

## LIFE CYCLES: A DAUGHTER'S REFLECTION OF HOME

*Betsy Faber*

*Writer's comment:* When Dr. David Robertson presented the term paper assignment for English 184 (Literature of the Wilderness), I brainstormed my recent hikes and outdoor adventures, confident that one would stand out and serve as inspiration for the paper. Ironically, the more I searched for an untamed place, the further I ventured from the assignment's goal. Upon considering my home territory, a family dairy farm, I grasped the themes of understanding and attachment encouraged by Robertson. Although a farm may not fit the stereotypical model of wilderness, it incorporates the integral themes of ecology, land stewardship, and spirit thus creating a unique and sound environment. By understanding the life cycle of the dairy, I couple my recollections of childhood with my professional goals as a young adult allowing the impacts of my place to carry me forward.

— *Betsy Faber*

*Instructor's comment:* Students in English 184: Literature of the Wilderness were asked to consider the ways by which humans come to know and attach to a place. In particular they were to examine the process by which they have come to know a specific place. Betsy Faber, in "Life Cycles: A Daughter's Reflection of Home," tells a moving and complicated story of her family's dairy farm in the Idaho Panhandle. Her description of the farm and her grandmother is vivid and specific. As I read it, I was often reminded of the exclamation, which is implicitly a directive for writing, "It's in the details!" Her tale does not have all that happy an ending, but loss is balanced by lessons learned. One of those lessons is a hard one, that, while the farmer and the ecologist have much in common and by and large operate by the same rules, neither one necessarily goes all that well with economy.

— *David Robertson, English Department*

**I** believe that humans attach to a territory—a field, a body of water, or a forest grove—and over time allow the place to shape their perceptions and perspectives. Raised by dairy farmers and influenced by the land, I connected to the family farm, entitling it to form my personality. My parent's first dairy in the Midwest reflected the grit and goodness of Wisconsin terrain and people. Farming difficult land sown with tradition tested their spirits and skills, but prevailing, they built up a classic, small-scale farming enterprise. Beckoned west to glacially filtered soils and limitless alfalfa yields, our Starcross Dairy migrated to Idaho in 1983. With our barns silhouetted against the Selkirk Mountain Range and our livestock resting in the shadows of Douglas fir and tamarack trees, my family's dream of a productive and respectable operation evolved. Tabby kittens and mountain lions, chickens and wild turkeys, heifers and elk roamed the fields, and our family farm integrated the economic needs of domestication with the ecological provisions of the environment. Our territory's natural factors of climate, watershed, and soil fertility determined our choice of livestock and forage. To such a unique farm setting, my parents added a child. The dairy and the daughter, both rooted in fertile soils and surviving on the nourishment of milk, matured under the watchful eyes of my parents and the endless skies of the West. However, pressured by the economic demands of raising a family and enhancing production means, my parents, like many small-scale dairy farmers, could no longer depend on the farm for security. Their territory, a home cultivated by years of backbreaking work and unwavering devotion, was abandoned. Through understanding the life cycle of my family's farm—the birth, the growth, and the eventual death—I have come to understand myself. I realize that Starcross Dairy, nestled in the wilds of Idaho, has not died but rather regenerated itself in my spirit and ecological conscience.

The life of every organism or idea begins with birth; this comfortable constant stands as one of the purest processes on the dairy farm. A farmer witnesses hundreds of births over his/her lifetime yet never tires of the bright promise shining in freshly opened eyes, the warm reassurance of maternal instinct, and the unrivaled security of mother and young. Thus the family farm stands as an extended family as the births of children intertwine with those of animals, creating a rich and hopeful setting. Birthing is especially relevant on the dairy farm as it initiates the cows to produce milk. The maternity pen on Starcross Dairy consisted of a softly bedded, southern-facing refuge surrounded by haystacks and barn swallow nests. Whether a bitter January afternoon or pleasant September evening, my family always participated in the birth of calves. Occasionally, complications would occur, and we would sit tense and worried as my father guided a breech birth or strained with a hiplock, but typically our amazed smiles reflected the joy of this slippery, tender process. Babies of many species frolicked wildly along our fence lines. Goat kids bounded haphazardly among the alfalfa plants, blindly attempting to see over the leafy barriers; chaotic piglets swarmed about an equally disorganized sow eager to locate a milky teat; and overconfident kittens explored tunnels in the haystacks stalking and wrestling for hours. A farmer cannot help but feel grounded and secure when such hopeful and gentle life signs emerge throughout the year. Perhaps an even warmer feeling arises as the farmer integrates his/her own children into the farm setting. Janet Fitchen describes the dual roles of one mother as “she would often interrupt her milking work in the barn to sit down on a hay bale and nurse an infant or to talk to a baby in a playpen beside the cows”(25). Birthing and motherhood, integral to the creation of a farm and a family, transcend the apparent borders between human and beast while fostering a pure and promising interpretation of life.

On our farm, fresh signs of life were not restricted to the year-round births of animals but also surfaced during the intense fruiting season of the orchard. I remember the excitement of walking through the orchard on a breezy April day and suddenly noticing the first tender blossoms of the cherry trees. Restricted to dormant, protective buds for most of the year, the darling petals broke free and basked in the

Idaho sunshine. As the trees transformed into soft puffballs of delectable flowers, our equally excited honey bees zipped about, urgently gathering sweet nectars to bring to their Queen. Gradually, tender, ripening fruits emerged, beckoning whitetail deer and black bear. It seems ironic to me that wildlife, when offered to graze the crisp fiddleheads, wild strawberries, and plump huckleberries of the adjoining forest, still venture to feast on the domestic fruits of the farm. Perhaps the deer were vying with my family for the first bites of new plums, granny smith apples, and, of course, cherries. However, they might find themselves in stiff competition when faced against my Grandmother, the reigning authority of our orchard stand. Grandma Sharer raised my mother on a Wisconsin dairy and upon retiring began visiting Starcross Farm every summer. Grandma observed every step of the fruit life cycle, from the emergence of promising blossoms to the final days before harvest when the limbs literally bowed under the fruit load. She taught my mother and me to peel pears, core red delicious apples, bake plums, and can cherries. This generational continuum of skill complemented the maturation of the orchard and over the years our preserving habits improved with the increasing yields of the trees. Although the birth of orchard fruits spanned a short period of time, it bound the honeybees, the wildlife, and the farmers in a universal appreciation for sweet juices and colorful skins. Such symbiosis inspired my family, and we would relax in the summer evenings with a warm piece of apple pie and watch the deer tiptoe across the orchard grass.

Although they enjoyed the orchard, the wildlife was not allowed in the garden. Our protective chocolate lab and yappy cow dog assured the uninterrupted growth of my family's beautiful plot. Stepping just outside our front door in July, one would enter a dense acre of rich leafy greens, covered trellises, and flowers of all varieties. It stood as an accomplishment to garden successfully in North Idaho, and my family's efforts guaranteed a wholesome supper in which everything on one's plate—from the buttercrunch lettuce to the corn on the cob—was freshly picked that afternoon. Thus, fostering the growth of over 20 species of garden plants became a ritualistic ceremony on our farm. However, before any planting could occur, my father first prepared the ground, relying directly on the yields of our dairy cattle—"The exquisite tedium of preparing the garden, plowing in last winter's manure, adding lime, destoning, smoothing with the patience if not the dexterity of frosting a cake" (Kumin 67). Such effort paid off as the tiny seeds opened in the ground, poked through the dark topsoil, and reached toward the big Western sky. The months of June and July focused on continued stewardship—weeding, watering, mulching, laboring-in preparation for harvest. Again it was Grandma Sharer who understood this tender growth cycle most completely. Grandma's incredible patience and love for fresh vegetables inspired my family to devote countless hours to the garden territory. I remember spending entire afternoons, comfortable in a mesh lawn chair, shucking peas with my grandmother, as curious hummingbirds buzzed overhead. In August, after all of the zucchini breads were set out to cool and all of the onions stored away in the cellar, I would load the wheelbarrow with the harvested stalks of summer growth and treat the cattle and swine to a fibrous meal. I can only speculate that the nitrogen of that meal would cycle back the garden soils one day, but more definitely I can state that the intertwined efforts of my family created a pure and healthy experience unique to the family operation.

Beyond the raspberry bush borders of the garden lay the fields of Starcross Dairy. Like an extended leafy moat surrounding our immediate barns and pastures, the alfalfa and wheat fields provided a microcosm of growth that secured my family. In my lifetime, I came to know our field territory more intimately than any other environment. With each round of the swather and with each hay bale thrown on the wagon, the farmer's appreciation and understanding for his or her land intensifies. The practice of raising a crop and feeding the product to livestock vividly displays the inherent ecological processes of farming. John Muir's definition of ecology—"everything is hitched to everything else"—couldn't be truer than on the family farm. Makeshift wire hinges bind recycled machinery parts together, and the entire unit circles the fields, intermixing the summer air, the rainwater, the glacial soils, the essential minerals, and

the sweat of the farmer. Jager illustrates the interconnecting character of the elements in stating: “We hauled the hay that fed the cows that fertilized the fields that grew the grain that thickened the milk that fattened the pigs that supplied the bacon that fed the family that hauled the hay. I suppose all this made hauling hay and spreading manure significant; I don’t recall that it made them fun”(14). As our lush alfalfa forages matured, the crop’s health rested largely in the soil’s mineral content. Therefore, we fertilized and cycled crops every six to seven seasons to replenish the nitrogen levels. As Jager points out, the pressing workload was not always enjoyable. The fields demanded labor priority and evoked a range of feelings from frustration to elation, from disbelief to immense satisfaction. Thankfully, our intimate family operation integrated work and play. I remember exhausted July evenings in which my family, coated with fine hay dust and grease, would pile into the car and drive five miles to Brush Lake, a clear jewel in the Selkirks. The warm surface water, illuminated by moonlight, beckoned our sun burned bodies, and we dove in, blistered hands piercing the stillness. Cleansing mountain water rinsed the dirt from our bodies and numbed our pains, preparing us for another day in the fields. There exists a certain soundness of mind when understanding that one’s hard work and physical toil contribute to a larger ecological cycle. Witnessing the inspiring growth of the fields and preserving the leaves and stalks in bales of nourishment creates an unrivaled, purposeful calm in the heart of the farmer.

A farm’s growth and survival undeniably depends upon the local weather. Located in the Idaho Panhandle, my family’s dairy rested at the mercy of Pacific storm systems distorted by the barrier of the eastern Rocky Mountains. Small-scale effects of the weather included the late spring frosts squelching the life from orchard blossoms, and the morning dews of July and August making it possible to bale previously over-dried hay. However, weather could be greatly magnified, as in 1986, when an early spring thaw coupled with torrential rains and significant creek run-off, transformed the entire valley into a huge mud puddle. Winter wheat suffered, and farmers planted behind schedule as the ground was hypersensitive to tracking and compression. Poet Maxine Kumin writes, “Nothing is to be taken for granted after a winter of below-zero mornings, ice frozen in all the water buckets, the horse’s nostrils rimmed with ice. After north winds that scour and cleanse and punish” (66). Thus the weather cannot be changed-it is an immense, uncontrollable force that tests the farmers’ patience, commitment, and their belief in the land’s resiliency. A weathered farmer, my father learned to gauge the weather, seek trends from year and year, and predict future conditions by way of past experiences. Upon accepting our dependence on the larger force, my family cultivated a faith that allowed us to believe that the weather would complement crop growth and survival. My family’s spirituality was harnessed in the reassurance that the evening Alpenglow would, in turn, welcome each new day’s life giving sunrise; we hoped that each bank of clouds emerging over the Selkirks would provide the essential rains and snow cover for our crops. Such faith in the day and faith in the clouds allowed us to endure and enjoy the natural forces governing our livelihood. As a child, I spoke to these essential clouds. I asked questions-not of God or of Heaven-but of the actual vapor formations to which I attributed my daily existence. Thus even a five-year-old child instinctually realizes that the weather proves to be the ultimate regulator, the ultimate tester, of the farmer.

If weather controls a dairy’s survival, then why did my family have to sell our cattle on a lovely April day? Beyond the influence of natural factors, such as climate and livestock health, farming in the late 20th Century depends on a number of other conditions-most prominently the economic bottom line. Starcross Dairy’s profits lay entirely in milk production. Sweet second crop hay, rich ensilage, pure well water, apple pulp from our orchard, and barley mash from a local brewery all contributed to a perfect frothy product. Our dairy cows had clean stalls, open pastures, hourly grain feedings, and a beautiful view of the mountains. Generational refinement characterized our herd goals just as many “men and women who have spent years developing a top-quality dairy herd, culling, breeding selectively, and tending carefully, [who] are enormously proud of their accomplishment. Their herd is their identity, their pride”(Jager 31). A

farmer's life revolves around the cycles of the herd-the daily continuum of morning and evening milkings; the yearly successions of calving; the passing decades in which one milks the great-granddaughters of original herd members. However, farming in the 1990s does not necessarily provide the long-term security necessary to milk generations of cattle. Overwhelming economic strains such as falling milk prices, increasing milk-shipping rates, and growing debts threaten the survival of family-owned farms. To make ends meet, my father began working part-time, and we investigated alternative careers in the dairy field such as small-scale cheese production and whole milk sales. Yet with each month, savings grew smaller and bills grew larger, and it soon became clear that our endearing red buildings could no longer support a family. On the 27th of April, 1996, we sold our beloved dairy herd to a large milk factory in Southern Idaho. Three days later, Grandma Sharer, a woman who milked cows morning and evening for 40 years and religiously visited Starcross Dairy every summer, passed away.

Jan Goggans states that "people exist in response to their place" (Goggans 1999). As much as immersion in the farm environment shaped my perspectives, I believe my true understanding of ecology arose after my family moved from Starcross Dairy in 1997. I realize that the ecologist and the farmer strive for parallel goals of practicing sound land stewardship and encouraging natural productivity trends. Both integrate species' life cycles with the weather patterns, soil types, and water cycles of an area-whether it be a bioregion or a garden-to foster a symbiotic whole. Applying the integral ecological lessons of farming to my new urban lifestyle not only allowed me to appreciate nature and agriculture more but also allowed an angry heart to accept the tragic endangerment of the family dairy. Since leaving Idaho, my stomach tightens during June rains for I hope the nearby farmers gathered their hay in time. When I sit down to a plate of food, I remember "a parsnip in the ground is a marvel of living chemistry, making sugars and flavors from earth, air, water" (Snyder 184) and eat with appreciation.

As complementary as nature and agriculture may be in the Idaho Panhandle, there exists one area in particular where ecology and farming collide head-on. Under my interpretation, natural selection ensures that the fittest species survive-those species best suited to the natural offerings of the environment and best able to flourish in the face of adversity. Then why does the family farm, an intimate, cohabitative, and non-invasive species perish while larger, more isolated, and environmentally damaging farm factories take root in the modern agricultural scene? Perhaps the reason lies in my linking farm survival to ecology when in fact, ecological does not necessarily imply economical. Tragically, the decline of the family dairy indicates a state of nature in which a mislaid, exotic species replaces an adapted, native species. A society in which the family operation belongs but nevertheless is cast out. Although Starcross Dairy supported and utilized its ecological provisions, this symbiosis failed to render a healthy bottom line economically. Through understanding that my family's farm could not compete in a modern, profit-driven economy, I accept our loss of territory and remember our love for the land.

As sensitive and endearing as the family farm may be, it is undeniably cycling out of the modern agricultural ecosystem. I find it difficult to come to terms with this loss of childhood territory for myself, loss of livelihood and enterprise for my parents, loss of a tender way of life for future generations. However, I realize that I will never lose the lessons gained on the farm. Maturing under the wrinkled, guiding hand of my grandmother and the loving, hopeful eyes of my parents sensitized my personality. I place faith in the larger natural order, whether that is a powerful lightening storm brightening the valley or the surreal glow of the Aurora bathing the Selkirks. But more importantly, I discovered soundness in farm life. I attain a calm-a sense of purpose- when physically sacrificing to a larger, more complex natural cycle. In *Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder writes, "People love to do hard work together and to feel that the work is real; that is to say primary, productive, needed" (119). Whether providing milk, a life-giving, essential food, or harvesting a lush and healthy stand of alfalfa, the farmer flourishes when understanding the ecology of his/her operation. I wish to transfer these integral learnings to a conservation lifestyle-a

lifestyle in which the dirt under my fingernails signifies the sacrifice I give to achieve soundness. A lifestyle in which I dive into a clear, cold mountain lake to rinse my body of purposeful sweat and revive my heart for another day of meaningful, natural work. I vividly remember a section of territory on the border of Starcross Dairy where the orchard grass merged with the forest floor and the alfalfa gave way to wild rose bushes and ferns. This precious transition zone housed the farm cemetery. Kittens, rabbits and chicks, buried by the hands of a little girl, were reborn in the hopeful spirit of the tiger lily. These intricate wildflowers, striving for sunshine and calm, covered the cemetery and soothed the pain. I realize that I am the tiger lily. Nourished by the soils and souls of Starcross Farm, I now grow toward a more ecological purpose in life. I carry with me the tenderness of birth, the invigoration of growth, the reality of death, and regenerate for the future.

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