herdsires. I think that could be a good pairing, though,” I replied.

There would be several days like this one before breeding season came around again. We’d wait to breed Mellie in the fall when it wasn’t so warm, to ensure she wasn’t pregnant this time next year and suffer from heat stress. We planned for about fifteen babies in the fall and spring of next year - the gestation period for an alpaca being around 11 months and thereby requiring a significant amount of planning. Each cria was carefully created, selected and bred with particular characteristics in mind - and this was just the beginning. Birthing comes many months hence.

Breeding decisions are a big part of our livelihood, and an ongoing decision-making process, as a large portion of the income we earn each year is from producing well-bred offspring. Mom and I were the most knowledgeable when it came to what makes a good breeding animal and how to improve any given animal on the farm. A plethora of experiences built these knowledges, as neither of us had any background in farming before my parents decided to start the farm in 2003. Over many summers when I was younger, Mom and I went over the AOBA (Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association) handbook and read up on their guidelines regarding confirmation, fleece, and color classifications to grasp basic understandings about how to do well in the show ring. I found many of my first jobs at alpaca shows: as a shearing hand and a handler for other alpaca farms, through which I was involved with other farms and had the opportunity to see what distinguished a high-quality alpaca from an average one. Mom volunteered at fiber shows to see what makes a winning fleece, an area upon which the

alpaca industry placed lesser emphasis than a good quality breeding animal, in order to make use of our annual fiber harvest. She sorted and washed all of our fleeces before sending them out to be processed, a skill which saved on cost and turnaround time at a mill, and taught me the basics about fleece preparation.

In retrospect, I did not view these experiences as skill-building exercises, merely as understanding what Mom and I could do to improve our own herd at home. We both did, and continue to, find a sense of pride in the quality of our breeding stock and what they produce. Though Mom's business plan was surely to produce a small number of quality alpacas, the everyday lived experiences which built the foundations of our farm had more to do with a sense of responsibility and commitment to our herd: the culmination of our efforts.

Farming & Fecals

“Did they tell you what kind of work you'd be doing?” Leanne asked, holding open the gate for me to pass through.

“Um, no, I don't think so. Oh, actually, yeah. They mentioned a sort of herd health project.” I quickly corrected myself.

“Yes, I'll show you how to do it here. I run fecal samples, usually six at a time, to see what their parasite loads look like. I have a few samples in the fridge that we can use, I collected them earlier. When the girls get up to go out in the morning they usually go all at the same time.” She said.

The alpacas would do a similar thing; all the girls would be sitting along the barn wall chewing their cud until I came in and rattled the food bins. They would all stand up and go outside at once, gathering around the poop pile before coming back indoors. Part

of the rhythm of things.

I followed Leanne through the back door, passing through what I would later learn is the milking area, well-located as the goats could hop right in quite easily. To the left is a wooden work bench covered in loose bits of paper, beakers, and a rack of test tubes. It was the most scientific-looking arrangement I'd ever seen in a barn! I felt nervous as I wasn't a science-oriented major student, and felt that she might be unimpressed with me as most others in the internship course had a background in biology or geographic science. I hoped my experience with livestock might make up for it.

"Okay, I keep the samples over here in the fridge." I looked around the barn area, familiarizing myself with the new space. On the left was an area dominated by a large workbench with several racks of tools arranged according to some logic that I did not yet understand - it looked as though there was a tool for everything there somewhere. There were several bags of feed sat along the floor, moved aside to clear a walkway, and an orange tractor fitted with a front end loader bucket sitting just inside the garage-style door. I followed Leanne over to a small room which contained a white refrigerator on the left-hand side and an industrial-sized metal sink on the right. She swung open the door and on the small shelves, below where I would keep butter at home, sat a few familiar medication bottles as well as several plastic gloves.

"Today, Leanne explained to me that she couldn't find credible source information which gave her specifics about how long these parasites live, how long particular portions of their life cycles last, and how long after she treats she should check for effectiveness of the drug. As a result, she was lacking the information she needs to effectively treat her herd and saw the fecal project as an opportunity to do so. There is

also a lack of clarity surrounding which portions of the lifecycle that particular drugs are effective against. While Cydectin is a drug which is meant to eliminate all worms at all stages of development, Leanne has found in her own goats that she is not seeing any change in egg counts after using Cydectin. She surmised that it is likely that there is total resistance to this drug in her herd, which has some clear implications for herd health management. She is also unable to successfully rotationally graze without this knowledge and although she does not yet have the setup to do so, if she were to attempt a rotational setup - she does not have enough information about life cycles to effectively determine how long she should keep the goats off of a particular area of pasture.”

“When I collect in the morning, I just bring a few gloves with me. Once I get a sample, I just turn it inside out and stick it in here. The cold preserves them.” She added.

Goat poops were just like alpaca poops, perhaps unsurprisingly, like little coffee beans. They’re both small ruminants, so probably digested things in a similar fashion. I was excited to learn how to run the fecal samples, thinking I could probably try it out back home with the alpaca poops, too. At home, it became too much of an expense to send out fecal samples to be analyzed by the lab - and the results variable depending on the day or particular sample you collected. There could be a parasite present in one sample but not in another from the same animal - so it just became too much of a hassle for uncertain results. Being able to do it ourselves, without incurring the cost, would be ideal.

“Okay, so first - I weigh out one gram from each sample. You need to make sure it’s exactly 1 gram, not 1.1 or 0.9, because it would be off by ten percent then.” She zeroed the scale with a small glass beaker on it, before emptying out a couple of the

poops. “You’ll figure out about how many look like a gram after a while, I’ve done it enough to eyeball it. If it’s over a gram, you can just take one of the plastic forks and divide them up.” She added, removing a small portion of the sample and returning it to the bag.

“As I was looking through a few samples, ideas were running around my head about how to ensure that we are conducting verifiable, rigorous scientific inquiry (mostly to double-check myself, as I do not yet feel super confident in my abilities). I asked Leanne if she thought it would be helpful to compare the egg counts between two samples of poop and see if they were similar, or different by how much, and she said it wasn’t necessary as she had already done so herself to ensure this method was effective. She also had tested differing float times (10-15 minutes versus 20 minutes) and manipulated other variables to ensure that she was getting consistent results.”

“Okay, cool.” I said, jotting down the process in my notebook so I would be able to replicate it later.

It was freezing out, and the sun was starting to set. I was finishing up with the last few samples as Leanne came into the barn, bundled in several layers.

“Hey!” I looked up from the microscope, noting the number of parasite eggs I’d counted. It was easy to lose track, and I didn’t want to start over - I was nearly finished.

“Hey - dang, it’s cold.” She smiled, her shoulders raised and body noticeably rigid.

“Yeah, I know right. What are you up to?” I asked.

“I need to draw up some medicine for the goats. Have you heard of copper

bolusing?”

“Actually, no, I haven’t.”

“I wondered if that was something you used for alpacas. It’s the up and coming thing with goats. You’re supposed to give them these copper pills, and the way they sit in their gut creates a hostile environment for parasites.”

I walked over to the table where Leanne was preparing their meds. I was surprised to see that the copper rods were visible to the eye, and looked like incredibly small tic-tacs.

“They’re supposed to swallow them whole, without chewing on the rods, so I open up the casings and put them in this syringe. I mix it with peanut butter so they’ll actually take it.” She replied, showing the peanut butter-filled syringe to me. I thought that was something that my Mom would do or Dr. Evans, actually - the wormer we gave to the alpacas contained molasses, which a few of the alpacas particularly liked. It seems to be one of the tricks of the trade, as far as medicating animals is concerned.

“However, she was skeptical that the effectiveness of copper bolusing been thoroughly tested, and decided to do so herself. Leanne approaches most problems/questions in this way, and as I watch her pore over all the data collected - I can see her passion for “solving” these complex questions. She is not having me do this work to simply gather data, though that would be reason enough, she is deeply invested in the “answers” so she can pass this information along to others and successfully combat the parasite-related issues she sees in her own herd.”

Leanne wrung her hands, raising her shoulders, “When it gets cold like this, it makes it more difficult for me. I have Raynaud’s, if you’ve heard of it.”

“Oh yeah, my cousin’s wife actually has it. From what I understand, it cuts off the circulation in your hands or something like that. Like makes your hands go blue.”

She nodded, “Yeah, it also gives me symptoms of what I would describe as a sort of seasonal diabetes, these highs and lows of energy. I started testing my blood sugar to see, and I was right. I would get these spikes.”

“Oh, geez.” I thought back to the many unbearably cold nights that Mom and I sat up in the barn, tending to an ill animal. I thought how much worse it would be if I was experiencing those kinds of symptoms, especially with no help.

“I started buying these small tubs of ice cream from Walmart - that helps a lot. Whenever I’m feeling like my blood sugar is low, I just grab one from the chest freezer.” She added, shuffling over to measure up some more medication, retrieving it from the shelf.

“Is there anything else I can do to help?” I asked, as I covered the microscope.

“You can fill up the bottles for the babies if you’re all done. Use the milk from the big glass jars on the bottom shelf. It’ll save me a good fifteen minutes.” She added, walking over to the back door of the barn.

“Okay, thanks!” I made my way over to the fridge, lifting the jars into the sink, pouring the milk carefully into the bottles.

“I was able to complete 6 samples today, recounting a couple of slides as I felt as though I may have miscounted or forgot midway through what number I had gotten through. It is certainly a new kind of skill that I am not yet used to. Admittedly, my inexperience with a microscope also meant that I initially was using the eyepiece in a way which strained my eyes excessively - where I was squinting into the eyepiece and

making my task more difficult for myself. I learned over the course of a couple hours that it was actually easier for me to look through the scope with both eyes open, and I was improving my speed as I now could better identify what I was looking for and what was extraneous or irrelevant.

I'm also getting to know the goats through their poop - today I tested Chardonnay, Penny, Celeste, Pepper, Poppi, and ISpy. Chardonnay has tapeworms, and so does Penny. Celeste has an egg count of around 900 - I had to estimate as it was a bit high. Pepper and Poppi have low counts, and ISpy is another tapeworm/high egg count gal."

“Okay, after you weigh the gram of poop, you break it up with the fork like this. I snapped a couple of the plastic fork handles at first, because I was pressing so hard.” I stirred the fork around in a circular motion, breaking up the grassy texture of the poop into a sort of paste. “And then you add in about 30 mls of the float solution, up to here. Just make sure you don’t go over 40. You can go ahead and try doing this one.”

“Okay, 30?” Klara asked, as she reached for the float solution beaker.

“Yep!”

She crouched down, so she was eye-level with the beaker on the table. She carefully poured the float liquid up to the line, hitting 30 just about on the mark. I hadn’t thought of doing it that way, and assumed it was something she had picked up in her Biology labs. I’d gone a little over the 40 line on a couple of occasions, and thought that Klara’s way of doing it was a more accurate method.

“Do you re-use the slides?” Klara asked, stirring the float solution.

“Uh nope, I just chuck them in the trash can.”

“I’ll bring my ethanol next time to clean them, so we can reuse them. I was in Bio lab and was amazed at how difficult it is to keep things sterile. We did this experiment where we had to use sterile techniques or our samples would grow bacteria. I thought we’d done everything correctly, but the next time we came back to the lab - it was growing stuff on it! I was like what!!” We both laughed, and I thought her interest in the subject was admirable and endearing.

“Sorry, I get all nerdy about that kind of stuff.” She said as she poured the sample into a beaker, filling the remainder with float solution and placing a slide cover on top.

Veterinary Pursuits

Dr. Evans is the vet we would always take our most critical alpacas to see. On many a school night Mom and I would rush to load up an ailing cria or birthing mother for the two hour drive up to the clinic. Sometimes it would be around midnight when we would arrive, as I helped Mom unload the alpacas from the trailer and into the nearest stall designated for patients. Dr. Evans diagnosed them right away - it wasn’t merely clinical, it felt almost spiritual in a way. She could tell by the way they moved and breathed which I knew came from decades of experience, but also came from a place of deep empathy and compassion. She handled them carefully, talked to them as she looked them over. She asked us several direct questions one after the other, usually about temperatures and behaviors - Mom had been conditioned to know the answers to them upon arriving at the clinic. Mom usually told me to keep the alpacas calm while she went

to the other room with Dr. Evans, so I sat down beside them in the hay, stroking the side of their neck, talking away to them.

Mom would always tell other alpaca breeders about Dr. Evans, how she would sleep in the barn with a sick animal to monitor them - an honest story regarding one of our own animals. Though it could be difficult to justify the cost of veterinary care at times, Dr. Evans would do her best to make it more affordable, we sometimes swapped the value of a breeding to our herdsire for the cost of a bill. It was harder when we lost an animal, but I knew then and even now how it would comfort Mom to know that we had taken them to Dr. Evans. There was nothing else we could have done. Even in death, though, there was an opportunity to learn - and for Dr. Evans, to educate.

One of my most vivid memories is of a young male, Lennox, whose lungs had filled with fluid. He had died very suddenly and violently in front of my younger sister. I went up with Mom to have an autopsy done at Dr. Evans'. We took his body and placed it in the tractor bucket - and she walked Mom and me through everything she observed. There was no nauseous pit in my stomach this time like there was during surgery, it felt almost mechanical the way she described what had gone wrong. She pointed to an area in his exposed chest, cut down the middle.

“There’s an area of consolidation there - it’s dark and firm. It doesn’t have that spongy texture anymore” she said, pointing to a pinkish, triangular organ which I assumed was the lung.

“Okay, I see. Is that the lung there?” I didn’t think a lung looked like that, I felt stupid as I thought lungs literally filled with air, like empty bags.

“Yeah, that’s right. If you cut off a bit of this and put it in water - it’d sink. Means the lung isn’t healthy.”

She pointed out a few more spots that indicated what had gone wrong, and turned to Mom and me.

“Well, if you’ve got livestock, you’ve got deadstock.”

Farming/Making A Difference

I pulled on my ski bib over my clothes and headed out the door to meet Klara, who was waiting for me in her Jeep.

“If it smells weird in here, it’s because I brought some curry I just made.” She said, pointing to a Tupperware container sitting next to the handbrake.

“Well the bottom of my oven actually just caught on fire, so if it smells like smoke - that’s why.” I replied.

We laughed, turning off of my road and headed towards the interstate. We met last semester in my farm internship course, though we didn’t get to talk much, and she had mentioned an interest in working with goats. She also worked with campus dining and their sustainability initiatives, and had mentioned that she had experience with hydroponics and permaculture. I later discovered during one of our car journeys that she had also worked as an IOFer on a farm in the local area, another unforeseen connection between our convergent paths.

I asked her about her IOF experience in the area, out of interest to hear how it might be similar or differ from my own abroad.

“I had a really good experience working there, they actually wrote me a recommendation for a permaculture program I was looking into applying for. The farmer’s wife, who-- is also a farmer, works as an OBGYN and the farmer works in environmental policy. He sent me an email the other day, and this is off topic but--”

“It’s all related -” I said, smiling.

“He said that the piglets, which he got in the fall - no, wait. It must have been the spring, because that’s when I was working there. He said that they’re ham and prosciutto, now. They were saying I should come and try it. They only eat meat that they raise, or that’s been sustainably raised.” She added.

“That’s awesome. Not a bad way to live.”

“Yeah, I know. I would love to do that - but I’m like, afraid that I would just eat all of my produce myself because it’s so delicious.” She laughed.

“I mean even if you did, you could still make it work if you kept your costs low.” I added, optimistically.

“Well yeah - but things you would need like water I guess, and taxes--”

“Yeah, could build a well or something like that. I feel like a big part of why people started getting into alpacas was because the tax breaks are pretty reasonable.”

I remembered one of my high school teachers, a fairly conservative man, scoffing at the thought. Why should the taxpayer pay for alpaca farmers, or, for someone to keep some alpacas? It had been years and the sentiment still rings in my ears, the embarrassment I felt at the implication that my family was cheating the system in some way and others had to bear the cost. Now, though I understood the origins of his sentiment, I thought how farming had made a difference in my own upbringing and the

improvements my parents had made to the land in having animals upon it. We were at least partially self-sustaining, and produced fiber products which were otherwise not available locally. It was not easy, though, to make much more than breaking even some years.

“I’m always torn between like - farming and doing my own thing, and making a bigger difference in the world. I don’t know.” Klara said.

“Literally half of my grad program is facing that exact same dilemma!” I said, voice raised, thinking how interesting the parallel was. How do we enrich our own lives while also enriching the lives of others?

DISCUSSION

Throughout my thesis project, I have attempted to put into conversation the theoretical framework of feminist theory and the everyday, lived experiences which both work to inform each other. Autoethnography as a methodology has proven to be an iterative process throughout this project; wherein I have written field notes, identified meaningful and confusing moments, drafted narratives, and attempted to arrange them thematically. I have gone through a series of themes and arrangements throughout the writing process which have evolved as I create new narratives and consider how they fit, speaking to the nature of autoethnographic work and the fallacy of linear and clean sense-making processes. It has been a messy, complex process which did not point to any one conclusion from the get-go, instead emerging from a number of experiences I have had and the threads which weave them together. There are many memories that did not make the cut and the narratives above that are not entirely complete, as no narrative can entirely encapsulate the complexities of the situations or relationships which I have detailed throughout this thesis.

Throughout this narrative project I have struggled constantly with the representation of myself and others, as they are fraught with both ethical and interpersonal implications. As mentioned in the section regarding relational ethics, I have approached this project with those goals in mind though they have become increasingly complex and difficult to grapple with as the project unfolded and developed. I did not know what conclusions I would ultimately draw, as mentioned previously in discussions of autoethnographic method, as they came forth from both memory work and through further examination of ongoing experiences I have with food and farm work. Turning a

critical eye upon these experiences has been both a productive and distressing experience as I aimed to recount these tensions so that other women may identify with them. Yet I also realize that this has significant implications for others represented in my narratives. As a result, I have written my narratives with this in mind and approached each with an emphasis placed on both fairness and resonance. I intend to make this document available to all individuals involved in my field work experiences and welcome their feedback, as I also realize that my perspectives are partial.

My thesis offers a number of implications for how women experience food and farm labor, which has broader implications for women in labor contexts more broadly as well. In both my experiences as a female food/farm laborer and in my experiences working alongside other female farm laborers, I have identified meaningful tensions and themes which are noted in the narratives above and discussed further below. These observations highlight the unique challenges faced by women who work as farm laborers and the contributions that women make to the field as well. I would hope that my thesis project acts as a source of empowerment for other women who share parts of these experiences and see the value in giving voice to and recognizing them as valid.

When I began this thesis project, I asked the following questions: How do female food laborers make meaning in their work? What are the gendered experiences of female food laborers in the context of their everyday experiences? How do structural inequalities shape women's experiences in their roles? How is gendered knowledge constructed and labor divided as a result? How do female food laborers form relationships within the food system? And, what are the implications/effects of gendered food labor? Throughout the sections that follow, I will discuss how my thesis project spoke to each of these

questions. I have divided these implications into four sections: gendered divisions of labor, invisible/visible labor, structural inequities: race, gender and class, and knowledge creation through autoethnographic inquiry.

Gendered Divisions of Labor

I initially approached this project with the theme of “gendered labor” in mind, which seemed to play out in terms of what labor was deemed “appropriate” for men versus women, and focused upon how women were framed as capable/incapable of particular tasks. I noted this when talking with a female worker who worked in a poultry plant, wherein women were prescribed by company policy to complete particular tasks, especially pertaining to lifting limitations. The concept of gendered divisions of labor was illustrated in more subtle and nuanced ways as well, and became far more complex as I worked through these experiences. I did not realize to what extent this pervaded my own understandings of work, knowledge, and feelings of vulnerability and empowerment.

I began this project by considering the question, “what are the gendered experiences of female food laborers in the context of their everyday experiences?”, as this stood out quite strongly to me while IOFing. Though I entered this project with the idea of gendered labor in mind, I have realized through reflecting upon my own experiences that there are underlying conditions which underscore the “symptom” of the separation of labor. Though there are many instances where I can recall myself and my female co-workers and friends being explicitly told what they can and should do - I have realized through this mode of inquiry that there is much to be uncovered underneath of these prescriptive remarks. Though I do not claim to have found the answer, nor could I

considering my positionality as my experiences are in part determined due to how I appear and identify to others, I have found great value in further analyzing moments which made me feel strongly - uncomfortable, excited, harassed, fulfilled, supported, and so on.

My pursuit of this topic was developed over the course of my lifetime, and culminated in my reflection upon the experiences I had abroad during the IOF program. After reflecting on my experiences in female-dominated farm work contexts, specifically following my experiences at Greg and Helen's farm in comparison to my experiences at Molly's, it became evident to me that there were significant differences in a number of areas. Though we had positive experiences throughout our time at both farms and learned many new things, a number of moments made clear differences in power, value judgements, expectations of work and social time, and gendered notions about the capabilities of men and women. I then began to identify additional foundational memories and relationships within food and farm work which have contributed to my understanding of what it means to be a (female) farmer. I have found that a significant portion of those individuals are women in small-scale farming contexts, despite the hegemonic representation of "farmer" as patriarchal male within industrial agriculture.

The gender role expectation of women as those who nurture and feed (Avakian & Haber, 2005; Julier, 2005) also presented itself throughout my thesis project. Women work in the challenging space of navigating gender role stereotypes due in part to historically patriarchal systems and policy structures (Barndt, 2007; Jiggins, 1998; Julier, 2005), and throughout my work with female farmers this appeared to be particularly salient. Though I have limited experience with this distinction, within the field sites

discussed throughout my thesis I noticed a difference between woman-centric farming environments and those wherein male-female gender roles are reinforced. When considering “what are the gendered experiences of female food laborers in the context of their everyday experiences?”, this distinction seemed most relevant. This has been a complex tension to work through, as I have attempted to create a distinction which does not simply categorize women as stereotypical renditions within either of these categories. All of the women I have encountered throughout these experiences are far more complex characters.

If I was to attempt to define these two categorizations, however, I would describe woman-centric environments as those which appear to place little emphasis on the gendered division of labor and knowledge. These relationships have proven to be meaningful and positive to me because I was treated as an equal and as a co-creator of knowledge. However, I also identified traits within my relationships with female farm owners and mentors alike which felt in part to be maternal, nurturing, and traditionally “feminine” in terms of gender role expectations. Many of the women I have worked alongside also challenge these stereotypes as I discuss in the narratives above: in their roles as small business owners, being responsible for gendered masculine farm and business tasks, and are independent and assertive personalities - to name a few. My relationships with Molly, Leanne, and my mom all speak to this woman-centric mentorship environment in differing ways. My relationships with Elyse, Caitlin, and Klara are also illustrative of the women-mentoring-women dynamic, but in a peer mentorship role as opposed to a cross-generational passing down of knowledge. In my conversations with Elyse, Caitlin, and Klara we often worked through our own

sensemaking processes and experiences in order to compare and contrast them with each other. We also brought differing expertise to the conversation, and I felt throughout our interactions that we were interested in learning from each other.

In contexts with more rigid gender roles present, it appears that women are delegated primarily to “nurturer” task roles while men are responsible for more physically demanding tasks (Barndt, 2007; Friedmann, 1999). Though my parents are a married heterosexual couple, similar to Helen and Greg, these gender roles were present in some ways while also quite flexible in others. My dad was often responsible for jobs involving heavy machinery and the disposal of deceased animals which typically required the tractor for burial. My mom and I would typically be responsible for medication, bottle feeding, and birthing tasks - which is evocative of the gendered act of caregiving. However, my mom and dad both worked on the construction of our barn, and my sisters and I worked alongside my dad to erect fence posts among other physically demanding tasks. As far as meal preparation is concerned, both my mom and dad were present in the kitchen and I associate them both with this aspect of caregiving.

Sachs et. al (2016) also notes that the role that women have historically played on family farms has been limited by patriarchal norms and institutions, a relationship which I observed in my IOF experience with Greg and Helen. For example, meal preparation was typically delegated to Helen, and in one instance where she was unable to prepare dinner that evening it was delegated to me. She often left the weeding field about an hour prior to our departure to prepare meals, and it was clear that Greg was typically our supervisor. This is also illustrative of the gender role expectations of women, and are responsible for acting as “keepers of the culture, primary agents of children’s

socialization, and defenders of the private realm of family life” (Julier, 2005, p. 168). As Julier (2005) notes, women have historically been held as responsible for maintaining the structure of the family and tasks associated with this maintenance as well, imposing these labor roles within the household.

Though there were clearly gendered labor roles present, interestingly, Greg often discusses his commitment to sustainable methods of growing which is more representative of a “dialogic masculinity with less of a need for control over nature and a greater social openness” (Sachs et. al, 2016, p. 6). Helen also had an impressive knowledge of botany, natural remedies, and other food preparation expertise such as making kombucha and bread from scratch. Though in some ways this does reinforce the gender stereotypical nature of women in the private sphere, her skill in plant care and interpersonal relationships also contributed to the success of their farm and parallels the entrepreneurial spirit which Molly, Leanne and my mother also exhibit. She also often took crops to market and Greg credited her with being more knowledgeable than himself in the area of plant care. In this way, women are also in a sort of “double-bind” as they are critiqued for falling into gender stereotypical roles while also pursuing hobbies they enjoy. Throughout *Mom’s Spagbol: Age Eighteen* for example, I discuss a traditional family meal that my mom prepares for us from what we have grown on the farm.

This presents a clear tension between the roles that women are expected to enact/take pride in enacting and do so well, which I do not endeavor to reinforce here. As Avakian & Haber (2005) discuss, women’s relationships with food have been historically scrutinized and discussed as patriarchal and oppressive, though there are many instances wherein it is far more complex as they “reproduce, resist, and rebel against gender

constructions” (p. 2). The tension that Caitlin and I felt during our time at Greg and Helen’s, though, seemed to step largely from the notion that men and women served fundamentally different functions on the farm as a whole. Helen’s role was reminiscent of the role of “farm wife” (Clair, 2011) which Sachs et. al (2016) describes as “remaining subordinate to men on family farms where their husbands or in-laws own the land and make decisions” and they “gain financial security, status, and respectability from their positions” (p. 4). This relational difference was in stark contrast to the environment at Molly’s farm, wherein she also taught us about plants and livestock but did not delegate that we performed certain gendered tasks or felt evaluated on our ability to adhere to gender roles in our appearance and otherwise.

However, Sachs et. al (2016) also note that it has been argued that sustainable methods of farming do not necessarily challenge the traditional gendered separation of labor, as they are able to start a farm for a lower cost without mechanization so enact similar labor roles. Leanne’s farm operation, though certainly modelled after sustainable methods, speaks to a strong challenge to the work that women “traditionally” do on farms. While farm machinery is typically gendered masculine (Sachs et. al, 2016), Leanne utilizes machinery in her dairy and a tractor for tasks which would otherwise require additional help. In a similar vein to many of the women farmers I have worked alongside, she shows a clear commitment to an independence from outside help and commits to learning expertise which enable her to do so.

This spoke to one of my original questions, namely “how is gendered knowledge constructed and labor divided as a result?”, as women have been socialized to perform particular tasks which are gendered feminine or masculine. Leanne, Molly, and my mom

have all passed along knowledges to myself and the other women I worked alongside regarding caring for livestock, and Molly, Helen, and my mom passed along knowledge specifically about plant care and identification. Also, as noted in stories about Leanne and Molly, they have also challenged what tasks are gendered female. Molly's construction of fencing, Leanne's knowledges of machinery, and my mom and I's experience with Holly challenge the types of knowledge and ability that women possess on farms and thereby re-frame what labor women are capable of doing.

Invisible/Visible Labor

Autoethnography as a method requires a particular level of vulnerability from the researcher, as I turn inward to study my own experiences, critically examine my understandings and biases, and in turn reveal my observations to others. This has been a particularly personal challenge as I do not consider myself to be a vulnerable person. With most others I may even appear outwardly closed-off. These tension may also be a gendered one, as I struggle with the gendered female expectation of being emotionally open and vulnerable and the methodology of autoethnography itself also requiring it.

In writing this thesis, I have grappled with the tension of disclosing the personal versus maintaining a sense of ownership and privacy about my own thoughts and feelings. For example, while writing the piece *Period Pains* I struggled to describe the discomfort and reality of having my period as it was a private experience which then bled through to the public sphere in my writings. I felt that this also spoke to question of, “what are the gendered experiences of female food laborers in the context of their everyday experiences”, as Caitlin and I had our periods while working and had

inadequate accommodation to “deal” with the outcomes of a common female bodily function. I found myself censoring the experience for those who may read it, leaving out the “gory” details, and upon revisiting an earlier draft of the narrative I realized what I had been subconsciously doing. Even in the act of writing through this experience, I felt as though I had to hide it from others and feel shame in the reality of my monthly experience of menstruation. While I have a plethora of experiences with breeding and birthing animals, which is in many ways closely related to the natural and cyclical nature of my own period, these processes are operationalized and discussed in sterile terms throughout my experiences with farming. Disclosing the challenges of farm work while female is a challenging and personal process, especially considering the gendered norms inherent in being open and vulnerable.

The discomfort that I felt in disclosing *Period Pains* also stems from the gendered stigma that women face in discussing their periods. While farm work involves a connectedness to cycles of life and death and reproduction, I still faced this stigma which was largely left unsaid during my time at Greg and Helen’s farm. I kept the discomfort and pain to myself, as I had always done, and attended to leakages without public mention of them. Caitlin collected all of her stained laundry and washed these clothing items herself, never acknowledging to our hosts that she had dealt with this issue. It is neither encouraged nor accepted to openly discuss menstruation cycles, though it is a common female experience, which requires women to also deal with any challenges associated with their periods in silence.

One particular theme which emerged through the section of narratives entitled *Vulnerable and Gendered Labor* is the implications of invisible labor and the visible

body. This addressed my original question, “what are the implications/effects of gendered food labor?” as women face particular biases for their physical appearance which in turn determines how they are treated and what is expected of them. The female bodily experience carries with it associated “baggage,” including gendered biases regarding the ability of the female body and vulnerability to harassment and violence. As illustrated in *Profile Pictures*, Caitlin was subject to particular judgements about her ability as a worker due to her physically visible female body. Caitlin was classified as unproductive as her body was not considered ideal in terms of the aesthetic of the “working body”.

The invisible labor that women do is also illustrated throughout the literature, as women are expected to work the unpaid “second shift” and are responsible for duties which are not expected of men. Women are also largely discussed in terms of the nurturing and feeding tasks that they do, which is important - however, it is clear that women also do work in other areas which is not fully realized. I also found that in the case of Molly specifically, she absolutely was subjected to the double-shift phenomenon as she was primarily responsible for childcare duties in addition to running the farm. She mentioned on at least one occasion that this was an area of concern as, during the process of separation from her ex-husband, she was subject to heightened levels of scrutiny. She had mentioned that others may perceive the farm as a dangerous place for children, and was afraid that she would be accused of child endangerment for bringing Daisy with her - though clearly this was not the case. Molly also mentioned the cost of child care being a significant factor which led her to work at home and on the farm, and she was one of the few students in her farm course who did not also have a part-time job (outside of caring

for Daisy, which was not considered as such by others). This may also have been due to the male-dominated nature of the course and the profession in general.

I also found myself falling into the “second shift” phenomena in my time at Greg and Helen’s farm. Upon arrival at the farm, we were told that it was expected that we would wash up our dishes after meals on weekdays and we would take turns to do all dinner dishes. This expectation became less clear over time, as Helen would sometimes pick up dish duty as we headed off to the fields or other family members may help us. This was also the case for other household chores, such as cleaning the bathroom or our own room before Elyse came. An instance that stuck out to me in particular was a day wherein Helen was not able to prepare dinner that evening. Helen and Greg had also told us when we had arrived that meals on week/work days were provided, but we were expected to cook for ourselves on weekends. It was unusual to be asked to cook for the family. Helen walked me through how to cook dinner that night and talked me through when to put on particular ingredients in her absence, which I did upon returning to the farm with Caitlin. Greg sat in the living room on the couch as we prepared dinner for everyone. It was clear that if Helen was not there, we were expected to provide the role that she fulfilled, which was to provide food for the family.

Structural Inequalities: Gender, Class, and Race

When considering the question, “how do structural inequalities shape women’s experiences in their roles”, I originally struggled with considering how my privileged identity as a White person also intersected with my identity as a low-income woman. As I recount in my narratives at Grocer’s Market, it became clear to me that my presence and

resulting vulnerability in those spaces was marked by my appearance as a female. This was also the case in my experiences as an IOFer, which Caitlin experienced as well, wherein our performance of gender role expectations was scrutinized and dictated that we perform particular tasks. There are also structural barriers that women face in acquiring capital to run farm operations (Sachs et. al, 2016), which I observed in Molly's experience with a farmhand from the local area who had the machinery to cut and bale hay/silage.

I also recognize that my experiences have been shaped in large part by my identity as a (at first likely high, and now lower) middle-class White female. I grew up in a household with two parents who had both the financial ability and agency to start a small farm and stay home without also taking additional part time jobs. Throughout this thesis, I study a relationship to land and farming from the perspective of Whiteness and also alongside White laborers. These experiences are distinct from a large population of food laborers. As Liu (2011) discusses, people of color are disproportionately employed in the food industry though they are underpaid and underrepresented in positions of power. The experiences of non-White food laborers and farmers are understudied overall, which is a gap in the literature that should be further examined.

The contexts in which I have experienced food and farm work also play a significant role in my own understanding of the profession and lifestyle overall. The type of farm work I have experienced is more typical of smallholder, family-owned, organic setups which are inherently less risky and oppressive environments - though it is certainly not the case that they are without their flaws and oppressive practices. Industrial agriculture on the whole is far less White, is more contaminated in terms of pesticides

and chemicals, is highly structured in terms of work tasks and procedures, and has a different value-based orientation overall (economies of scale versus subsistence production goals, for example) to name a few. In comparison to my other experiences with farm labor, Grocer's Market was most closely linked to industrial agriculture and also happened to be the most diverse in terms of race and class identities. The hegemonic notion of a farmer and those who feed us is typically White, though throughout the chain of food production and distribution this is not the case. In Keshari & Rawal's (2014) film *Food Chains*, they illustrate the realities of migrant laborers, who are largely non-white and non-English speaking populations, that pick the crops which most Americans eat. I also spoke with migrant laborers in the Shenandoah Valley area who work within the agricultural sector, and found that the population I spoke with via translator were also largely people of color who faced a number of challenges which others I worked alongside did not (Shedden, 2017).

Throughout my experiences with food and farm work, I often find myself reflecting upon my own financial situation and class background. This has been a substantial influence upon the tension I feel between pursuing farming or other occupations, and considering what I value most in my life which has been shaped by a number of the experiences I reflect upon in these narratives. While it is clear that farm work has had a profound effect upon my own life and I credit my upbringing as the primary motivator for pursuing environmental studies, I have also seriously questioned this path and farming as a career more broadly. While my parents were both financially successful in their own right prior to starting the farm, and from what I understand would be classified as higher middle or middle-class, they no longer make a comparable

income. Sachs et. al (2016) observe a trend in women-led farms, which emphasizes maintaining “control of the operation, preserve[s] a work-family balance, enhance[s] their quality of life, and focus[es] on the customer and employee”, which seems a fairly accurate description of my parents’ intentions in pursuing farming (p. 22).

A symptom of the financial sacrifice my parents made by starting a farm is their own bodily vulnerability. As my mom and dad both struggled with health problems, some as a result of farm labor, I can’t help but wonder how the financial implications of small-scale subsistence farming have taken a toll on them. While health care is not particularly affordable for most Americans, it has not been a financial consideration that myself or my parents can take seriously considering the tremendous cost for little coverage. Farm labor is physically demanding and potentially debilitating, and the inability to afford preventative care and treatment carries significant consequences. Their ability to physically complete farm-related tasks, a point which Leanne mentioned to me as she recounted her experience dealing with a broken collarbone while running a goat dairy, also potentially puts their livelihood at risk if they are ill or injured.

There is also a distinct shame and vulnerability which pervades my experiences with low pay wage work and the inability to make enough money to save. Experiences with financial insecurity and food are places wherein identity is negotiated and power relations are made visible (Cherry-Chandler, 2009), which became a tension I felt in my own experiences as a cashier yet also as a farm laborer with some agency over the food I grow and thereafter consume. Cherry-Chandler’s (2009) storied experiences of being a Black woman who grew up within a low-income community illustrate the complex interconnections of race, class, and gender and their associated vulnerabilities. These

paradigms of privilege and marginalization have material implications for my own lived experiences, which are reflected in instances evocative of both vulnerability and empowerment.

In *690 ml* I discuss the familiar experience of selling my plasma and reflect upon an instance where a Black, female Grocer's Market employee sat down across from me. Her presence in that space reminded me of my own vulnerabilities, though markedly different from hers, as the physical scar on my arm marked me permanently from repeated "donations". How did I get here, and what did I do wrong? PharmaHeal is a place which provided me some financial relief, yet also took advantage of my social position and resulting need. I saw many others who came and went from the bustling yet monotonous, procedure-oriented medical center and were in varying positions of social need. While as a student I am a transient member of this community, it is likely that many others have made this an integral part of their weekly routine as a way to supplement their income.

Knowledge Creation & Autoethnographic Inquiry

The use of autoethnography in this project aims to illustrate the importance of highlighting underrepresented voices in food and farm labor. The instances I have recounted in the narratives above speak to the struggles and challenges that female food laborers face, which may not be visible or apparent to those who have not had these experiences. There are also uncomfortable and potentially vulnerable moments that female food laborers face which are difficult to quantify or explain. I also approached writing these narratives of my own experiences in a way which privileged showcasing

vulnerability, so as to include readers in the story and not keep them at arm's length.

These accounts seek to give voice to underrepresented experiences in ways which involve the reader in their implications.

I also arranged the narratives within my thesis in order to evoke particular tensions within my narratives which may not otherwise be obvious considering a reader's previous experience and positionality. The narrative *Hay Baling* describes an interaction that may be perceived as playful between myself and Greg, and does not necessarily indicate poor intentions. I place this narrative in conversation with the scenes in *Cowboy Hat* and *Blue Convertible* in an attempt to illustrate the context within which I experience this physical interaction. Given my prior experiences with vulnerability as a woman, there is a thread which runs through the push in *Hay Baling* to my experiences at Grocer's Market that I perceive quite clearly. Though *Hay Baling* may appear innocent there is a power differential present reminiscent of a male figure who feels entitled to and expectant of my attention and physical body. I cannot escape a certain level of control in any of these situations, which makes visible an invisible phenomenon.

The narratives also provide a space to acknowledge the relationships and experiences which have culminated in the writing of this thesis project, which spoke to both "how do female food laborers make meaning in their work?" and "how do female food laborers form relationships within the food system?". I was able to identify inter- and cross-generational women who have been present throughout my life and credited them with the knowledge and skills which they have taught me. This in itself rebuffs the notion that women are not fit or capable to farm, but in fact that they do so in ways which encourage productive relationships and create new knowledges. Narratives involving

Leanne and Klara, Molly and Daisy, and Elyse and Caitlin all speak to the unique burdens which women face within farm labor and the conversations in woman-centric environments which provide support to both recognize and overcome them. Though all contextually situated, the narratives also coincide at important junctures which have left lifelong impressions. Leanne's passing down of knowledge to myself and Klara through the fecal project, Molly's mentorship of myself and Caitlin in gardening, shepherding, and motherhood, and the sense-making that Klara, Elyse, Caitlin and I made together - is all connected.

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