



Lisa Laughlin
Body and Field

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I did not go out of my way to work on my family's farm until it became clear I'd be losing it. The dryland wheat that was our living had been seeded by my great-grandfather. He came to the sage-riddled middle of Washington state and learned the rhythm of the land, claiming

ground under the Homestead Act. My father and uncle were sons of sons who had studied the seasons and methods developed by their fathers—when to plant, when to harvest, when to let the arid ground rest in fallow. They learned to weather the Columbia Basin summers and winters, learned not to blink when a sudden spring storm tore seeds from field rows, transforming the hard-turned land to an unfertile scab. My family did little but blink when my younger brother, the only male in my generation, became allergic to wheat. We still lived with the myth of the land—that it would all go on as it had. That, like the wheat, we could transcend the hardness of the place.

Because my father, now 60, has knuckles warped from hard labor—because one of my earliest memories is walking up his back as he lay on the floor to alleviate his pain, because he hobbles through the grocery store with a worn-out hip—it's easy for me to believe that he never wanted my brother and me to work on the farm, that he wanted to spare us. He's suffered one too many thunderstorm heartbreaks, backaches, and bruises. He has battered his body against the land and come out, most years, just above even. He did not teach us to drive a manual when we were 12, the age he learned. He did not teach us how to weld broken plows or navigate the panel of buttons on his John Deere tractor. He tried to push us away from the hard work and heartbreak. We fell in love with the place anyway.

We learned intimate, impractical things. We learned where to step as our father moved sprinklers in a muddy field under a full moon. We learned how to press and roll a single head of wheat in our palms, mimicking the movement of a combine, and to blow gently to separate chaff from grain. We learned to shake our fists, as our father did, at storm clouds in July, when the wheat was so dry a sudden rain would shatter grain to the ground, lost to field mice or sparrows. We learned that sometimes this shattering was natural—that you won some and lost some, that the land could restore itself, and that, when it didn't, there was crop insurance.

It didn't feel natural for our family to break off and leave. It was clear that all the things my brother and I had learned about the place would soon be irrelevant. The land my great-grandfather fought so hard to tame would no longer be our family joy and burden. It felt like stepping away from a sculpture a relative began carving long ago with great care; we were setting down the chisel, with the knowledge we'd never see the final form.

Last summer I lived in a city in an apartment with no grass. My father began to talk about his

retirement date in single-digit years. His pronouncements startled me. I saw them as the beginning of the end. I asked him, for the first time, if I could drive a wheat truck. I wanted to understand the mourning I felt for a place that was not yet gone. I think I told my father something like, *I need a job*. He said yes. During the three-week harvest I'd spot trucks, meaning I'd shuffle a series of wheat trucks into line for the combine. I'd place full trucks up front, empties in back, and rotate with the schedule of truck drivers who ferried grain out of the field to the grain bin.

Spotting trucks was a task I had witnessed many times; like everything else on our farm, I was equipped only with the experience of an observer. When my mother took us to the field to visit our father, I would bum a ride from my cousin Alissa, who was much older than me and a seasoned truck spotter. I would slurp a can of Minute Maid Lemonade as she grinded gears and bumped over field furrows. She worked to align the long, metal truck beds, anticipating the angle that would best suit the combine when it arrived the next round to unload. I asked insightful questions, like, *Does the radio work?*

When I agreed to take on the task of truck spotting at 25 years old, I realized I was the most outsider any insider could be—a farmer's daughter who loved the land, yet knew little of the practice. When I shipped home to the dust-blown basalt flats of my childhood to start wheat harvest, I was thrilled, but also anxious. I knew only in theory how to drive a stick shift.

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Driving a wheat truck in a dryland field in July is not a glamorous job. It is dusty, hot and dry. The field crew wear heavy jeans, despite the 100-degree days. Horned toads curl up for shade under the brush. Even the crows, slick shimmers on heat waves, seem tired of the place.

The dust is only an issue if you notice it. I notice it when it mimics smoke as it curls up and drifts behind the tracks of a field truck on a gravel road, how it snakes behind the truck for miles in all that flat, open land, thick and billowy until it rises up and loses resolve. I notice the dust when my fingers leave prints on the handle of my lunch box, my water jug, and the book I've brought to read between truck loads. I notice it when I blow my nose into a handkerchief

that was my grandfather's, then father's, then mine: by mid-morning, I'll make mud snot. By the

end of the day, I'll have little clean room on my handkerchief. I'll wonder at the state of my lungs. Then I'll wonder more at the state of my father's lungs. He's had hours and days and months and years of mud snot. He's had a lifetime of wheat chaff swirling and scratching into the soft lining of his lungs.

My grandfather, my father's Dad, died of lung cancer. It's most reasonable to believe he died from all the smoking; during harvest, especially, he chain-smoked from the first puff of the combine to the setting sun. I know the cigarettes were responsible for his last few grating gasps, but I can't help but imagine he may have also died, in part, from the land—all those years of mud snot and chaff. It seems believable that the land my family worked took as greatly as it gave.

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One week of working harvest had me thinking of my own body's relationship to the land. I had a hard question to ask—how did my body, and self, fit into the land I had viewed as permanent, land that I was now losing access to? If I could figure out how I existed in that space, perhaps I could learn how to craft an identity outside of it, when the time came.

The heat was unexpected. I drank nearly a gallon of water each day, and each night I went home feeling sucked-dry dehydrated. My body had a hard time keeping up. Each day in the field—when I'd lined the trucks and was waiting for the combine or the next driver to arrive—I hugged the shade near the metal sides of the truck beds. Each day at noon, the shade slipped smartly underneath.

I sat under a truck—only slightly, crouching below the overhanging metal bed—just once; I was told by one of the men who was used to the field and the heat and the large weight of metal that it was dangerous to sit directly behind or in front of a truck. Something might give. The truck might roll. It was a risk that dehydrated-me was eager to take anyway: the bigger problem, it seemed, was that my own body might give. Noon was when I felt most like the land was against me—the sun shimmer-glared in a way that made even the sagebrush suck up its shadows. Noon was when I felt most aware that I was stuck in some flux of land and heat, that I was as subject to the elements as a simple slab of basalt. Noon was when I felt most like pouting.

It was easiest to convince myself I loved the job of truck spotting when there was shade. It's a job that's easy to love when you are driving windows-open down a hill on a gravel road at sunset. It's a job that's easy to love when there's a taste of dusk in the air—the palatable coolness that floods the land as soon as the sun backs off. It's a job I can love when it's nearly finished, but that's how I came prepared to love it: it was a job with an expiration date. I knew I was at risk for romanticizing it.

I did not think I would miss the frayed seat cushions that scratched every time I made a sudden move. I did not think I would miss the many bruises I gave myself throughout the three weeks of my first wheat harvest—metal truck door against shin, against the soft inside of my elbows, against the curves around my kneecaps. Each one of these transgressions made me marvel at my body: how tender-burnt in the sun, how vulnerable to sharp metal edges, how clumsy in my spatial perception of self. I cannot tell you, even now, how I bruised my ribs and hipbones. But I can tell you that I miss it, and that I find this confusing.

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Being out in the field was a job that made my body come second. There was no air conditioning to retreat to when my lips cracked from the sun. There were no spare tubes of chapstick or sunscreen or cool cloths to refresh my skin. My bruises, if noticed at all, were taken in stride when my hand-held radio was crackling, when the combine rolled up over the hill with a full load of wheat, when there was a task that was bigger than myself at hand. I took stock of the bruises each night in the shower. Each one made me feel a bit more aware of how I inhabited my skin.

That summer, I was the only woman in the field. I was afraid, at first, that I would not be physically strong enough for the job. My field mates consisted of older men, each of whom I perceived as tougher than me. Our truck driver Greg was an ex-Marine officer in his 50s who had served in Afghanistan. Our other driver, Bean, had been a mechanic at the Hanford Nuclear plant. Our grain pit manager, Lewis, was 72, and had recently survived breaking half of his ribs in a snowmobile accident—he talked lightly of how the doctor said it looked as if his ribs had been filleted. I was slim, and underweight for my height according to medical charts. The greatest toughness I could claim was long-distance running, and that was something self-inflicted, a kind of vanity in a land of necessity.

I had strength enough to keep up when people were looking. Other times, I maneuvered my body to make up for weaknesses. One wheat truck in particular had a tough-to-open door handle. It was the metal button underneath the handle that stuck, the small square one had to push in to pull the door open. By mid-week, the joint and lower muscle of my thumb felt sprained. Each time I had to struggle with the driver's side door—the square button on the other door of the cab was already broken off, inaccessible by even the male farmhands unless they carried around a stick to trip the handle. By the end of the week, I was putting all my weight behind two curled knuckles to open the door and move the truck on time.

When I was the only body visible in the field—when the driver had left with a full load, and my uncle's combine had disappeared—I resorted to crawling up and into the truck cab through the window. One of the drivers left the window half-opened or completely down, so I was lucky. Our other driver, a bit more meticulous, always rolled up the windows to prevent chaff from blowing in and dirtying the cab. When he drove the truck into the field, I was up against the door handle whether anyone was around or not.

Even when I had the chance to wriggle through the open window, issues arose. Half-opened was especially difficult, because I could not put too much weight on the glass. Breaking a window was something I cringed to imagine. (Dad: How, again, did you shatter the truck window? My sheepish answer: My thumb hurt too bad to open the door handle.) In order to get inside the cab to move the truck into line before the combine, full of grain, appeared again, I climbed up onto the roof of the truck cab. This in itself was a series of stretched-out steps: running board then bottom bed railing, door handle then top bed railing. From the top of the cab, I could lower my dusty tennis shoes inside through the open window. The move required a neat lower body twist, as I began lowering into the cab facing away from the truck, and ended trying not to scrape off my chin on the top metal of the window frame. The maneuver, in retrospect, is probably how I acquired my oddly-placed hip bruises.

Instances like the window heist only heightened the sense that a major part of my job was body versus truck. And there was plenty of evidence of body versus truck that had come before me—my father still had a faint, shining scar on his forearm from the muffler of a wheat truck. Each time I moved a truck, whether two feet or two miles, it was my responsibility to check underneath the truck for lodged straw (an instant fire hazard). When the wheat stubble straw—brittle and dry from so many sun-soaked days—made contact with the muffler, it was my job to wiggle quickly, belly on dust, over sharp straw to dislodge it. My father told me

before my first day of work to mind my head—a muffler burn to the forehead would likely leave a permanent mark. Even keeping my head down, the stubble sliced my skin once or twice when I had to pull straw from the earth to clear the muffler. My fingers were left with a series of cuts, as if I'd run my hands along a five-blade shaving razor.

I felt less ashamed when our truck driver Greg cut his hand clearing muffler straw, too. The stubble cut his finger so deeply that my father had to stop working and drive back to the farmhouse for a Band-Aid. Greg was embarrassed at the interruption, though he needed something for the bleeding. It was the attitude we all adopted in the field: we bruised and battered our bodies against the land, but tried not to acknowledge it. Admitting the bruising and battering would be one way of admitting that sometimes the land won. The mind couldn't register the body breaking down, for risk of breaking down itself. The bruises were evidence of our impermanence, a thing we were set on ignoring so we could continue to believe our work would sustain us.

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The only immediate grievance I claimed was one based on sex. As a truck spotter, I was one of two people who stayed in the field from the hour we started cutting till the combine stopped its header at day's end. The wheat truck drivers moved wheat from the field to a grain bin at my uncle's farmhouse, which gave them access to refill water jugs and use the restroom. My father drove a combine like my uncle, but often went back to the farmhouse to order parts, make insurance calls, or check the level of grain in the bin. My 62-year-old uncle ran his combine all day long, eating a sandwich as he drove with one knee, swigging coffee from a thermos as he nudged the header on track. The difference between me and my uncle came when I needed to pee.

I had to keep a careful mental log of where the men were at and when they were due back to the field to snag an opportunity to pee. The drivers alternated trucks, which, when things ran smoothly, meant I'd have little to no time alone in the field. Almost as soon as Greg drove out of the field with a full truck, Bean would arrive with an empty one. And, unlikely as it seemed as we were miles from any town, stray pickup trucks would drive the gravel roads around our field at random. I was the only one with the awkward task of squatting behind a wheat truck tire. I packed my own toilet paper in my lunch box.

My uncle, who was always in a field with me, only sometimes disappeared with his combine. Other times, he made flat rounds of cutting. I could watch him pick up an entire load from a single spot in the field, which meant I had no privacy. I normally took the opportunity to pee if it was only him and me in the field, banking on the fact he'd be focused on the wheat, or facing away from me. More than once I went to squat and jumped upright when I saw a plume of dust on the horizon, signaling the approach of some vehicle. My uncle peed off the balcony of his combine, ten feet in the air, without a worry.

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I didn't have many women bodies to compare to. My mother had never worked out in the field. My uncle's wife brought out cool cans of Coca Cola every once in a while, but she did not stay for hours in the heat and dust. My other aunt—my dad and uncle's sister, the one who had grown up in the same farmhouse I had—had been betrayed by her body. For years she drove trucks despite the arthritis she'd had since childhood. Her hands, her knees, her neck did not bend as they should have, and still she got trucks in place on time, in a perfect line. I had never taken the time to ask her about the work, perhaps because I knew that for her it was a strange mix of pain and joy.

I had female cousins who had worked the summer job of truck spotter before me, but all that remained in the field from their time were stories. The dent in truck Number 7's fender was from the summer my cousin Alissa accidentally backed up too far. There were still finger-oil drawings on the faded paint sides of the truck beds from when we were small: a cat with whiskers, a smile. They were our finger-paint attempts at ownership. Just last summer I retraced the whiskers of the cat on the truck bed, and remembered I'd been scolded for drawing it, because it would last.

Even my grandmother, the woman of the homestead in the 1950s, told me her job was to make lunch and dinner for the men each day. She gave birth to my father in early August, and my grandfather learned he had a son when he came in from the field for lunch and she wasn't there. If the women in my family were marked by their presence, they were marked just as notably by their absence.

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On the whole I couldn't complain. My body developed a give and take with the land, the heat, and the truck metal. My thumb recovered from the stiff door handle. Eventually, I drank enough water so my pee was clear each night.

I was embarrassed only when I had to ask Lewis, the man managing the intake auger of our grain bin, to help me pull the Power Take Off knob on the dash of my wheat truck. The PTO knob lifted the truck bed to dump grain out from a small grate in the back. After backing the truck up to the auger—a feat I considered no small miracle on my part, having recently remembered to put in the clutch whenever I held down the brake—Lewis held the bed-up sign, a thumb-up. My bed did not go up. He emphasized his thumb-up with a wiggle. He was ready for me to start dumping wheat. I tried pulling the PTO knob with one arm, two arms, my whole body, and still it would not budge. Lewis abandoned his thumb-up and walked slowly up to my cab door. I stepped out of the truck and he pulled the knob with ease.

The thing about my female body in the field was that it seemed no one really expected it to belong there. The men I worked with gave me room to try, but kept an eye out for failure. I deeply appreciated their watchfulness—how Bean walked over wordlessly from his truck cab when I could not start a cold truck, when I was at the front of the line and holding everyone up. I was grateful for how he checked in on our hand-held radio when I killed a truck with a clumsy attempt to shift to fourth gear. I could tell he was being gentle when he was ambiguous in asking if I was all right: the hand-held radios operated via an open communication channel, and every man in our operation, including my father, was tuned to the same frequency. Bean didn't ask me why I stalled, or why I looked so panicked, because the question would have been heard by everyone in the field. Maybe I was the only one aware of how small my body felt behind the wheel of a multi-ton truck.

I thrived under that protection and help, but sensed sometimes it was a complicated kindness. I was new at the job, and perhaps the men knew I had a great learning curve ahead of me. Perhaps they were trying to cushion the fact that I was the farmer's daughter who could hardly manage a manual, for my father's sake. It did not escape me that these men were teaching me my paternal family's way of living—something other people learned from a grandparent, perhaps, or internalized when they were young. The kindness from these men felt, at times, like an affront, as if they were explaining a task they'd explained many times before, and thought by now should be a bit obvious. There was nothing to blame for this feeling but

circumstance. It was a feeling of not belonging in a place I knew I should have.

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If my female body would have betrayed me in some way—if I would have passed out from dehydration, or simply given in to my muscles that quivered from exhaustion sometimes—it would have been assumed the job was too tough for me. When a man's body lost to the land, it felt like a bigger betrayal. Which is to say I think my younger brother had it hardest.

My brother was twelve when he sat cracking sunflower seeds in the cab of a wheat truck with an open door, as he had many times before. He was twelve when the chaff was suddenly too much—when his throat swelled in the thick heat and the hives appeared like sudden burn marks. His stomach cramped so badly he could not move from a fetal position on the ground. The family doctor declared he was gluten intolerant. Even though there were other children in our family, he was the only male, and his allergy felt like the end of something bigger.

When my brother finally made it his mission to confront the field—when, as a high schooler, he became determined to give wheat harvest a go—it took a heavy combination of allergy pills, shots, and nose spray for him to walk around in the land. Some days, it still was not enough. He completed his job as a wheat truck driver, and even did the same the following summer, but it had become clear when his body first betrayed him that he would not take over my father's role. It was something unspoken, but evident as autumn's first frost. Just last month my brother graduated from college with an engineering degree. He traded our great-grandfather's hard-earned tips and tricks for mathematical equations, a graduate career. Nothing, it seemed, was to blame for this; many kids were leaving farms, seeking out the promised land of education. The land, like a body left behind, lay quiet.

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Maybe because I remembered the series of betrayals before me—betrayals of family bodies, of men and women losing to the land in a series of internal and external extremes—I was glad to let my body suffer that summer. I took the razor-sharp stubble cuts, the bruises, the sweat and stress in stride. I realized the breaking down of my body was one way to establish order: I was weaker than steel. I was stronger than the no-shade hours. I was small against

the endless rows of wheat, but so were the field mice and the coyotes and the crows. My body existed, like theirs, temporarily but surely in place.

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