ERIC’S ANNUAL ROUTE always starts in Texas because that is where American wheat first ripens. The crew will follow the wheat belt north as it continues to mature; the wheat ripens at a rate of about twenty miles a day. Over the years, Eric has built up relationships with farmers who own land in each of the seven states, and they all work on the assumption that he is coming to cut their crops. Each year the arrangements are made on a handshake; there are no paper contracts.

For harvest this year, Eric is traveling with Emily and Juston. His older son, Winston, usually accompanies him, too, but his wife is expecting a new child, and he will stay home in Pennsylvania with her. Two other family members are with the harvest crew: Bradford and Bethany, who are brother and sister, are Eric’s nephew and niece. Bradford is twenty-two and Bethany will turn twenty while on the road. The others are young men from the community back home. Competition to get into Eric’s crew is fierce, and most of these boys will have called a year in advance for an interview and a chance to participate. Rain or shine, they will be paid a daily flat fee, and will be fed, housed, and given a chance to see the United States. This year there is Luther, the oldest at twenty-five; Michael, who is twenty-two; Samuel, who is also twenty-two; and Amos, who is twenty-three. This is the first year that a woman has been part of the group; Bethany and I will share a trailer that Eric purchased.

A few days before I arrive, Eric drove 1,400 miles with his crew, from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to Hydro, Oklahoma, where a friend and fellow harvester, Dwayne, lives. The combines and tractors were all ferried on the backs of flatbeds hauled by semitrucks. Eric dissuaded me from making this drive, and asked me instead to fly to the Will Rogers World Airport in Oklahoma City, where I pick up a rental car, a “small SUV” that still feels larger than anything I’m used to. I drive through a heavy rainstorm, and after it passes, I see a rainbow in my rearview mirror.
Eric has given me directions. I thought that when I asked for a landmark, he would direct me to something like a McDonald’s in town, but he does not choose a place whose logo juts obtrusively out of the land. His instructions imply a faith in my powers of observation. He has told me to “look for a bridge where there’s work being done,” and that once I see the bridge, I will see two combines. Along the way, I pass signs for Halliburton, Hobby Lobby, and Trump-Pence. And then I turn off the interstate, and there is the bridge with yellow tape and there are the combines set up on trailers, attached to two semitrucks. The rigs are parked on a farmer’s gravel lot, by an unused barn. The rain has now completely passed and the combines gleam in the sun, a glossy, confident red against the green-and-gold landscape.

Each combine costs anywhere from about $250,000 to $350,000. With its hydraulic lift and changeable header, a combine is about as close to a Transformer as you will find in the real world. Each one weighs nearly thirty thousand pounds, which means it must be carefully placed on the back of a semitruck to be hauled across the country. All the different pieces of harvesting equipment are a bit like pieces of a puzzle, with space at a premium. To accommodate three combines, four headers, a tractor, three grain hoppers, and a grain cart, all of which must be loaded onto four semitrucks, Eric has devised different ways to transport each configuration. One truck has a combine and a hopper behind it, and another has a combine with a hopper and two headers fitted inside; the header is the knife of the combine and the part that cuts the wheat. This particular hauling method requires that the combine face forward, and when I arrive, Juston is wrapping the front windshield with a thick plastic sheet for protection. “One rock,” Eric says, “and that glass shatters into a million pieces. And it’s miserable cutting without a windshield.”

It is decided that Juston will drive me into the camp where the trailer houses are. This will happen a lot over the course of the spring and summer: the men will do the driving. There are practical reasons for how and why this happens: I often do not know where I am going, and the men do. Juston also jokes to me that I am about eight years old in farm years. The age is not chosen arbitrarily: ten is about when kids start to drive tractors, and I cannot truly drive a tractor.

Juston chats happily. “It’s been a while since I’ve driven a passenger car,” he says. “It feels so small.” There is something about the way he con-
fidently zips along these country roads that makes me feel as though, in his capable hands, the SUV has shrunk to the size of a roller coaster car.

Juston attends a Christian university in Pennsylvania, where he is majoring in English. He is tall, good-looking, and a little bit brooding, with a fuzzy beard, mustache, and blond hair of an indeterminate texture and length because he keeps it hidden under a Wheeler Brothers Grain cap at almost all times. Juston’s smiles are slow to form, and always feel genuine because they are so hard-won. He has an inward quality, and by his own admission needs time to himself to recharge after being out in the world.

There is a hole in his ear where he wears an earring when he isn’t on harvest, and we occasionally joke that his true identity is as a hipster. But this is merely a joke, because he is no hipster. He’s the son of a farmer who never went to college, which makes Juston a bridge between worlds. He likes language and the analysis of ideas in a way I find comforting and familiar, while his fellow farmers often tease him about his “college talk.”

Now we are driving onto Dwayne’s property. A bonfire is burning slabs of wood and tree branches. “That’s how we get rid of trash in the country,” Juston says. There are some men—boys, really—working on a truck in the lot, and they stare as we park. They are slim and fit and they all wear jeans and boots. They are a version of the boys I have seen year after year in Nebraska who come to cut our wheat. All are white, and they avert their gazes; farm boys are shy.

Juston has explained to them that I am a writer. “I hope you don’t mind,” he says, chuckling. “I told them you were from San Francisco. And one of them asked, ‘You mean, like, she’s a Democrat?’”

“Oh my God,” I say. Then I remind myself I need to stop saying “Oh my God” this summer. “I mean, Oh my . . .”

“. . . word.”

“Oh my word,” I say.

“I told ’em . . . I said . . . ‘It’s not like she’s the only Democrat!’” Juston laughs with glee.

After he parks the car, I move my things into my trailer and then go to see Emily, who has been waiting to greet me by the door of her trailer. She says that it is time for dinner. Emily has cooked dinner for both crews—Eric’s men and Dwayne’s men—because Dwayne’s wife, Carrie, has been busy with her girls, one of whom is graduating from
high school. Even though Emily has prepared everything in her trailer, we will be eating in Dwayne’s house. “We use houses when we can,” Emily explains.

Dinner is a large affair—so many people at the table. On the menu that night: a chicken casserole, Waldorf salad, and chocolate éclairs for dessert. There will always be dessert.

There is no alcohol and will be no alcohol all summer. The crews often come from families that have Old World habits, which involve saving water and avoiding baths, and so, in addition to the no-alcohol rule, Eric and Emily insist that their crew must shower.

Emily shoos me into the area where the adults are sitting. Dwayne has an idiosyncratic accent I have never heard before, and Juston explains to me that he sounds like he is from southern Oklahoma. Carrie is a sort of superefficient and terrifyingly talented woman from Oklahoma City, and her accent seems more typically Southern. Carrie is good at everything. Her house is spotless. There is always enough soap. She makes the best brownies (from scratch), and her daughters are well dressed and have good manners and do everything well at 4-H, and one has earned a scholarship to college.

The conversation takes off when the men start to compare their combines. Eric uses something called Case International Harvesters, which are red, while Dwayne uses Gleaners, which are silver. The defenders of the Gleaner claim it cuts a clean sample, by which they mean it doesn’t crack the grain.

“Does it?” I ask.

“Well.” Dwayne tosses his head. “Yes!” He leans into the phrasing of his answer as though to indicate that there is a hidden layer of meaning behind what he says and perhaps even behind my question. I feel terribly out of place.

And then, exhausted, I go to the trailer and change into my pajamas, climb into my bunk, and fall asleep.

In the morning, we caravan to Texas.

The entire procession of vehicles—all seven configurations—is tightly secured on flatbeds and trailers, and each assembly now noses out of the parking lot by the anonymous farmer’s barn and heads out for the start of the great American wheat harvest. The longest configuration is
so long, Luther is unable to make the right-hand turn to get onto the freeway, and swerves left into town, where he will do a series of turns until the truck is facing the right way.

Emily rides with me so I don’t get lost. We pause on top of a slight crest to catch a view of the trucks proceeding one by one. “When harvest begins,” Emily says to me, “they start out as boys, but go home as men.”

We drive and drive. After we cross the Red River Valley, the earth bleeds red, as though we have punctured the country, which is only now releasing her deepest secrets for us.

I admire the way the mesquite stands silhouetted starkly against the sky, and how its distinct black lines are echoed in the carved and arched shapes of the wrought iron signs and brands hanging outside the entrance to every ranch we pass. Each cemetery has its own clear sign also fashioned of metal and framed against the blue heavens. Pioneer names etched into marble leap out of tombstones and declare the dead. This is a landscape absent of extraneous communication, by which I mean advertising. Words seem to matter more, and to be used more sparingly as a result.

I spot unfamiliar birds and vegetation. There are succulent cacti with golden flowers, now in full bloom. I wonder if the yellow rose of Texas is this yellow cactus, but when I look up the term, I learn that a yellow rose is a yellow girl, meaning a biracial girl. I wonder if I qualify.

The scissor-tailed flycatcher is featured on the license plate of Oklahoma—it is the official state bird—but I see it all over Texas, fluttering from telephone wires to bushes and over to barbed wire fences, dragging along an impractically long tail, forked like a rattlesnake’s tongue. It is as if someone took a sensible bird and added to it a repressed desire for whimsy, embodied in the guise of this unnaturally long tail. The flycatcher has a white head, and hints of peach that might be tangerine under its black wings. Every bird is different: some are darker, some smaller, some more gray than black. But intelligent caviar eyes stare out of each bird’s slightly pyramid-shaped head, and I start to think that the scissor-tailed flycatcher is a key to understanding Texas, a state that appears so rough-and-tumble, but that has room for something so charming.

“Turtle!” Emily points. “They say when there is a turtle and a snake on the road, it means there will be rain.”
I am disappointed not to have seen a turtle. There are no turtles in the wild where I live.

A moment later I see a snake. “Snake!” I say.

“Let’s don’t tell Eric,” Emily says, a little somberly.

We are 1,476 feet above sea level and on the High Plains, an arid stretch of the North American continent that, though flat, is elevated due to the upthrust of the Rocky Mountains to the west, the same way a tent pole yanks up canvas to transform flat fabric into an A. This is partly why the plains farther west—closer to the mountains—are higher than the plains to the east. In farming terms, this western land is used for “dryland” farming, which is another way of saying the crops are not irrigated by a sprinkler system but depend on the grace of rain clouds releasing moisture.

We are in Crowell, Texas, the “wild hog capital of the world,” about two hundred miles northwest of Fort Worth, and eighty miles west of Archer City, which cinephiles know as the setting for the film version of Larry McMurtry’s *The Last Picture Show*. Small, dusty, and ramshackle Thalia (population 193), eleven miles due east of Crowell, was retroactively named after the fictional town of Thalia featured in McMurtry’s books.

Crowell is also the county seat, though you might not immediately pick up on its status. Begin, first, with the population, which was 840 in 2016, and 1,016 in 2006. Populations are often on the decline in the towns where we will stay. Texas is a football state, to which the popularity of the show *Friday Night Lights* attests, and this means each Texas town is supposed to have its own team. But Crowell’s population is so small, it cannot field the twelve players needed. Crowell has compensated for this deficiency by coming up with a six-person football team, something small towns in Texas do; they call it “six-man football.” In 2014, the Crowell Wildcats won the six-man football state championship. This fact is repeated to me often.

There is a square in the center of town. I have seen many town squares—in Brussels, Sonoma, New York City. There is a dignity to a square in the middle of a town, and my first impression is that Crowell is hardly holding on to its own. The buildings are slightly dilapidated. In the middle of the square is an ochre brick building, which in places reveals its original rust color; has the sun bleached the bricks? War
memorials pop up around the town hall with the names of all the local veterans. Emily tells me the town hall is where we will go if there is a tornado.

In every town, Eric has an arrangement with either an RV park or a farmer who can house us in a spare lot. In Crowell, we stay in an RV park, a gravel-covered area with allotted campsites for large vehicles. Each campsite comes with its own picnic table and firepit. We can also hook up electricity, water, and sewage. The combines and trucks are parked south of town by the grain elevator.

We are the first ones here for harvest. There are no other combines or crews, and Eric is proud to be first. It means he is ready. It used to be that dozens of harvesters came to town. There was so much custom work that the town's excitement was palpable in a sign that read “Welcome Harvesters!” This year there is no sign.

Over the course of thirty years of custom harvesting, Eric has watched such towns die one by one. It is a point he makes to me repeatedly. Eric and Emily observe as we drive along that a movie theater was built here and the drive-in theater went away; a Walmart came and people moved here for jobs; the Walmart went to the town next door and the town died. With all these changes, the people—especially the young people—have fled, though the fields in the Great Plains have remained.

Farmland is disappearing in the United States. From 1982 to 2007, more than 23 million acres of agricultural land were converted to developments, with Texas, California, and Florida leading the list of states shedding arable land. Fields located closest to urban centers are vanishing the fastest, as they offer the most convenient land for new malls, offices, and housing. Also, these fields are often the most productive, and people tend to settle down in a location where they can make food.

Everyone needs to eat.

Juston takes me into town to buy boots and a hat. Farmers wear baseball caps. This is because they are often in pickups and other vehicles for long stretches of time, requiring them to lean back against a headrest, and the wide brim of a cowboy hat gets in the way. All the same, I get a cowboy hat because I am concerned about the sun. In his later years, my father had noncancerous growths removed from his head,
and Eric has been by told by doctors to wear a wide-brimmed hat and to cover his ears.

The shop is cramped, with the feel of a secondhand store crammed with mismatched merchandise. There are racks of one-off utilitarian shirts, pants, and shoes. There are artifacts from the past, abandoned farming gear haphazardly attached to the walls: scythes, knives, horseshoes, and objects I don’t recognize. Eric would. There are old suspenders with silver buckles for sale in a glass case. There is an odd assortment of uncategorized books. The newest item—just in!—is jewelry made in Mexico.

On a wooden sign on the wall is this ditty: “Feeling tired, worn-out and abused, this is the place. Join us. Get amused! By all means sit and tell us something new! Have a cup of coffee from us to you!” Below this are numerous photographs of customers in the shop and in town. I am told that if I come early in the morning, around 8:30, I can sit with the old-timers and talk about the way the town used to be.

The majority of goods a human might need are here in the general store. There are a limited number of cowboy boots and field boots; the crew wears field boots. Try as I might, I can’t get anyone to clearly explain the distinctions between the two kinds of boots. It’s as if we are talking about the difference between jazz and other forms of music: you know it when you see it. To my layman’s eye, it seems the cowboy boot is stylized, often with a heel and an angled if not a downright pointed toe. A field boot has a lower heel, often a lower shaft, and is made to be slipped on and off easily. But there are exceptions.

There are few options in my size. There are few options for women at all. But Juston and I find a pair of men’s boots in a size seven. They are caramel and black and handmade in Mexico. If I wear two pairs of socks, my feet fit inside.

“Truth is, you want ’em loose,” Juston says.

In Oklahoma City we will visit a proper Western shop, Juston says. This will have to do for now.

Juston and I have quickly established an easy rapport. For years, it seemed, he was a small, shy child, driving his father’s tractor during wheat harvest and barely able to make eye contact or muster a hello. At one point, Eric and Emily told me proudly that Juston wanted to be a
pastor. I had run into him every now and then and then at his home, and more recently at Winston’s wedding.

Then one day, perhaps a year ago, Juston picked me up from the train station when I came to Pennsylvania to visit his family. The young boy was now a man. And he seemed to be angry about something. I feared he resented having to drive me from the Amtrak station in Philadelphia all the way to Lancaster County. He was so tense, I finally asked: “Are you . . . upset about something?”

“I’m afraid my people will ruin this election.”

There was a lot here to unpack. “Your people?” I asked. “You mean . . . white people?”

“You don’t know?” he asked, smiling as if he felt both surprised and a little sorry for me. Then he took what I have come to call a “Wolgemuth pause.” Wolgemuth is his family’s last name. As his father does, Juston thinks before he speaks—though he talks a lot more than Eric. “We are evangelical Christians, Marie.”

“You are? You’re sure?” I didn’t even definitively know what an evangelical Christian was.

He was quiet again, as though running my question through a data-processing bank to reconfirm. Then he nodded. “Yes. Technically, we are evangelicals. Yes.”

And then our conversations began.

He revealed to me that he felt as if he was raised in a Star Trek–worthy simulator, by which he meant a conservative groupthink strain of Christianity. Since that trip, he has been sharing his most profound thoughts with me, and his most intellectually capacious school papers about God.

Beyond the obvious differences in our backgrounds—I am forty-six and he is twenty-two—I was surprised by how quickly I felt a kinship with him. We have kept up a correspondence, and we talk about God as the thing that anchors all of Juston’s beliefs and doubts.

Among the major religions, I’m most familiar with Buddhism, and I had originally thought that since Juston was supposedly going to be a pastor, I could, with his help, increase my understanding of Christianity. I thought Juston would be like a terrarium: I would be on the outside watching God waddle around inside of him and, thus observed, God would make some sense to me at last. But this is apparently not what God had in mind. God had in mind that a conservative
Christian would question whether God even exists, and then decide to talk to me about it and try to determine what, if anything, is real, and I would go into the terrarium and be asked to waddle around too.

On a rainy day when there is nothing to do, Juston and I go to the Red River Valley Museum in Vernon.

We walk through a series of rooms dedicated to Texas history, then enter a hall furnished with more than 130 species of animals. The early part of the exhibit features taxidermied animals from North America, and I briefly feel like a child again, relearning the names of the creatures of the woods: fox, squirrel, deer. Juston squats and stares the wolf in the eye. I do the same. He says he did this often as a child and it used to terrify him. When I look at the wolf straight on, I try to imagine what it would have been like to be an early American settler, faced with a predator intent on eating my property. Would I have shot it?

When we move over to the Africa section, I can't keep all the gazelles straight. There are so many species. Dozens of heads hang on the beige fabric walls, as though an encyclopedic herd is pressing in from all sides and pausing, midstride, in the nightmare that is this killing room. The dead animals are called “trophies.” At this point, I don't yet know that, down the road, I will go hunting and watch a pig die and delight in handling guns myself. At this point, my brain just trots neatly down its anti-gun, anti-hunting path of scorn. I would never travel to kill, as did William A. Bond, after whom this room was named. I would travel for art and maybe for food. Definitely for love.

Then Juston says: “Marie. This room is important to me because this is where I decided evolution is probably right and creationism is probably wrong.”

The admission—the first I've ever heard of its kind—takes me by surprise. I wait for him to say more.

“Like with the deer. You have your curled antlers and the flat ones and then the totally impractical ones that just stick out. Why would God make a mistake with antlers? God would just make the perfect deer, perfectly suited for the environment. He's God. So something other than God has to be behind all these gazelles. It has to be evolution. Not that I'm a materialist. Did you read my paper?”

“Yes!” I say brightly.
“And?”
Here is a snippet from his paper.

The true question is intention; Genesis one does not intend to be
cosmologically correct, and to draw modern science out of it mis-
understands its objective. In this way, understanding Genesis [1]
as scientifically inaccurate is not a liberal idea that disregards
Scripture. Instead, it views Scripture as authoritative, interpreting
Scripture with its true intention in mind. Consequently, the Bible,
and especially Genesis [1], can remain God’s authoritative Word,
but it should not overrule modern understandings of science.

Juston is tracing a line of thinking I have never pursued, and though
I recognize certain signposts—it’s in English, Genesis is scienti-
fically inaccurate, Western science wasn’t around at the time of the writing of
the Bible—he adopts attitudes and needs that I have never had. What
assumptions is Juston challenging? What does Genesis mean? What is
this conversation actually about?

“I don’t completely understand everything you are saying in it,” I
tell him, and I can tell he is frustrated with me. But it is also the truth.

One way this story could play out would be for us to rejoice that
Juston might now join the ranks of those of us from liberal states and
liberal cities. I could teach him about our ways so he will be more flu-
ent. But something about this scenario does not feel right. I know when
I meet someone from “my world” and can assume we share the same
language, the same tastes, the same jokes. This happens when I meet
someone from, say, Australia who has seen similar television shows,
read some of the same books, and perhaps eaten at the same chain res-

taurants. That is not what this feels like. The closest experience I have
to this current feeling is when I meet someone from another country,
and though they wear distressed jeans and are able to recount dramatic
moments from Friends, I don’t know for sure that they listen to the na-
tional anthem with skepticism. They are not—and he is not—from my
world. I cannot make assumptions.

We are not in a terrarium. Juston has not made landfall with me on an
island of liberal blue. Instead, it feels as if we have both taken a long and
treacherous journey and come upon a preordained trail—like a footpath
on the Continental Divide, or between two tectonic plates—and now that
we are here, it’s as though it is expected that we can both walk side by side and speak the same language. What did he see on his way over? And then I wonder, If I go all the way back to the place where Juston started, to God, will I really find nothing but the simulator? If that is all there is, how did Juston even get out of it? How did he know to try?

On the outskirts of most functioning farm towns, there is a miraculous thing called the grain elevator, which is usually located by a railroad. Harvested wheat is unloaded there. The grain is then lifted out of the tub into which it was dumped and, via a series of tubes, moved into large bins, where all the farmers’ wheat is pooled together cooperatively. Farmers are people who cooperate. The Union Pacific will rumble through from time to time, and purchased wheat—often traded in Kansas City—will go off by railcar to the docks in Seattle and beyond. This was always exciting for me as a child—to see the train stop at our town elevator in Nebraska and receive a load of wheat.

There are eight different kinds of wheat recognized by the US Department of Agriculture, generally categorized by when they were planted (spring or fall/winter), how hard they are (soft or hard), and their color (red or white). Winter wheat, which is planted in the fall, accounts for about 75 percent of wheat produced in the United States. Most of what we will cut on our trip will be hard red winter wheat, though there will also be spring wheat and soft white wheat. Historically, half of US wheat production has been exported to feed people in other countries; top customers have been Japan, the Philippines, and Mexico, or places that want wheat and flour in their diet and either do not grow it or grow it in limited quantities. China has also become a top importer of US wheat. In all these countries, wheat is not necessarily a part of the traditional diet, but as populations modernize, they want to eat the foods that they see modern people eating, which include bread, pizza, and pasta, not to mention hamburgers with buns. And flour-based foods are a good source of calories for people who might otherwise not get enough to eat.

The US is always competing with other wheat-producing countries—notably Russia. Exports fluctuate due to trade wars, tariffs, and even gluts in the market. When this happens, farmers may try to grow something else on their soil, if they can, so as to avoid selling their crop at a
rock-bottom price. They are also often limited by what they will be able to sell to a buyer, or middleman.

Not all farm towns have a location to receive a niche product like organic wheat; if a farm grows organically, it will need to have a pur-chaser, which may be hundreds of miles away. And even then, if the organic buyer or mill experiences a glut, it may turn away the crop or lower the purchase price, reducing what should have been a premium good to animal feed. Nearly every farmer I’ve spoken to has an anec-dote precisely like this.

My cousin Paul, who lives in Seattle, likes to tell me that he occa-sionally sits in his car by the shipyard, at Terminal 86, the grain port, which receives wheat via one of the many branches of the Union Pacific Railroad, or via the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway. The wheat is unloaded there into large shipping containers and then departs to other countries. Paul likes sometimes to imagine that it is our own wheat, off on a tanker, journeying across the quiet seas to feed some-one in China.

In Crowell, the grain bins and elevator are located to the south of town, and nearby there is a wide dirt-and-gravel parking lot that is empty now, but that in a week or so will host all the equipment for all the other harvesters who will roll into town. This is where our crew has left the machinery. Once the trailer houses are set up, the boys—and Bethany—go off to prepare the gear. The stretching of metallic limbs and the rolling down off of platforms and the hydraulic lifts in action make the equipment look like lunar rovers slowly unfolding and pre-paring to explore unknown terrain.

Transported on the backs of semitrucks, combines cross the country on the interstate system at seventy miles an hour. But on their own, combines lumber down county and country roads at a pace of about fif-teen miles an hour; it can take them some time to reach the field they will cut. They are rarely driven out to a field on a semitruck, because once cutting starts, the semitruck is pulling a grain hopper and is wait-ing to receive a full load of wheat by the edge of the field, which it will take to the elevator.

The technology that gave the combine its name has remained the same since 1834, though combines have become more efficient with the introduction of diesel-fueled engines and the aforementioned hy-draulics. The earliest models also did not have air-conditioned cabins.
The driver endured dust and noise, and many older farmers, like my father and uncle, were hard of hearing after a lifetime of exposure to the cacophony of so many moving metal parts. The newest combines are connected to computers and GPS locators, which track a plethora of information. If, for example, after years of cutting, you notice how one patch of ground in the land yields peculiarly thin wheat, you might fertilize that patch more heavily, and the computer can remember the exact coordinates for you and relay this information to a tractor, also outfitted with a computer and connected to a fertilizing unit.

The computer can also remember the contours of a piece of property. I like to joke with Eric that pretty soon a farmer will just sit in his truck and let the combine harvest on its own, much the way a child at the beach can drive a toy dune buggy by remote control.

Then there is the grain cart system, a revolutionary addition to harvesting popularized in the midnineties. While the combine cuts the grain, a tractor pulls up alongside it with something that resembles a metal bucket on wheels attached. The combine can continue cutting while simultaneously dumping a load of wheat into the grain cart. Once the cart is full, the tractor will go separately to a waiting semitruck and unload the grain into the back of the semi’s hopper. A semitruck cannot go over as diverse terrain, as a tractor can, and thus must remain parked in a part of the field—or on a road—where there is enough firm ground to support its weight; no one wants a truck loaded with grain immobilized in a field.

When I was a child, the tractor and grain cart system did not exist, and combines needed to trek out to the grain trucks to unload, resulting in hours of lost cutting time. Since harvesters are always battling time and the elements, an hour isn’t something anyone can afford to lose.

All these pieces—the hoppers, tractor, combines, and their headers—are unpacked and lined up in rows. It is a trademark of Eric’s crew that his vehicles are always neatly parked. More than once, a new farmer will approach Eric and say something like “I been watching you for a few years, wondering if maybe we can work together.” The “watching” generally begins with the parking.

If the day ends before we have finished cutting, which can and does happen often, the equipment is left in the field, parked tidily. But it isn’t enough to park the equipment neatly in a row; the space used for parking must be considered carefully, so a truck can get in and out
and a combine can turn around. I will spend the entire summer trying to guess where I should park a pickup so as to most efficiently use space and to avoid being asked to move to a less disruptive position. It will make me feel good when a passing stranger says: “You park like a farmer’s wife.”

The men unload and line up the trucks and the combines, communicating mostly through hand gestures—back up, stop, back up, stop. I am reminded of the silent form of communication that is dance. The best dancers know that our bodies talk. “We project . . . beauty through our bodies . . . love, happiness, heartbreak, elation,” says the great American ballet dancer David Hallberg in an ad for the jeweler Tiffany. I sense in all the hand motions of Eric’s crew a set of meanings beyond mere directions. I cannot yet name what this meaning is, other than, at this point, to call it “teamwork.”

Before the crew is hired, they will all have acquired a commercial driver’s license (CDL), which enables them to drive a truck. I had offered to get one so I could drive a truck, too, but no one took me up on it. The boys can all drive tractors; most of their fathers were farmers, and they have inherited all the nuances of farming body language—hands in pockets, standing completely still, caution around large equipment. Their bodies sense edges and danger with a radar-like sensitivity that I don’t have; conversely, they know when to get in the middle of a mechanical contraption to fix it. This is because they have been raised to want to fix things and ferret out where something might be broken. They look at problems and their minds figure out quickly how to re-attach, weld, mend, or otherwise rewire. Such skills—once known to most men, including my father—are becoming obsolete, and are being transferred into the bodies of fewer and fewer boys. Families lose their farms, or move to towns or cities where the skills aren’t needed and so don’t develop. My father lamented, for example, that I wasn’t good at driving stick shift. “We just grew up differently,” he would say, sighing. At the same time, I am a girl, and, in general, women aren’t taught the same skills as men; in these traditional communities, women tend to have a different role that requires different abilities.

The men know their skills are not widespread. There is the oft-repeated story about the rest stop on Interstate 80 in Wyoming where a crew was eating lunch when they saw an egregiously large RV stop for fuel. “Real big thing,” Eric says. “Got the satellite dishes. Everything.”
While the driver was pumping fuel, semitrucks arrived and parked nearby, shortening the space through which the RV could drive out. For what felt like half an hour, the boys watched the RV back up, pull forward, back up, pull forward, and they narrated to one another the mistakes and overcorrections the poor driver was making. When they tell the story, it’s mostly through gesture. They point here, now there, now here, and turn their heads back and forth, and the cumulative motion demonstrates the distress of the driver unaccustomed to navigating both space and a vehicle of this size.

Finally, Eric said: “Shall I put him out of his misery?” According to Juston, Eric went over to the RV and, in his hands-in-pockets way, offered to drive the RV out of the gas station. He was respectful, so as to not embarrass the man who couldn’t drive his own vehicle. Once dislodged, the RV continued its journey, and not long after, the crew continued its interstate caravan to Idaho.

One of the combines will not start. It was driven onto the flatbed back in Pennsylvania, but now that we are in Texas, the engine will not turn over. The batteries are new; it cannot be the batteries. The combine is thirteen feet high and its interior is a labyrinth of wires, gears, and other parts.

“Let me take a look inside,” says Luther. He opens the compartment where the engine lives. And this is when we all learn that Luther’s head houses a vast and invisible map where parts move and intersect with wires all at the same time, and that Luther can consult the map and follow the instructions and find a destination. When he emerges from the inside of the combine, he is holding a piece of cable. “Needs a new relay switch.” His voice is dry, as if he could use a lozenge, and he has a slight drawl.

Eric folds his arms and nods, beaming. Luther has potentially saved the crew hundreds of dollars.

A relay switch is a kind of an electrical lever; turn it on or off and electricity will flow and different parts of the combine will move. Luther has determined that one of the relay switches that sends electricity from the battery to the combine has failed and needs to be replaced. Or, as they say in Lancaster County, “needs replaced.”

“You could be a combine mechanic,” Eric says, beaming, delighted to have discovered a treasure.
Luther smiles back at him, then goes over to Lily, the service truck, to rummage around for a replacement switch. He finds it, and a short time later, the combine starts up.

Luther has confided in me that his dream is to get a job working for a real farmer. As a young man, Luther used to entertain himself by taking apart engines and reconstructing them, learning how all the parts work. Luther wants to be able to use his mechanical side while also working the land. He is from a Mennonite farming family, but—and this is an attitude I often hear among boys who work for Eric—his family “farms cows,” which means Luther grew up on a dairy farm. He does not want to work with animals; he wants to work with crops. Animals, the boys often tell me, smell.

The boys are happy huddled around the combine. They are happy with machinery, happy climbing things, happy driving and working. I haven’t seen anyone lose their temper.

Before dinner, Bethany says something intriguing to me in the trailer. She says that she likes to be able to see the solution: she does not want to be a part of a process but wants to see the result of her work. “It is,” she says, “a very Lancaster County way to be.”

And then I think that if all we need—if the goal of farming—is to find a solution to a problem, then it hardly matters if you are a man or a woman.

At dinner Eric is restless. By seven the sun is speeding toward the horizon and he wants to go for a drive. Evening light is short and magical and we should see it before it fades. But we don’t go out until Eric has had his dessert—cherry cobbler that night. It is a favorite, and so good that Eric has an extra helping. Then a few of us pile into a pickup with Eric.

It is so red here in Texas—there is even a park called Copper Breaks State Park, where the earth coalesces into ruddy forms resembling statues. I feel as if I am inside a hollow and glowing chamber.

We continue out into the remaining light. I think of how right now the wheat is ripening across the land at a rate of about twenty miles per day. The settlers crossed the prairie at ten to twenty miles per day and then stopped to rest. Does the ripening stop, too, when the sun sets? At the end of the day, the sun hangs over the west like a lantern beckoning
us onward. If we followed the lantern, we could leave this red earthen chamber of a heart. But we won’t catch the sun. We will have to stop and wait for it to circle around again.

We stop and climb over a fence. Eric hops over easily and is sucked into a field. Samuel stops to wait for Bethany; determination shows in her body and in her expression. She wants to demonstrate that she can do what the boys can do and she climbs over without complaint. Samuel helps me, too, and I am humbled. Crossing a barbed wire fence like this is one of the earliest memories I have of my father teaching me the physical vocabulary of farm. He stepped on the lower strip of barbed wire and pulled up the top strip so I could climb through the space in between. But I was a child then. When I was an adult, he taught me to climb over the wire by supporting myself on the wide pole to which the wire was attached. These days, fences are not anchored to wooden poles but to metal stakes, and they are much harder to grab for balance than the pole.

Eric is long gone. He has charged into the center of the field. I don’t have on boots; I am wearing sneakers. My feet snag brambles. I stop on the edge of the field like a child who can’t yet swim in deep water. Tomorrow, I tell myself, I will remember to wear my boots; I hadn’t worn them for fear of looking pretentious, as if I was wearing a costume. But the boots are absolutely necessary. Even so, from here on the edge of the field, I can see that the crop is terrible. Weeds have won the battle for water and choked out the wheat.

“What happened?” I ask Eric when he returns.

“I figure that the farmer did not kill the weeds.”

“Is he organic?” I mean it as a joke, but no one laughs or answers.

Eric thinks the farmer let cattle graze on the growing wheat in an effort to get more money off the land. The wheat grew back—a little—and so did the weeds. It is terrible “dirty” wheat and may not be worth cutting. We all go back into the pickup to look at another field, and this time, I don’t climb the fence.

It is dusk and the country is crawling with creatures. I think I am good at seeing animals, but Eric is better. He sees the roadrunners and the turkeys before I do. I spot what I think is a . . . dog. Is it a dog?

“Coyote,” says Eric and I am thrilled.

Then I have doubt. I am a person who often doubts. “How do we know it is a coyote and not a dog?”

“Dog won’t run like that,” Eric says.
“He was wild?”

There is something knowing in the way he nods. Yes, he says, this is the beauty of a wild thing. Of wild things. We are not in a park set up for tourists, but in a wild place, where wild things behave as they were meant to.

I want more than anything to see a live armadillo. I have seen two dead ones on the side of the road. I am hopeful one will come out at night.

There is a tall tale the farmers tell, of an armadillo who had just died and the harvest crew who picked him up in Texas and kept his carcass in their freezer, and carried him all the way to North Dakota, following the wheat as it ripened, twenty miles a day. Once in North Dakota, they put the armadillo on the highway, where he thawed and was discovered by locals, who, amazed that such a creature lived unknown in their environment, put the story in the paper: the armadillo who had lived and died incognito in North Dakota.

“I saw a jackalope,” Bethany volunteers. She’s joking, of course.

“We can find a dead one and take it to Idaho,” I suggest. Everyone laughs.

That night, right before I fall asleep, I hear a coyote singing. Another one answers. I drift off listening to them sing to each other, the way the cowboys say they do, and it’s as if time hasn’t passed, or maybe as if I’ve gone back in time and the coyotes are singing under the stars and the land is vast and unfenced and a wild thing can run and run forever.

We begin each day with breakfast. The time is determined the night before and we set the alarms on our phones accordingly. I tend to rise early, and if I haven’t showered the night before in the trailer, I do in the morning. The boys take off their boots before entering Eric and Emily’s trailer. I will learn to tell if I’m late, early, or on time for every meal by how many boots are assembled on the wooden crates at the foot of the steps to the trailer. Farmers are always getting muddy and always take off their shoes at a doorway.

Emily reads from the Bible. She uses the New Living Translation, a version of the Bible first translated in 1996 from the original Greek and Hebrew. Her voice, though a pretty soprano, is plain and unadorned. Prettiness was one thing the Protestants and Anabaptists rebelled against when they left the Catholic Church: too much self-conscious red velvet
and gold embroidery. For me, there is always something in the Protestant and Anabaptist version of Christianity that is slightly self-effacing, as though it refuses to embellish what is naturally pretty. Emily begins with the Psalms.

“Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do. But not the wicked! They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind.”

The Bible is so full of seeds and wheat.

After Emily reads, Eric prays. His prayers always mirror whatever it is we need that day—patience to endure downtime, or gratitude for safety. Eric once told me that he learned long ago not to pray for God to alter the weather; this is not the role of prayer, because if it stops raining just for us, then someone else will suffer. But he can and does ask for God to give us courage, strength, and patience.

Breakfast is often absent much conversation. But today, midway through, Eric says: “Let’s prepare for transport.” He pauses. “Let’s say eight o’clock.” The crew starts chewing their cereal again with renewed gusto.

There is a moment after breakfast when Juston pulls Eric aside. I will see this periodically during the summer. Juston occasionally gives feedback to his father when he finds Eric to have been too gruff or unclear.

Eric is telling us that we need to prepare the equipment for full transport from the elevator parking lot to a field. The headers of two combines will ride out on a flatbed trailer, which will be pulled by a pickup. The third combine is a new model; the header is made so its wheels can be rotated and then pulled behind the combine to the field without a trailer. The idea behind this design is to eliminate the extra flatbed trailer altogether.

Luther and Bradford, those computer-age farmers, wear Bluetooth headsets, and they look at ease, fusing technology, machinery, and silence. They are ready to work.

We are cutting for a farmer named Tommy, and he is waiting for us in the lot by the elevator after breakfast. He has his own pickup and
will drive it out to the field. He is in his fifties, farms along with his brother and son, and one day will own the entire farm. He takes his hat off when he meets me, and talks haltingly about the poor harvest the year before, and how he had put some of his crops into canola, and how, after an entire year of waiting, the wheat this year does not look so good. He asks me where I am from. I explain my diverse origins, and he nods.

“How do you feel about what’s going on in the world?” he asks.

“I worry,” I say simply.

Tommy nods and then mentions how he wishes Donald Trump would stop his tweeting. “It don’t seem necessary,” he says.

Bradford climbs into the cabin of one of the red Case combines and Juston gets into another. Samuel takes a semitruck, Luther the pickup pulling the headers, and Bethany the tractor. We are short a driver, so one combine will be left behind.

There is so much excitement around cutting the first field of the year, but the crew is quiet and focused. The maneuvering of a combine must be done with care; if it falls over, a strong cable is needed to pull it back up. Eric drives another pickup truck to the field, and I ride with him. Our caravan is slow on these dirt roads. Once the combines are in the field, Bradford approaches the flatbed trailer attached to the pickup and picks up one of the twelve-ton headers with the combine’s claws. Then he rolls out into the field of wheat and begins to cut, shred, and bin grain at seven miles per hour. Hydraulics, that wondrous modern discovery that we usually take for granted, has, in a matter of minutes, attached blades to the combine and thus transformed the lumbering and ineffectual cabin into a super locust, capable of stripping a crop in a matter of hours.

Waiting for the combine to cut a test patch is always tense. On the one hand, there is the temptation to just cut the entire field on a hunch that it is ripe. But if the grain is too wet or not ripe enough, the wheat will be wasted, or fined at the elevator, or will need to be put through a machine called a “dryer,” which is pretty much what it sounds like: a mammoth metal structure, a kind of popcorn popper the size of a pickup truck, that tosses around 500 to 1,500 bushels of wheat while simultaneously passing hot air across the kernels. But not everyone is lucky enough to own a dryer, let alone pay for the energy to run one, and we do not have one in Texas.
Bradford cuts a swath of wheat. Over the CB radio, he reports that his sensors measure a moisture reading of 12 percent.

“I still want an official reading,” Tommy says.

Then the combine returns to edge of the field where the grain cart is waiting. The combine swings around a giraffe-like neck from its back, and the giraffe neck spits a waterfall of amber grain into the cart. Eric climbs up into the cart with a metal coffee can in his hand, and a moment later jumps back out. With the alacrity of an emergency technician delivering a severed limb to the ER, Eric speeds off. We sit and watch the sail of dust behind him grow ever smaller; not much moves out in the country, so you notice anything that does.

On average, there are forty bushels per acre of wheat cut in the United States. Farmers would put it like this: “The average is forty bushel wheat.” We will not make that here. Dryland wheat—grown in fields that, like this one, are not irrigated—generally makes closer to twenty-eight bushels per acre, and this is a vast improvement from my childhood, when yields were often in the teens. One bushel of wheat is made up of approximately a billion kernels and weighs about sixty pounds. When milled into flour, a bushel can make about ninety loaves of whole wheat bread; if you take out the husks of the kernels and mill the grain into white flour, you can make about forty-two loaves of white bread. Alternatively, a bushel of wheat turned to white flour can make forty-two pounds of white pasta. If you are the sort of person who enjoys math, as my extended family does, you can calculate just how much bread or pasta a two-thousand-acre farm can make. Or I can give you the shortcut statistic that the entire state of Kansas produces enough wheat to bake 36 billion loaves of bread, which could feed everyone in the world for two weeks.

We wait for Eric. People sit in the shade, or inside the cabins of trucks, or, as my family always says, they “visit.” Perhaps half an hour later, there is a call on the CB radio in the semi. Samuel answers it.

“It’s Eric,” Samuel calls to us from the window of the truck. “He says we can cut.”

Harvest has begun.

I make a mistake on the first day. I leave my water jug in the pickup because it is heavy and I don’t want to carry it everywhere. Not long
after, someone—probably Eric—drives off with the pickup to go look at other fields, and I am separated from my water. It is hot. It doesn’t take me long to get dehydrated, and then I have to ask for a drink of someone else’s water. I swear to myself that I will never make this mistake again. But I will. Of course, no one else does.

That day I also make one ineffectual attempt to drive the tractor. Bethany takes me out. She drives around the field once, explaining what she is doing. Eric had taken me out once before, in Pennsylvania, and then it had seemed easy enough. I just needed to pay attention to the terrain, the speed, the clutch.

“Okay, now you try,” Bethany says and slides over.

So I get in the driver’s seat. It ought to be easy and I ought to drive the tractor around. But my mind does something strange. It fills with questions. How fast should I go? Should I or should I not brake? How close should I get to the truck? And there is just the feeling of the tractor in my hands. I can’t feel how wide it is. I know that much of maneuvering the tractor will entail driving up beside the truck or a moving combine, and I don’t have that intuitive spatial sense that everyone else seems to have. I’m not even convinced I can quickly develop it in the same way that, say, I’ve managed to successfully commandeer a couple of rental vans after a lifetime of owning only small passenger cars.

I drive with little confidence.

Beside me, Bethany laughs lightly, as if she’s embarrassed for me. I think she has probably never seen a grown woman so incapable with a tractor.

Without much further discussion, it’s decided I will be a “ride along,” which means I won’t operate anything, but will sit next to the crew as they drive. I would have needed convincing that I could actually drive the tractor, and they don’t indulge me. Juston tries to make me feel better. He repeats that in farm years I am about eight years old, which is how old he was the first time he drove a tractor. He says that even now, even though he has his CDL, driving anything large makes him nervous. Everyone understands. Most people don’t drive trucks.

I can, however, drive the pickup. There is always a shortage of drivers when the men are operating equipment; Luther has ridden back to town with Samuel to get another wheat truck, and the pickup is unattended. I am delighted when I am asked to move it with the combines
as we switch fields. I am told to leave the keys in the pickup. We will leave our keys in all the vehicles all summer. This is so anyone can drive and move anything as needed; there is no fear of car theft.

The roads are all unpaved and I have to remember them without the aid of GPS. I have to be a bumblebee. I always have to know which way is north, and remember landmarks for mental maps, so I can trace the roads in my head and reverse course when necessary. My father taught me to do this, and I have to recall the lessons so I can speak with the people I am spending all my time with now. The crew does this quickly. They pick out the same landmarks, as though special trees and abandoned vehicles, or “where we saw that coyote,” are somehow marked in neon. Occasionally we do see a coyote. When we do, Bradford takes a shot with his assault rifle. “I’m going to take a shot,” he announces over the radio.

Often I drive the pickup behind Juston. We go everywhere on dirt roads. On one dirt road there is a broken-down and abandoned car and we manage to pass the headers of the combines just over it so the car—and the combine—does not sustain any damage. There are power lines, fences, trees, and all manner of obstacles, and it is as though the men are threading the eyes of giant needles.

The crew splits up at one point—two combines, the grain cart, and a truck go to one field, and a combine and wheat truck go to another. Bethany, Bradford, Amos, and Samuel are often together, while Eric, Juston, and Luther make up a second team. When we are working hard, which we are for a few days, Emily drives the lunches and the dinners out to the fields. She calls Eric over the radio to learn our location and precisely where she should park and which way the pickup should face to avoid the wind blowing chaff into the food, and because she’s a farmer’s wife, she, too, dusts off the mental maps she has stored in her mind all year, and follows them. One time I’m entrusted with driving dinner out to Bradford; he is working clear across a rough field lined by terraces, which are raised areas meant to make a sloped field comprise as many flat segments as possible. I try to decide if I should drive at an angle or straight over the terraces. Again my head fills with questions that stop me from just moving.

I’ve heard Bradford admonish others to drive their combines and the tractor at an angle over the ridges. Does he mean all vehicles should do this, or just the combines? Will I look reflexively too careful if I drive
the pickup at an angle? Will I look like a sissy? Am I asking too many questions? I drive straight over.

“Marie,” I hear Bradford’s voice say. “Drive at an angle.”

I’ve overthought the instructions. I am always overthinking instructions. I am supposed to do what I’m told and not assume that there is an extra layer of invisible meaning over everything.

One day I am by myself, driving through the mesquite, when a tiny rainbow jewel of a bird darts in front of me and I stop and watch as the thing flutters to my right. All my life I have wanted to see a painted bunting. It is iridescent green, with an indigo head and a scarlet chest. Like the scissor-tailed flycatcher, the painted bunting seems like a completely impractical bird for this tough environment. It disappears before I can take a photo. I want everyone to see what I have seen. I ask everyone if in all their years of coming to Texas they have ever seen a painted bunting, and they haven’t. I keep asking, while Eric is measuring protein and moisture levels, and I start to feel like the painted bunting myself—extraneous and unnecessary. Everyone is patient about the fact that I have no discernible skills, about the way I exclaim how beautiful it is in the evening when the light is streaming through the cheat grass by the side of the road, so it glows like crystal fog. “It’s still weeds, Marie,” Eric says.

Eric is often busy giving a ride to farmer Tommy, and I am shy about asking Bradford and the others for a ride after driving over the ridge incorrectly, so I wait in the air-conditioned combine cabin with Juston. He tells me he will spend most of his time that summer “driving truck.” He likes truck. He’s not sure he really fits in here with the other farmers, but he also likes to be in the country. It calms him. He says he knows that his mind will quiet after a summer on harvest, and that mine will be too. The lack of excessive conversation will slow my mind down. He knows we have the same kind of hyperactive brains and that the country will soothe us both. When we aren’t together, he says, he listens to podcasts like BadChristian and The Liturgists, which have been part of his healing.

“I didn’t know there were podcasts for people like you . . . people who . . .” I don’t want to say in recovery from Christianity, as if he has a form of addiction.
“There’s a lot of us.” He pauses for a long time. “It starts with hell,” he finally says.

“I don’t understand what that means.”

Juston says he started questioning his world while on mission in Germany, which was supposed to be part of his training to become a pastor. Refugees were coming into Germany from Syria, and terror had clearly sculpted their faces. Juston began to wonder: How could an all-loving God send people to hell? And if we are saved as a people, as the Bible said, then aren’t we saved? At what point and how does God decide that someone is going to go to hell? And at the same time, he wanted to believe in God. And so began a period of struggle.

“Did you always doubt?” I ask.

“I’ll play you a recording of me preaching sometime,” he says. “I sound so sure. I sound like I believe. But even then I was doubting.”

“What did you do about the doubt?”

“I read books. Rob Bell.” He explains, briefly, that Rob Bell is a pastor who has written on the subject of hell and Jesus, and has become influential to Juston and in certain Christian circles. “There’s a lot of evangelicals who don’t like Rob Bell because, basically, he says hell doesn’t exist. But I like him. If you want to understand what I’m talking about, you could start there.”

And then it rains.

Outside there is thunder and lightning. I hadn’t even noticed it was going to rain. I ought to have noticed. My father started every day by looking at the weather. He ended every day with the weather too.

My conversation with Juston comes to a complete stop. Over the radio I hear a few urgent phrases. The grain in the back of the combines will get wet; there is no cover. We need to unload into a truck that has a tarp. The boys—and Bethany—all strong hands and biceps, furiously crank handles to spread the tarp over the grain. One combine is stuck with a flat tire and we leave it; Juston moves his to higher ground. Then there is a scramble into trucks, and we drive back morosely to the trailer houses.

In the trailer, I download a weather app to my phone.

In the morning, the sky is blue; storms can pass swiftly on the plains, and the hot temperatures and aridity can quickly dry a wet crop. We
just need to wait till the wheat is dry again. “I don’t think there was any hail,” Eric says. He has checked the weather map. What he means is that the rain was a setback but it did not destroy the harvest.

In the meantime, we have to see about the combine with the flat tire, which we learn has been punctured by a deer antler. Eric says that deer antlers are often found on the periphery of fields; deer lose them as they jump over fences. Lily the service truck is like a mobile hospital for equipment, and all summer I will see the multiple ways she can be employed. Today Eric drives her out to the abandoned combine while Luther follows in a pickup and hooks up an air pump from Lily to the flattened tire. Then I drive the pickup behind Eric as he slowly wheels the combine to the mechanic in town and Luther takes Lily back to the trailers. The shop has a coatrack made of deer antlers. I will see deer antlers everywhere in Texas: as table settings, chandeliers, and always as coatracks.

The mechanic deflates the tire, and puts the entire rig up on a block. He struggles to get the tire off, so Eric goes over and hits it once with his fist, at which point it pops off. Then the mechanic is able to begin the patch on the puncture.

Once the combine is fixed, we look at the fields again. They are still wet. And so we pass the time.

Spirits fall.

“It’s always like this in Texas,” Juston moans. “It always rains.”

“Oh, Juston,” says Emily. “We’re just getting started.”

At dinner, Eric says there is a rodeo nearby, but it is not a typical rodeo. It is a ranch rodeo. He asks who would like to go, since there won’t be any work for a while. There is an entrance fee of twenty-five dollars. Because of this, not everyone will elect to attend. Eric is not going to pay for the boys. But they can use the pickups to drive to Abilene, where the rodeo will be. And so we go.

The region now known as Texas was originally inhabited by multiple Native American tribes; perhaps the best known are the Comanche and the Kiowa, who hunted buffalo and antelope and lived off the land.

Then the Spanish came to Mexico and Texas (though at the time, no one thought of Mexico and Texas in those terms, as the land was all part of Spain), in the sixteenth century, and brought with them cattle
to graze on the “open range.” Cattle from Mexico drifted up north to Texas and interbred with cattle that had drifted east from California.

In 1821, Mexico won its independence from Spain, and the Mexican government encouraged Anglos to settle Texas, to help clear away the Indians. But, of course, too many visitors can have unintended consequences, and in the first four decades of the nineteenth century, a tug-of-war ensued between Mexico and the United States over who would claim this land. Meanwhile, Native Americans fought on both sides. In the end, in 1845, Texas was admitted as a state, though not without considerable debate over the issue of slavery. Abolitionists did not want another slave state to enter the Union; until 1844, the number of slave and free states had been equal, but if Texas permitted slavery, it would tip the precarious balance. The Compromise of 1850 resolved these tensions for a time through a variety of actions: California entered the Union as a free state. The war with Mexico formally ended with a monetary settlement of $15 million. As humans continued to figure out their national boundaries, the cattle interbred, and the hardy longhorn was born: these cows were tough and resistant to disease, and they wandered the plains of Texas, eating and multiplying.

Once the Civil War was over, men and some women turned their attention to the lost herds of cattle roaming around Texas. The Texas ranches, some of which had been on life support during the Civil War, were reestablished, and hardy, individualistic men appeared on the plains to drive the wild cattle north and across the open range to the railroad, where they could be shipped east to a population hungry for meat. It is against this backdrop—the 1870s—that Larry McMurtry’s epic novel *Lonesome Dove* is set. While in Texas, I am often asked by Eric and by Texans if I have seen the miniseries or read the book or both (I have). The open range and the great cattle drives ended around 1890, but as any Texan will tell you, the spirit of those times remains. It is easy to find traces of it in the ranches and in the people who made them.

Rounding up cattle requires particular skills. A cowboy is a man of the land and not the city, and in this way a cowboy is a version of Eric. A cowboy has to be able to fix things, move quickly, improvise, and read the terrain and other people’s movements. For Eric and for the harvesters, the cowboy is not an exotic once-a-year sight on a dude ranch, but a familiar cousin with whom they share a dialect.

Real-life cowboy Teddy Blue Abbott said: “In character their like never
was or will be again. They were intensely loyal to the outfit they were working for and would fight to the death for it. Living that kind of a life, they were bound to be wild and brave . . . In fact there was only two things the old-time cowpuncher was afraid of, a decent woman and being set afoot.”

A cattle drive prized similar skills as a harvest run, down to avoiding women.

Harvest has many rules, including mandatory showering and zero tolerance for alcohol or smoking. In addition to this, dating is not allowed. This is the first Wolgemuth harvest with a girl on the harvesting team. And while a man may call and text his girlfriend during off hours—Eric supports and is certainly enthusiastic about his crews’ relationships—anything involving sexual tension or chemistry would be distracting, and distraction is dangerous around heavy equipment.

Throughout the summer, my city friends will ask me about Bethany. She is as capable of the work as any of the men. My friends in the city project onto her all their feminist ideals, and this makes me incredibly nervous. Bethany is a gifted harvester, and on occasion speaks of her desire to do what the boys do. But hers is not the insistent language of feminism. She has no well-thought-out agenda, or a desire to insist on equal pay for equal work, or anything approaching such a conscious declaration of selfhood and equality. When she talks about her ideal life, she often mentions as a role model my friend Caroline in Nebraska, who helps her husband, Caleb, with nearly every farming activity. Bethany simply likes to farm.

Men and women are not the same, I am told over and over. “Anyone who works with farm animals, like cattle, knows that,” the crew tells me. Women are diverting. Beautiful women are the worst. The West was won and the wheat is cut by men pushing through and working, and women appearing when needed. When they appear at other times, there is always the danger of distraction.

Eric likes that my first rodeo will be a “ranch rodeo” and not just a regular rodeo, which he says is more like a show. In the latter, professional rodeo riders go from town to town riding bulls and horses for the crowd’s delight, not unlike a professional football team. A ranch rodeo is made up of teams of horse and bull riders, who are men who
work on ranches. The names of the ranches are legendary in Texas and across the Great Plains states: Guitar, Green Land & Cattle Company, Stuart. They are the oldest and largest ranches, and are part of the legacy of how the West was settled. Among the ranches represented is Pitchfork, with which Eric is affiliated, because, on occasion, he cuts their wheat.

The first thing I notice at the rodeo is the smell of animals. Then we enter the slow conveyer belt of fashion, of men in cowboy boots accompanied by their women, circling the exterior ring of the arena. Nothing has prepared me for this, not even the one time I changed planes at the Dallas Fort Worth airport. There are suspenders, and more than once I hear the clatter of spurs. Men carry lassos in neon colors. Nearly every man is in a hat. I order the most foul fried chicken and fries I will ever eat. Around me is a sea of cowboy hats flexing on top of heads. I wonder, as I listen to the voices curl and flex, too, if they know how their drawl is reflected in the curvature of their flaxen hat brims.

Inside the arena, I see men sitting on thin railings. Some wear chaps and cock their hips from side to side to loosen up, as dancers do. In my mind’s eye, I see the choreography of Agnes de Mille’s famous ballet *Rodeo*. Lanky, wiry bodies are silhouetted against the light—they rest on a fence, on a horse, on a rail. The cowboy twitches; he readies his reflexes. He is not a patient farmer.

Before the rodeo begins, the emcee reads a poem in tribute to the cowboy. “Cowboys are tough,” he says, and then goes on to remind us that we are here to celebrate “our heritage,” to be thankful we can gather in a place like this arena and pray together. The grand procession includes buggies, and the teams of ranch hands ride together in their uniformed shirts and on the horses they will ride throughout the competition. And while there might have been a woman or two among them, everyone I see is white.

Girls carrying banners and riding ponies move in formation. And then the rodeo starts, with a series of men riding horses that buck. How quickly the men go into the classic bucking-bronco pose, one arm in the air, the other clutching the reins, and how beautifully nearly all of them fall, the controlled fall of a cowboy who has been thrown from his horse, who knows it is time to dismount, and who gives up the horse in lieu of clinging to time, because to do so would be to jeopardize his own body.
There are more events—I come to think of them as Olympic trials involving man and horse—including one where calves need to be separated from other calves, and each cowboy is allowed only one successful throw of his lasso. The technique seems to involve throwing a lasso over the head of the calf, and another around his foot. As soon as the calf is secured in these two places, one or two men leap down from their horses and do whatever is required—brand the cow, milk the cow, or lasso the cow. I can't explain how a lasso gets on the hind foot of a cow until Bethany explains to me that the rope falls down in a circle at the cow's feet, like a trap, waiting for the foot to step inside and be snared. Her eyes are shining when she tells me. She has a horse back home. It is her dream to be on a ranch, on a farm, on a horse. All she wants, she says, is to be a farmer's wife.

Samuel drives us back that night, a full two hours from Abilene to our camp. The darkness has clamped down hard on the land, and I think of all the aphorisms of night—how it falls like a cloak, how it drapes over the land, how it is immovable. The darkness is enormous and feels permanent.

Juston recounts a time when he was a child driving a grain cart in the dark. The lights on the tractor could illuminate a good distance, but then there was the cavern of darkness ahead, and the young Juston feared he would be forever separated from his family and not find his way back. I can see how, in a small child's mind, the imagination couldn't win against the persuasive power of the dark.

“That will change,” Eric says, “once they put in the windmills.” And against the night sky, in the distance, there are the slow and deliberate winking red lights of the windmills that stand on the land, and take motion from the air to power the things that people need.