

—+ **SOPHIA SPERDAKOS** | The Meaning of Wheat

“TELL ME ABOUT THE WHEAT” you wrote, and I took you at your word. I created texture and taste and smell for you. I lay down in the fields to feel the scratchiness of the grain against my skin and held a single strand between my thumb and index finger to describe to you the look of each kernel. I listened for the sound the crop makes when the prairie winds race from field to field, pressing against the stalks and creating the swaying rhythm of lovers in a dance. I reminded you of the noises and actions that accompany threshing and milling. I filled the allotted space for government-sanctioned messages with descriptions of the velvet sensation of flour against one’s skin. Cool and calming and clean.

And in writing all of this I sought to suspend the future. The unwritten “what ifs” that I had no capacity to ask and you, in your sea of mud and despair, could not have answered. But the wheat has tricked me. For it has a meaning beyond itself. In describing it, I described myself. In detailing it to you, I raised the unfinished measure of our lives together and left myself more unsettled. There are, it would seem, no neutral topics.

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THERE ARE THREE PARTS TO A kernel of wheat. The outer cover, the oily germ, and the protein-rich endosperm that makes up the bulk of the kernel. Each speaks to an aspect of the plant, its personality if you will. Yet seen from a distance a crop of wheat appears monolithic, as if there is only the whole, rather than a complex structure in every individual stock. When you saw me for the first time that morning at the train station did I seem any different from the other women who stood waiting to be claimed? Clustered together, as if physical proximity would protect us from the unknown world into which we were being catapulted. Does a man who orders a bride expect something unique or does he hope for uniformity so that he is relieved of the responsibility of choosing unwisely?

I had your photograph. You stood apart from the other settlers as the station-master called out our names. Simon Richardson. Amelia Darcy. Men and women alike pretended to be different from the lowly born settlers who sent home for women to add warmth to their kitchens and their beds. We were better born, better educated. You, the second-born sons of first-born sons. We, the redundant daughters of comfortable families, voluntary exiles from a society of more unmarried women than men.

Your jaw pulsed. I came to know that gesture well, as if it were reserved for me. Or is that one more thing about our relationship I simply imagined? As I stepped forward, I thought I saw the disappointment in your face. A man who expected more.

"May I take your bag?" you said, your arm outstretched, not to me but to what I held.

"If you like," I replied, knowing you would feel the dampness of the handle from the sweating of my hand.

We joined the other couples at the preacher's house. His wife had set out three small towels and a hard homemade soap. Somewhere in my bag was a single bar of lavender that my mother had given me. Her idea of preparing me for my future. It seemed ridiculous to take it out. I shared the towels with five other girls. We washed our hands and faces in a basin of cold water, the last of us replacing our own dirt with that of the women who came before. The preacher's wife was silent, but as we finished our modest preparations she said, "I hope you are realistic girls. I hope you are believers. You will need to be both."

By midday I was your wife.

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THE OUTER COVER OF THE WHEAT IS the bran, the most fibrous part. I think of it as the most serviceable. When ground with the rest of the plant it makes the flour coarse, darker, less silky. It is useful, but not elegant or refined. Before I left England I was given a coat by a woman who had returned from Canada for good. Her mother knew mine, and together they sent her on a mission to dissuade me from going.

"The land is frightening. There are no trees, no bushes, no houses, nothing to see. It is like being blind. It is as if you have lost your memory. There is no one to talk to except your husband, who has nothing to say. There is nothing to read. There is no music, only the wind, and there is no entertainment, only work."

I listened and said nothing. In England I was the spinster daughter, maiden aunt, childless woman. In Canada, I might be someone else.

"Thank you for the coat. I'm sure I will be glad of it."

"No, you won't. You will hate its shapelessness. You will find the wool scratchy and the colour as drab as the frozen earth in February. I'm glad to be rid of it."

She was right, of course. I do hate the coat. It is my outer cover, by which I am judged.

Simon and Amelia. We married without romance, with only the knowledge of each other we exchanged in one letter each. You wrote, *I am 28 years old, 6 feet*

tall, with brown hair and blue eyes and have lived in Canada for three years. I am in good health and require a woman who is too. I replied, I am 27 years old, 5 feet 5 inches. My hair is also brown, as are my eyes. I am in good health and will do my best to remain so. I am able to cook and am not concerned about hard work.

We left the other couples and drove in a wagon for three hours, saying little. I watched your hands on the reins, long almost delicate fingers, lightly freckled from the sun, scratched and callused and rough from hard work.

"Do you mind?" I asked, unaware I had spoken aloud.

"Mind what?"

"The calluses?"

He looked down. "They're like everything else here. Unavoidable."

"You sound resigned."

"It was not entirely my choice to come."

"Why?"

"Sometimes we are presented with options that are really decisions. My elder brother inherited our family estate. I was used to an allowance. Its continuation was conditional upon my coming to this place at the far ends of the earth. Look around this prairie and you will find the second sons of England in plentiful supply."

"Why do you stay?"

"I cannot bring myself to admit defeat. And I don't want to give up the allowance."

"And me?"

"It is difficult to manage everything alone." He paused. "Do you mind?"

"Mind what?"

"Not being wooed."

I laughed, the sound of it startling the horse. "No, I don't mind."

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THE OILY GERM OF THE WHEAT is the future. It is the part of the kernel from which the new plant springs. But it is delicate and does not always survive to produce another crop. The outer cover may protect it for a while, but it is vulnerable nonetheless. I tried not to let you see that part of me. I was supposed to help you manage. You had made that clear. We lived together, and apart, in the small one-room house you had built: living area, sleeping corner, cooking area and desk for doing accounts. One bed. We lay side by side, consciously not touching, each so

unmoving that morning would find us secretly rubbing a stiff neck and back. And we worked. From the hours before dawn, when the early summer air was sweet and gentle, until long after dark, when we fell back into bed, our backs sore again, this time from bending and plowing and hoeing. Our minds drowning in thoughts we did not share.

I was not lying when I said wooing was not important, but I was ill prepared for your separateness, for the sense that you were here temporarily, waiting for some sign that you should go. One evening at dusk, when we had been married for six months, I found you standing by the horse, your hand tangled in its mane, your body taut as if poised for flight.

“Simon . . . ”

“Amelia, do you miss England?” How seldom you used my name. As if to identify me was to claim me. I stopped at the sound of it, liquid, almost a whisper, and felt the first stirring of hope, perhaps longing.

“I miss some people and I miss the spring rain, but no, I do not miss England. I was made to feel unnecessary there. It would be wrong to miss such a place, don’t you think?”

You didn’t reply, as if my voice were merely the wind that rustled the growing wheat. I thought I had insulted you, but that night you turned to me in our lonely bed and laid your hand on my breast.

“Speak to me,” you said, as if the rhythms and cadences of my voice would transport you to that place for which you longed.

“I am afraid.”

“So am I.”

Did I think it would be better for us after? That the intermingling of limbs and scent and sighs would change the rhythm of our days, the isolation of our thoughts? I had not thought to fall in love. To look up from milking a cow or churning butter or tending to the garden and feel my breath leave me at the sight of you crossing from the barn to the house or wiping the sweat from your forehead. To need to position myself where you might have to touch me as you passed. In each season, to implore the wind and rain and snow and crop to cooperate so you would lose that look of impermanence and want to stay here with me.

But though you were with me in the fragile cocoon of the nights, you retreated when the dark gave way to dawn. Even more so in our second year together when I told you I was carrying your child. Was it panic I saw deep in your eyes, their light blue becoming cobalt with a vision of the future you had

not anticipated? I wanted to tell you that a child born of this place might connect us to the land, a rooting of our feet and dreams here, where the sky is endless and the possibilities limitless. But before I could say it, before I could make you want this link between us, it was gone, spilling out from between my legs one morning as I stood braiding my hair. In the days that followed you comforted me, but you did not tell me there would be other babies. And although, in the months before you left, you came to me in the night, you did not try to replant what we had lost.

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THE NUTRITIOUS ENDOSPERM IS LARGER than the rest of the kernel. The foundation of any flour. Resilient. On a blistering summer day, when the fields buzzed with the sound of crickets, and the wind was hot against the skin, the word came.

“Simon, what has happened?”

“England and Germany are at war. Armies are mustering. They’ve called for volunteers.”

“I am glad we are away from such madness.”

“Amelia, many of those enlisting are English. I have to go.”

I watched your face, the pulse in your jaw rapid, hard.

“Have to or want to?”

“It will be over in a few months and I’ll be back. I’ll arrange for help with the harvest and be back by Christmas.”

“How lucky for you, Simon. A reason for you to go, to abandon this farm, to get away from me . . .”

“Stop it.”

“Stop it? Look at me and tell me I’m wrong.”

“I don’t have to justify this. England is at war. It’s what men do, Amelia. They fight to protect what they believe in.”

“Canada, Simon? Me? Are we what you will fight to protect? We are your life now. Have you forgotten?”

“I’m sorry, Amelia. I will be back, but I have to go. I won’t be left out.” You turned from me then, already seeing another place, but I called you as a voice in a dream pulls you away from your chosen direction.

“Go, then. Prove to your brother that you are not the lesser man because of an accident of birth. Perhaps he will die and you can take on the life you think would be so much better than the one you have here, with a barren wife no one else wanted.”

The words circled over me and penetrated my pores. They lingered like fine dust, their impact felt in the corners of my mind as I tried to close them out.

You went, of course. You left me on a morning when the sky was the colour of cornflowers and the wheat was strong and sure. I think you saw the beauty of the land, and I hoped it would brand itself on your eyes when you rode away. I stood outside the house as you came up behind me and pulled me back against your chest, your arms wrapping around my waist. I was rigid with anger and should have pulled away, but you had calculated well that my body would respond.

You put your mouth to my ear and whispered, "I promise I will come back," and released me. The warm breath caught me off guard, my body betraying my resolve to remain still. Before I could speak you had mounted and ridden away.

"Why?" I whispered. "Why will you come back?"

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SOMETIMES A STORM WILL COME out of the sky that can be seen for miles. This first spring since you left I looked out one morning at the new plants beginning to rise from the ground and knew complete helplessness before a force I could not control. The sounds of thunder and lightening deafened me, and I watched as the wheat was pummelled beneath hail that crushed the kernels beyond recognition. When it was over the wheat lay trampled. No outer cover, no oily germ, no endosperm.

And in a muddy place that my imagination cannot conjure, you lay trampled under the feet of your battalion as they retreated. Forever unaware of the fury and blinding light that filled the sky around you. Were you granted a last flash of clarity before you died, a moment of knowing what your future would have held? I hope not. I hope so.

If I could have spoken to you in your last moments I would have reminded you that sometimes the wheat surprises us, is hardier than it looks. In the trampled remains a few stalks survive and produce more. And sometimes, in a woman's body, a tenacious seed takes hold.