I taste grit. It grinds in my teeth and mingles with my noonday meal, turning my creamy peanut butter and honey sandwich crunchy. It gets in my scalp. My snot is brown, full of it, when I blow my nose. It streams down my body when I shower at the day's end, leaving traces in the tile. My siblings taste it too. But we quibble over the proper word. My brother calls it dirt – clean dirt. I ask, "Clean?" He doesn't feel compelled to elaborate. "Clean," he says again. He's still too full of hope to use my father's term, marginal, to describe our poor western soils. My sister also calls it dirt, but her tone hints at something not clean. She's grown weary of all this dirt, wondering aloud if the wind will cease and the dirt will lie down. As for me, I call it grit because of the way it grinds in my teeth and because of what it grows. It grows hardness and hardiness, despair and doggedness, and every now and then the weeds of waywardness. And I think, as I watch all this growing in and around me, maybe our soil's not so marginal after all.

I taste grit – I'm a farmer's daughter. To be precise, I'm a farmer's daughter who works on the farm. There's no inequality on this farm. Everyone works here. I've heard elsewhere the women cook and the men harvest. But the grit in my teeth doesn't come from making pies in the kitchen. My sister and I make pies late in the evening. We pick tart cherries from the surviving cherry tree – the chicken house landed on top of the other cherry tree in the tornado – and make pies after coming in from the field. Though neither of us can remember how it happened, our roles seem predestined – she makes the crust; I make the filling. Years later, no longer living together but both hungry for pie, we realize that we can only make half a pie apiece. Kitchen work is hot work. The oven can only be turned on early in the morning or late at night to keep the house bearable. Kitchen work is hot work but clean work, no grit here. The grit in my teeth

comes from driving an old, open-air tractor pulling one-ways. One-ways make my sister uncharacteristically sarcastic. She grumbles that we're the only children of our generation intimately familiar with one-ways. My brother, usually the one to understand and explain the means behind my father's madness, doesn't contradict her. He too thinks our father has a peculiar attachment to one-ways. We use them long after everyone else has switched to other implements to till the soil. My father has three kids, three old tractors, and six one-ways. One kid on one tractor with two one-ways hooked behind. The math works well – He's always been better at mental math than his kids. And he likes what the one-way does to all this dirt. Like a plow, it digs deep to turn over the soil, killing the weeds and conserving the moisture, but the discs of the one-way don't leave behind big furrows like the blades of a plow.

Regardless of the alleged merits, we know one thing for sure about farming with one-ways. It's a dirty job. We carry a good bit of that dirt out of the field with us at dusk, all wound up from turning counterclockwise. The key feature of a one-way is that it only turns one way – left. This simplifies the decisions of the day. No matter what stands in our way, the only option is to turn left. The thinking part of the job comes when moving down the road to another field or back to the home place to refuel at the diesel tanks. We learn to think three turns ahead, keeping ourselves and our one-ways out of trouble. Driving old, open-air tractors hones a rare skill. Later, my college friends make a game of testing this skill. They randomly quiz me, "What time is it?" I guess correctly every time – give or take a few minutes. My siblings have this same skill. We were not about to miss supper sitting on an old tractor pulling one-ways.

I feel the heat. Drops of sweat teeter precariously on my forearms, threatening to tumble into the salty pools seeping from behind my knees as I harvest wheat in July. I learn to drive the

combine the same summer I learn to drive the truck. I'm tall for twelve but not tall enough to reach the pedals without perching on the edge of the seat. Bouncing across the pasture, trying to see the trail through my tears, I hear my father yelling, "What the hell have you been looking at all these years while I've been driving? Haven't you ever watched my feet?" Weeks later, I confidently and secretly teach my sister to drive the truck. My father's theory that my sister is the smarter of his two daughters is supported the next summer when she passes her driving lesson without incident. Our combines are the same color as our tractors – red, not green. I can't explain why that fact is important, but I know it is so. They are old, but that doesn't matter because they are ours and ours alone. We don't have to wait for the custom harvesters from Texas to come and cut our wheat. Like every other job on the farm, we do this one on our own. I'm unsurprised when my brother later majors in mechanical engineering. He and my father can fix just about anything that breaks down and just about everything breaks down at harvest. My mother drives the combine just once. The fan goes through the radiator. My father explains odds – farming is a game of chance he tells her. He reassures her that it was just bad luck that she was driving. Not a gambler, she never climbs aboard a combine again. As for me, I like operating the combines. There's something exciting about controlling all that power. But more than that, there's something addicting about the intensity of harvest.

I feel the heat and smell the stench. I've tucked my jeans into my boots to keep the mice from running up my pant legs. We're cleaning out the grain bins. It's unanimous – this is the worst job on the farm. It's hotter than fixing fence; it's harder than hauling hay; it's smellier than cleaning the corrals; it's even dirtier than driving open-air tractors hooked to one-ways. Grain bins stand conspicuously tall on the treeless plains, marking a homestead from miles away. My

father likes grain bins because they increase our efficiency. If asked to name the seven heavenly virtues, I suspect he would add an eighth – efficiency – and then list it above the others. He says it wastes time to haul wheat to the local grain elevator during harvest, so we store our wheat until the winter when the line at the elevator goes down and the price goes up. The inside of the metal bin is sweltering. Mice scurry away from the augur running in the pit of the bin. Moisture from the winter snow seeps in around the seals and turns the wheat in the bottom of the bin rotten. The smell of fermented grain is released as we shovel the crusted wheat into the augur that carries the foul mess up and out of the bin. Emerging from the pit when the job is done, we collapse in the shade, summoning the usually unwelcome wind to come and cool us down.

I hear my mother. I hear my mother threatening my father. My sister and I are standing atop the red combines parked at the home place. We've pulled water hoses up the ladders to the very top where we stand washing the wheat straw, chaff, and ever-present dirt out of the engine compartments. We're standing on metal machines twelve feet off the ground with water running everywhere as the summer storm moves closer and closer. We've been hurrying to finish the job, trying to beat the storm. I hear my mother threaten my father with his death upon our death as the thunder booms. She's certain that we'll be struck by lightening at any moment. We pause from our job of cleaning the combines, watching the storm brewing in the sky and the one brewing between our parents. But our pause is brief. Like our mother, we respect the lightning's might, but we know without doubt that our father's might is stronger and surer than even lightning on the high plains of Colorado. My mother slams the door, angrily grinding gears, gravel flying, her parting words to my father, "Fine. Kill our children. It'll be on your head not mine." My sister and I continue cleaning the combines.

The sky, cloudless at noon, is now green and swirling. This hot day is suddenly cold. The green skies and sudden cold foretell of hail. We run to park the combines and tractors under the cover of the Quonset. We then head for home in the pick-up trucks. The wind drives the rain sideways. The clay in our soils makes the road greasy with just the littlest rain. I focus on driving as my sister grabs a coat from behind the seat and tries to keep the cracking windshield from falling into our laps. The hail hitting the Ford pick-up sounds like I imagine warfare – The noise is deafening. My father's Ford, barely visible through the blinding rain and hail, slides to a halt on the slippery road ahead of us. I barely avoid hitting him. The storm chasers are parked in the middle of the road. They – usually overzealous graduate students from Oklahoma – love our ridge. They sit in their alien-like vehicles all summer, eagerly awaiting the next big one. At over a mile high, this place on the plains is heaven for meteorologists and hell for wheat farmers.

I hear my mother. I hear my mother consoling my father. The hail has yet again destroyed our wheat crop. It's the only time I ever see my father cry. This year's crop was good, better than most in this region too far west of the 100th Meridian to be graced with regular rain. My great-uncles like to say, "We get ten inches of rain a year. You ought to be here the day it comes." The summer storm floods our little creek. My sister and I like the cartographer's honesty – the county map officially names this trickle of water Hell Creek. Before fixing the fences crossing the now swollen stream, icy cold from the hail, my father turns this flood into an adventure. We lash three stock tanks together and float Hell Creek in our dubious boat. My father thinks I've the makings of a biologist, eagerly jumping overboard to catch minnows. The creek dries to a trickle within days and we get back to work because maybe, just maybe, hail won't accompany the rain next year. Later, in high school, I recall this day when our track coach makes team T-shirts that read,

"Heart + Determination + 106,500 Meter Sprints = Success." I think that's it – that's what my father has and what I work for – heart. I've been calling it grit, but maybe it's heart. No matter the name, I see my brother has it too. This same coach turns my brother into a fullback. His other positions – a state 4x4 runner, the first basemen on a winning baseball team, the homecoming king – make sense, but this position – starting fullback on the football team – is surprising given my brother's tall, lanky frame. Nevertheless, he stays at fullback because he just won't quit.

I see the horizon. I see the horizon, and I'm comforted. There's something about being able to see forever that brings me comfort. I have a friend who goes away, far away to foreign places for work, and when he comes home, he can't stop talking about the view. He's forgotten what it's like to always see the horizon. I read the researchers' explanation – it seems we have an evolutionary urge to like places where we can see the enemy approaching. Even though the storms come frequently and quickly to this place on the plains, we can see them coming. Maybe this also explains why I like the horizon at dusk. I can see what's coming next – the calm of the night sky. Sometime just before midnight, the chill in our thin air makes the grain hard to thresh, forcing us to shut down the combines. The heat from the day is gone. The night, no matter how hot the day, is always cool at this elevation. The wind also seems to surrender – finally dying down. In the chilly stillness, I look into the night sky unpolluted by lights, and I find comfort. But I think it's more than seeing what's coming. I think it's seeing the present put into perspective. The vastness of our western skies reminds us of where we stand, our place in the picture. And that's why I like the horizon at dawn. My sister and I rise early, running before breakfast. Heartbreak may well be on the horizon, but with this grit in my teeth and the view before me, I sense something new growing in me – love for this place on the plains.