On Leaving the Midwest

On warm spring days in Iowa the breeze carries the rich, dense odors of fertilizer and pesticide into town, and on those days I almost believe that the entire state is one giant machine-farm, cranking out food for the nation and the world.

I arrived in Iowa from New Mexico two years ago during a long stretch of fierce August heat. I drove through cornfields shimmering in dusty air, shriveling for lack of rain. Now that I'm coming to the end of my time here, the weather has once again turned summery, bringing me full circle. In three weeks I'll be gone.

During the last two years I haven't explored the Midwest as much as I would have liked. School has kept me in town much of the time, but there have been opportunities and I have passed them up. In fact, I am wary of what I see when I venture outside the comfortable confines of Iowa City. Driving to Chicago or Milwaukee (as I have done several times), I am intimidated by the extent to which the land is used and by the sheer intensity of that use. There is no nonsense in this landscape, and the message is clear:

Farming is not only serious business, but also big business.

"Thimet beats Dyfonate." "Buctril—The buck stops here." "Lasso, the Yield Protector." Those ads don't run on television in other parts of the country, and I watch them here in fascination. Some of them are amusing—a gallon container of Lexone DF sucking up various broad-leafed weeds, for example—while others try the folksy approach, like the nice-looking man in khaki pants and plaid shirt extolling the virtues of Lorsban 16G. Still they make me uneasy. The assumption is that there is no alternative to chemically based agriculture and that yield-per-acre should be the farmer's only consideration.

"Food is a weapon," former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz said, meaning that we should use our ability to produce and export it to have our way with the world. Perhaps he is right. Perhaps I am naive to think that food is for feeding hungry people and that farming is essentially the loving husbandry of the land. Perhaps I shouldn't get upset when I read about small farmers going bankrupt and other farmers being paid not to grow crops or to grow only certain crops or to let certain crops rot in the field.

I know little about methods of farming and even less about the political and economic variables that confront (and confound) farmers today. What I do know is that I can feed myself well for about $100 per month and that as malnutrition becomes a well-publicized global problem, food remains a remarkable bargain in this country. And I know that I am beginning to be suspicious of our unnatural luxury.

I will leave the Midwest not much more informed about these matters than when I arrived. I regret my ignorance. I wish I could speak authoritatively about what has

happened to American agriculture in the last fifty years. I wish I could support with facts and argument what I am beginning to suspect: that the creation of agribusiness—the industry of agriculture—is related to the perverse use of power that has, during the same period of time, characterized American foreign policy.

In three weeks I'll return home to New Mexico, finished with my studies here. I'll leave the Midwest with at least an increased awareness of the role of agriculture in modern American life, of its importance in the world today. Earl Butz was right after all, I'm afraid: Whatever else it may be, food is a weapon, an instrument of foreign policy, leverage on the world.

Along the Rio Grande in New Mexico agriculture isn't so technical or efficient. There, Pueblo Indians still live and farm the way they have for centuries, hand-planting kernels of corn, cultivating their crops with wooden sticks, and praying to the sacred kachinas to bring them enough rain. The Pueblo Indians do not export corn and they do not let it rot in the fields, but even they labor under the shadow of Los Alamos.

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