

The Windhover

30.2

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Fall 2026

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Cover: ***Song of the Heavenly Host***

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University of Mary Hardin-Baylor Press

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Statement from cover artist, Elizabeth Bowman:

AND SUDDENLY THERE WAS with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!" (Luke 2:13-14)

Elizabeth's work depicts biblical stories and the life of faith in a blend of surreal impressionism and dreamlike abstraction. Form, symbol, and blurred color intertwine to reckon with what lies beyond clarity – the mystery of human encounters with the spiritual.

The Windhover is published twice a year, in February and August.

Subscriptions are \$22 (two issues).

The most recent issue is \$12.

Back issues are \$6.

For full submission guidelines, subscription and purchasing information, and samples of back issues, please visit *The Windhover* homepage:

<http://www.umhb.edu/windhover>

The Windhover is a proud member of CLMP
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CARLY T. FLYNN

It's Funny How

when Peter said he would follow you even to death
You asked him to repeat himself.

It was an honest test and a flash of lightning
in your sacred heart. Human enough

to not want to die alone. Do not ask me to
repeat myself. I know what I've said.

And such are promises – the flare of passion
dims as we hear our own voice

Reach our own ears from our own tongues
in a tone we do not recognize.

His follower. No. I am my own. I have a business.
A home. I have my father's boat. I can

fish, you know. My family laughs at my jokes,
and I can tell you one now if you'd like.

Three men walked into a church, and parts of them
never left. How do I explain church?

It's funny how we leave parts of ourselves
lying around. Maybe that's what ghosts are.

Parts of Peter never left that boat, you know.
His soles could walk the water because

His heavy parts were back beside Andrew. His
doubt, the weightiest, was back in the boat.

But oh, look at the time. I should be getting home.
To where I'm known, you see.

Love is about being known. Seen. And you
see, Lord, and you know. And you

stay. And leave a piece of your heart everywhere
you go, as a promise. Even to death.

SARAH REARDON

Oil of Mercy

The widow wakes to find replenished oil,
Which gleams beneath the streaming, scorching haze
That coruscates upon the thirsty soil
And makes the widow shift her wearied gaze.
The driest season showered down a man:
Not a suitor, nor a son, but strange, spare.
He spoke with certainty as no one can;
His accent foreign, he's from God knows where.
The stranger stood and knocked and asked for bread
As she prepared for death that final night—
The final fire, a lightness in the head—
The man of God sat down and took a bite.
And, lo, abundance flows from death's remains.
The sight of oil is mercy, life regained.

ANDREI ROMANOV

The Grain Elevator Operator

I.

THE SOUND CHANGES BEFORE anything else.

Wheat moving through steel makes a specific whisper, a rush like wind through tall grass, but denser, more insistent. Forty years I've been running the elevators at the co-op, and I know every sound the grain makes. The hiss when it pours from the truck bed into the hopper. The steady shush as the conveyor pulls it up six stories to the top of the silo. The settling sigh when the grain finds its level in the dark.

This year, the sound is different.

Not wrong, exactly. Just off. A slightly higher pitch. A dryness in the whisper, like speaking with a parched throat.

I mentioned it to Curtis, who drives for the Hendersons. He gave me the look you give a man who's been alone with machinery too long. "Sounds like wheat to me," he said, and climbed back in his truck.

But it doesn't. Not the way it used to.

The work itself never changes. That's the whole point of this job, it's the same thing, over and over, until the repetition becomes a kind of trance. You back the truck up to the dump pit. You open the hopper. You watch the grain pour down. You flip the switch that starts the conveyor. You listen to the motor climb. You wait. You shut it off when the truck's empty. You log the weight, the moisture content, and the protein percentage. You do it again. And again. Sixty to seventy trucks a day during harvest. More, if it's a good year.

I used to think the repetition would make me stupid. When I started here in 1984, fresh out of high school with no better prospects, I thought: this is what happens when you don't leave. You stand in the same place doing the same thing until you become the thing you're standing next to, just another piece of equipment, just another mechanism for moving grain from one place to another.

But repetition doesn't make you stupid. It makes you sharp. When you do the same thing ten thousand times, you notice the nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-ninth time something's different.

The sound is different.

II.

People think grain is just grain. A mass. A commodity. Something that comes in truckloads and goes out in railcars, undifferentiated, interchangeable, priced by the bushel on markets they'll never see.

But grain isn't a mass. Grain is a million small decisions made by a million small lives.

Pick up a handful. Go ahead. Let it run through your fingers. You're holding a summer. You're holding soil and rain and sun and the particular alchemy that happens when a seed decides to split itself open and become something else.

You're also holding a history.

I can tell you the year by looking at the kernels. The color. The size. The weight in my hand. In the 1988 drought, those kernels came in small, hard, almost flinty. The 1993 floods were swollen and pale, and some were already sprouting in the trucks. The 2012 heat wave shriveled, like they'd given up before they'd even started.

Every year writes itself into the grain.

This year, the kernels are smaller than last year. Not by much. You'd have to be paying attention to notice. But I'm always paying attention. That's the job. That's what forty years of the same motion over and over has trained me to notice the smallest variation in a thing that's supposed to stay the same.

Smaller kernels. Harder. Drier. A pale gold that's almost white in the center, like the kernel couldn't quite commit to the color it was supposed to be.

I mentioned it to the agronomist who came through last week. He took a handful, rolled it in his palm, squinted at it in the light. "Tough year," he said. "Not enough rain in June."

But it wasn't just June. It was May, too. And April. And March. And if you've been paying attention, and I have, it's been every spring for the last five years. A little less rain. A little more heat. A little earlier.

The agronomist didn't say that. He just said "tough year," like it was weather, like it was a coin flip that came up tails, like next year the coin might come up heads and everything would be fine again.

But I don't think it's a coin anymore. I think the coin's been weighted.

III.

There's a rhythm to harvest. It used to start the first week of August. Now it starts mid-July. The combines roll a week earlier every five years, creeping backward into summer like the calendar's running in reverse.

The farmers don't talk about it, not directly. But I hear things. I hear Curtis say the wheat headed out too early this year, before the roots went deep, so when the heat came in June, the plants just gave up. I hear Martinez say his south forty didn't make seed at all, just grew stalks and then browned out, like it forgot what it was supposed to do.

I hear things, and I write them down.

Not officially. The co-op doesn't care what I think. They care about moisture content, test weight, and the percentage of protein that goes into the record, as well as the numbers that determine price. But I keep my own log. A little notebook I've been filling for twenty years. Not data, exactly. Just observations.

August 3, 2004: First load came in at 13.2% moisture. Smells like straw, not grain.

July 29, 2011: Kernels are darker this year. Almost red. Henderson says it's the new seed variety, but I don't think so.

July 15, 2019: Early. Earliest I've ever seen. Martinez says his field was already turning before the Fourth of July.

July 12, 2024: Sound is wrong. Grain running dry.

I don't know what I'm writing it for. I don't know who would read it. Maybe no one. Maybe it's just the same instinct that makes you carve your initials into a tree, proof you were here, proof you saw.

Proof that before it all changed, someone noticed.

IV.

The silos are old. Built in 1957, back when this town was twice its current size, and people thought grain was a future they could count on. Concrete and steel, six stories tall, ten of them standing in a row like sentinels. From the road, they look permanent. Solid. The kind of thing that'll be here long after the rest of us are gone.

But I know what's inside them.

Grain is alive. People forget that. They think of it as inert, dried, dead, waiting to be ground into flour, pressed into oil, or shipped overseas to feed someone else's chickens. But it's not dead. It's dormant. It's still breathing.

You can measure it. The respiration. Every bushel of grain in those silos is still pulling in oxygen, still giving off carbon dioxide and heat. If you let the temperature climb too high, if the grain's too wet, or if there's a hot spot where the moisture's concentrated, it'll start to cook itself. I've seen it. Grain that's been in the silo too long, starting to ferment, turning sour, the smell is like beer and rot.

And then there are the insects.

People don't think about that, either. But grain is an ecosystem. There are weevils in there. Flour beetles. Indian meal moths. They're in every load that comes in, eggs laid in the field, waiting. When the conditions are right, when it's warm enough, when there's enough moisture, they hatch. They eat. They breed. They turn the grain into a living, seething thing.

I used to fight them. Fumigation. Aeration. Turning the grain over to break up the hot spots, to kill the larvae before they could spread.

But lately I've been wondering: what if they're not the problem? What if they're just responding to the same thing? I'm noticing that the grain itself is different, that the conditions are different, that something fundamental has shifted, and we're all just trying to adapt.

Last week, I found a cluster of weevils in the number three silo that shouldn't have been there. It's winter. It's cold. They should be dormant. But they weren't. They were active. Moving. Eating.

I killed them. That's the job. But I wrote it down.

February 9, 2025: Weevils in #3. Shouldn't be active. The temperature outside is 28°F. Inside the grain, 52°F. Ten degrees warmer than last year this time.

The silos are holding heat they didn't use to hold.

V.

There's a kid who works here part-time. Jeremy. Eighteen, just graduated, doesn't know what he wants to do with his life, so he's spending his summer running the forklift and learning the elevator controls in case I ever retire.

I've been trying to teach him to listen.

"Hear that?" I said last week, when the Henderson load was running up the conveyor.

He stopped, tilted his head. "Hear what?"

"The pitch. It's higher than it should be."

He listened again. Shrugged. "Sounds normal to me."

And I realized: it does sound normal to him. Because he's only been doing

this for two months. He doesn't have the years of reference, the archive of sound in his head that tells him what wheat is supposed to sound like when it's healthy, when it's whole, when the world that grew it wasn't cooking itself alive.

He'll learn, maybe if he stays. If this job still exists in ten years, if there's still grain to move.

But I wonder, sometimes, what he'll think is normal. Whether the wheat that comes in ten years from now is smaller, harder, drier, or stranger will just be wheat to him. Whether he'll have anything to compare it to, or whether the baseline will have shifted so far that he won't even know there was a before.

I asked him last week if he'd ever seen the size of the kernels change year to year.

He looked at me like I was asking if he'd ever seen the color of the sky change.

"It's just wheat," he said.

VI.

I went to a grain conference once. 1997. The co-op sent me to Des Moines for three days of seminars on moisture management and pest control. I didn't want to go, didn't see the point of listening to people in ties talk about things I already knew, but they paid for it, so I went.

There was a session on climate and agriculture. I almost didn't attend. I thought it would be activists, people with signs, the kind of thing that had nothing to do with the actual work of moving grain. But it was a Saturday morning, and I had nothing else to do, so I sat in the back.

The speaker was a soil scientist from Iowa State. She had slides. Graphs. Projected temperature increases, projected rainfall changes, and projected shifts in growing zones. She talked about how corn was already moving north, how the southern plains were getting too hot and dry for wheat, how the Midwest, our Midwest, the place we lived, was going to look different in thirty years.

I didn't believe her. Not because I thought she was lying. But because thirty years felt like forever, and the wheat I was moving every day looked like wheat, and the farmers I knew had been farming the same land their grandfathers had farmed, and it seemed impossible that something as big as the climate could change fast enough to matter in my lifetime.

That was 1997.

It's 2025 now.
Twenty-eight years.
And she was right.

VII.

The dust is different, too.

When grain moves, it makes dust. Chaff. Broken kernels. Bits of stem and leaf that didn't get cleaned out in the field. It's always been part of the job: you wear a mask, you wash your clothes every day, you try not to breathe it in.

But this year, the dust is finer. It hangs in the air longer. It coats everything: my boots, my hands, the control panel, the windows in the little office where I eat lunch. I wipe it off, and ten minutes later it's back.

I think it's because the kernels are drier. They shatter more easily. They break down into smaller particles.

Or maybe it's because there's more chaff than there used to be. More stems. More leaves. Like plants, which put all their energy into growing stalks and forget to put it into the seed.

I don't know. I'm not a scientist. I'm just a man who's been standing in the same place for forty years, watching the same thing happen over and over, and noticing when it doesn't.

VIII.

There's a myth about grain elevators. People think they're safe. Solid. Just big concrete boxes holding a harmless crop.

But they're not safe. Grain can kill you.

It happens like this: someone climbs into a bin to break up a crust, check the level, or clear a blockage in the auger. The grain looks solid. It looks like you can walk on it. But it's not solid. It's a fluid. It behaves like water.

You step onto the surface, and you start to sink. Slowly at first. Then faster. The grain flows around you, pulls you down. You try to swim. You can't. Grain is heavier than water. It fills your pockets, your boots, your lungs. In thirty seconds, you're under. In three minutes, you're dead.

They call it "grain entrapment." It kills four or five people every year in this country. Usually young guys. Usually, someone who thought they knew what they were doing.

I've never gone into a bin when there's grain in it. I've worked here for forty years, and I've never once climbed into a full silo. It's against the rules,

and even if it wasn't, I know better.

But sometimes I think about it. Standing at the top of the silo, looking down into the grain, forty feet deep, a pale gold ocean in the dark. What would it be like to step out onto it? To sink. To let it pull me down.

Not because I want to die. But because I want to know what it knows.

The grain has been everywhere. It's been in the soil. It's been in the rain. It's been in the air, in the heat, in the long dry springs and the short wet autumns. It's absorbed everything. It's written everything down in its cells, in the proteins, starches, and oils that make up each kernel.

If I could read it, really read it, the way I've been trying to for forty years, what would it say?

What does the wheat know that I don't?

IX.

There's a guy who used to work here. Larry. He ran the elevators before me, back in the '70s and early '80s. He trained me when I started. Taught me how to operate the controls, how to read the moisture meter, how to listen for the sound of the motor straining when the grain's running heavy.

Larry retired in 1991. Moved to Arizona. I didn't hear from him for years.

Then, two months ago, I got a letter. Actual letter. Handwritten. Envelope with a stamp.

He said he'd been thinking about the wheat. About how it looked different toward the end of his time here. Harder. Smaller. He said he didn't think much of it at the time, figured it was just the seed varieties changing, or the fertilizers, or something the farmers were doing differently.

But now he wasn't so sure.

He said he'd been reading about the climate. About the Dust Bowl. About what happened in the 1930s when the rain stopped, and the wheat failed, and the soil blew away. He said he remembered his grandfather talking about how the sky turned black, how you couldn't see the sun, how people packed up and left because there was nothing left to stay for.

He said he wondered if it was happening again. Slower this time. Not all at once. But the same trajectory. The same trajectory.

He asked if I'd noticed anything.

I wrote back. I told him about the sound. The kernels. The dust. The heat in the silos. The insects are active in winter.

I told him I'd been keeping a notebook.

He wrote back three weeks later. He said, "*Keep writing it down.*" *Someone needs to remember what it was like before.*

X.

This morning, the first truck came in at 6 a.m. Curtis. Henderson wheat. I backed him up to the pit, opened the hopper, and watched the grain pour down.

I listened.

The sound was the same as it's been all season. High. Dry. Wrong.

I flipped the switch. The conveyor started. The motor climbed. The grain moved up the elevator, up into the dark of the silo, joining the thousand other loads already in there, becoming part of the mass, the commodity, the undifferentiated thing we sell by the bushel to people who will never see it, never touch it, never know what it took to grow it or what it means that it's changing.

Curtis climbed back in his truck. I logged the weight. 53,400 pounds. Moisture content: 11.8%. Test weight: 58.2 pounds per bushel.

Numbers. That's all anyone cares about. Numbers that go into the record, that determine the price, that tell you whether the year was good or bad.

But numbers don't tell you what I know.

They don't tell you that the wheat is smaller than it was five years ago. It's drier than it was ten years ago. That sounds different from what it did twenty years ago.

They don't tell you that the world is changing, has already changed, is continuing to change in ways that we don't have words for yet, in ways that maybe only the wheat knows because the wheat is the thing that's absorbing it all, the heat, the drought, the late springs and early summers and the slow unraveling of the seasons into something we don't recognize anymore.

I pulled out my notebook.

March 14, 2025: First load of spring wheat. Curtis/Henderson. Sound still wrong. Kernels are smaller than last year. Drier. 11.8% moisture. Used to be 13-14% this time of year. Climate isn't a forecast anymore. It's here. It's in the grain.

I closed the notebook. I put it in my pocket.

The next truck was already backing up to the pit.

I flipped the switch.

The motor climbed.

The grain whispered.
I listened.

CHERYL DYER

Drink From This

for Ella

When we say nature, we don't include
the bright red beat-up plastic cup
that's rocketing around in the wind. But you--
you noticed it and found it breathing and beautiful. Or maybe
just animated enough that it seemed to belong.

And another cup: think of all the lips that touched it
during that last supper: indifferent lips, devoted lips,
jealous lips, selfish lips, doubtful lips, lips that thought
It would have been better to have never existed.

All of them were asked to drink.

NORA KIRKHAM

Signs and Strangers

I was in Tokyo, taking three trains
to a wisteria shrine,
dangling fried noodles between chopsticks.
A stranger asked to borrow one and drew
the salted stick through a cake to offer me a slice.

Sometimes I remember being seventeen and lost
for the first time when a taxi driver delivered me
from a blizzard on the shining streets of Helsinki.
I let him keep all the change.

Would it make a difference if I knew their names?
I still remember the business man
who held a bleeding pigeon against his shirt,
the woman at Victoria Station who sold poppy pins,
the stranger in Moscow who asked me to marry him,

and the woman in the Boston Common, explaining
Here is the prayer in the garden, the world
stung him awake in Gethsemane.
She held out a card of Jesus painted on his knees.

That year, I was praying.
I thought everyone was a sign.
I slipped the image in my pocket
and laughed when thunder snapped the sky.

CONTRIBUTORS

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