

VENUS OF SWITCHGRASS

MARLEY RAMON

There is a woman in the fields. I've seen her, late at night when I'm supposed to be sleeping. There is a woman in the fields, and I don't think she's from around here.

We live on the edge of town: my dad, my sister, and I, right next to the last gas station — the one with only two pumps — and the tall grass. I'm not supposed to go in there, there are spaces where it gets taller than a two-by-six, my dad says, and I could go right in and be swallowed by the earth. There's a lot of things I'm 'sposed to do: get the eggs, pen the goat, brush Henry the sheep dog, be asleep and not be peeking through the slats in my blinds. But that's the one thing I am not 'sposed to do.

But I did it yesterday.

I stepped up to the grasses, right at the edges of where my house touched the wild. And I watched, and I listened. I didn't hear my dad call my name all mad-like, and I didn't hear my sister need anything, and I didn't hear anything growl or tumble in the grasses, and the only thing in my ears was the nice cool wind. I didn't think the Earth wanted to swallow me up. I thought my dad was fibbin'. Missy 'n' him went in the tall grass sometimes. I needed to go into the grass because if I didn't, I'd still be the baby of my family forever. I had to go into the grass. Now.

The first step into the wild wasn't much of a step at all. I put one foot securely over the edge. Let the earth know that I didn't care if it knew that I knew I wasn't supposed to be over here. I put one foot over the line of where the grass turned from grass to tall grass and I put it down decisive-like. Toe then heel, like a rooster, proud and tall. Though I didn't crow anything, and nothing woke to me at all. There was a beacon in my chest, and I ran home to recoup and gather supplies.

The sun was four fingers up the horizon anyways. I didn't wanna chance the dark turning up all the hungry in the soil. I took that foot out just as confidently as I put it in. That's what I wanted the earth to think. And then I walked to the back door. Pushing at the urge to run, I let my boots find each square inch of ground and muscled slow and steady back to the door. I thought I heard a whistle, but I didn't turn around, that's what they tell you not to do.

I slept and rustled in my sheets like grass and windchimes. I'd check the window, slating the blinds just enough to peek out of one end. The tall grass bent my direction, but then it bent the other way. Wind. And nothing else. I laid back down and turned some more, pulling my sheets around me like a twister. Groaning until my sister threw her pillow at me and I decided on my own to quiet down. She's not quite on the edge of fourteen yet, but she's bigger than me and you gotta pick your fights. Her pillow smelled like baking bread and all things nice. And my last survey of the grass didn't tell me anything new.



I slipped into sheets like a rising tide, all at once and totally gone.

When I woke there wasn't much to gather — I put a water bottle and a wax paper wrapped summer sausage into my sack. I wore my tallest shoes, the ones with the hard toes that clomped around. There was work to be done, but when I brushed the dogs and stole the eggs, I took a thin rope from the loft. A great big bundle that I tied to the waterspout.

This next step into the grasses was easier. The blades of grass licked up my calves, but they didn't feel hungry yet. I stooped down to pet them and none of them nipped. Off I went.

The grass climbed higher the deeper in I went. It wasn't long before I had to stretch on my tip toes to see. Wasn't much farther than that until I had to just go in the direction my rope line wasn't. I didn't see anything but the shifting green ocean in front of me.

It isn't my courage that runs out first. It might've, but it hadn't yet because my rope ran out first. Granddad always says that wisdom tries to catch me, but I'm faster. I think it's the same thing with my bravery, I can run too fast. Best in my class and better than my sister too. I want to untie my rope and keep going, but I can't see any direction but up. The grass is thick in front of me, and if I stick my arms out, it's eaten up by the grasses before I pull it up. Gobbled in plain sight, like the earth really will take me if I wait too long.

There's more to see, I'm sure of it. I almost take my rope off, but I see her. There's a tall woman, taller than me by a lot. I can see her honey blonde hair dust the top grasses and she's moving around. Calm like me.

It's still early, and I start to find myself back with my rope. Winding the concourse like that guy that killed the minotaur. Dad told me about him, but maybe I don't want to be him because I didn't come to kill anyone. Who would that make the blonde woman? I shake these thoughts out of my head. She's moving much more calmly than I am. I don't hear any rustling, just deep breathing. In and out like meditation. I'm picking my way carefully through the grass shards and they cut a little closer to my skin.

They could cut me if they wanted. Close to my onion layers like a blade relaxed. They could slash me I think, soft and quick like a paper cut, if they wanted to. I'm winding through the sea again, letting the blades of grass hit my skin and fall off like water. Everything's fine until I fade into a dull walk — like the end of the mile. I'm listening too hard to see where I put my feet. I see them moving in front of me in my peripherals and that's good enough for me. I feel the grass I step on not in my soles, but in my very soul. It puts a crack through me like Missy stepping on my back. I stop to listen and the one ear I can wiggle, I do; I cock it up like a dog might. There's nothing but not the good nothing with the birds and the wind and the bugs and the buzz of life. There isn't anything. It's like I held my hands to my ears or ducked under the soapy bathwater.

The grass starts to rustle all at once as the blonde woman's head reappears. Her hair bounces and bobs along the path from where she was to where I am. She's getting closer. The bit of her head I can see is quickly visible for less and less time.

I shove my draw string off quickly, pulling the mouth open like I might just tear the canvas if it doesn't comply. I'm digging around and can't seem to find it. The woman's head disappears but from angle not from distance. The grass bends around her and the only sound I can get clearly is the whipping noise air makes, like the crack of a jump rope pulled taut, like the snapping of a cord. My hand closes around the wax paper and I pull

it out without unwrapping it. It took Missy a whole bunch of bee stings to get the comb to make this paper, but I hope she'd miss me more than it.

I lob the whole thing — paper and all — high and far. I don't think I made it more than a handful of meters away from me, but the air changes. I don't even realize I'm on the ground but I am, small like the days when Missy would still play hide-and-seek with me. I'm bundled up, a girl and her knees and the rope around her waist just one small mass. My legs unbunch enough for me to roll back on my butt in the unparted section of the grass. My face obscured by too much shadow.

The woman passes nearby, somewhere between me and the sausage. She runs past and she's not wearing any shoes, but I don't think those are feet either. The skin is lithe and muscled like every part of her is flexed and taut, like the individual muscle fibers are working together but aren't joined. Like the whole of her is made of shards and blades and twines. Her body moves not like anyone I've ever seen, she's pulled through the fields and she doesn't disturb any of the grasses as they move around her.

The sound is awful, the whipping of grass out of her way and the tightening of the woman as she pushes through and the slow melodic breathing. It isn't working at all; this thing isn't out of breath at all.

I can't see her anymore, but I can hear her and she's heading away from my rope line. I crawl out of the grass on my hands and knees, careful not to trample anything. I don't look up anymore, my eyes are glued to my steps. A few times, it feels like the grass lays down and waits for me to see it. Standing stock straight as I catch my foot and hop over the trap. The grass stands back up and innocuously joins its brothers' soft swaying.

I'm almost home, I feel it and I can see above the grass for the first time. My eyes barely dusting the top when I fix my posture. I'm moving as quickly as I can carefully. Barely making a noise, it's unmistakable when the woman finds the meat. There's a quick tightening like a short stocky laugh. It's the sounds of a hundred million threads pulling against each other at once, unable to take the tension. The sound of a city bridge sagging with the weight. A chittering like a purr, not at all comforting but from something internal. It's a noise I couldn't replicate.

It's almost night, the sky a dark and dusky indigo. It can't have been that long. I haven't eaten all day and I've been on my feet for hours. I can see my house now. I'm picking through the grasses still; they're only about chest height, but I refuse to take any chances.

I see her again, but she's still. I can't quite make out the blonde woman's features, but she's flat-faced and unmoving. Her hair keeps blowing in front of her and she makes no move to stop it. I don't stop walking.

The woman takes a step towards me, slow and measured. It's weird and jerky again, like a marionette pulled toward me instead of her moving her legs properly. I don't wait for her to get closer, I take off towards the house. Running, pulling the rope to get to the edge just a little bit faster. I don't stop until I touch the waterspout. The blonde woman is still standing there, staring motionlessly.

One hand on the wall to the shed, I'm bent over and gasping for breath. The woman moves, turning to look at the house and then me. What do you want, I say. WHAT DO YOU WANT. I'm yelling now but I don't care. Shoving my hands down by my side in

exasperation. LEAVE ME ALONE. The woman raises one hand, she points at me. STOP IT, I yell. Her hand lowers slowly, and I see her mouth open, though nothing comes out. She's making shapes with her mouth, but I'm not sure I'm reading her lips right. It looks like she says stop it, but I can't hear her.

I'M NOT DOING ANYTHING, YOU STOP IT. The woman starts talking again. What is she on about, I'm not the one accosting her. STOP. Her mouth closes. She turns to the house again. She takes one more step to the house and I throw my hands out. YOU AREN'T ALLOWED OVER HERE. The blonde woman, foot raised again, lowers her leg.

She puzzles about for a second, pointing at me and then herself. I don't know what else to do, I mirror her. I copy everything she does. She moves her hand open and closed, I move mine. She brings her fingers to her chest, so do I. I don't know what she wants, but she isn't chasing anymore.

The woman breaks the still pool of acceptable by reaching inside of her stomach. Her fingers test the surface before pushing inside, ripples working through her abdomen. What I thought was a tight — fitting green shirt moves apart and over. The woman's free hand helps pull the skin into an opening, easily slitting between the threads holding her together.

I take one step backwards, roughly shoving my back against the wall. There's nowhere to go. The woman pulls a shedding fist from her skin, small flakes and droplets leaking from her hand. Smoothing it out gently, the blonde woman is holding Missy's beeswax wrapping. It's lighter, and there are holes worn in the paper, but it's the same fabric she picked out from the city months ago. The woman lofts the paper like a flag.

There's a high — pitched buzzing behind my eyes, I stop, gripping half — moon saucers into my ankles. My vision's going fuzzy but I force myself to listen to all the critters. There are birds in the distance, and the horses are talking in their pens, and Henry is snoring somewhere warm. I am safe, I tell myself.

The woman shakes her flag again. She picks her leg up like she might come closer, but she doesn't; she only holds her knee up high and puts it down. She puts her arm down and up again. It takes the blonde woman repeating her sequence for me to figure it out. When she waves her flag, I pick my hand up and wave it. Her skin ripples like the wind brushes through it, the woman lets her body roll like it needs to wave. I copy her, bending at the side before slowly springing back.

I sit with the woman, blowing in the wind, for almost a minute. She raises her flag again. WAIT THERE, DON'T MOVE, I'm cupping my hands around my mouth, but if I can't hear her, I doubt she can hear me. PLEASE, I toss in for good measure. The woman mouths back at me. DON'T MOVE DON'T MOVE DON'T MOVE. She probably gets it.

I race back to the house, taking corners like a mad woman. I don't take my shoes off at the door and it feels wrong, but I don't want the woman coming to check on me. Or leaving, I'm coming to realize. I grab a whole rope of linked sausages. I almost leave before I remember. I double back to bring another beeswax wrapper with me.

What are you rushing off too, my sister asks from the couch. Her legs are kicked up on the seat and she doesn't glance away from her book to see me. Nothing Missy, I answer back quickly. Whatever, don't get into anything stupid Nina. Iwon'tbyeloveyou. The screen door thwaps shut before she can answer again.



The woman is standing exactly where I left her, head tilted up, sunning herself. She looks peaceful, and at home. You can see her hair blow gently in the wind in time with the grasses around her, some of the strands winding up her arms.

HEY LADY. Her attention comes to and her head snaps in my direction. HEY LADY, she mouths, she raises the beeswax square again. I raise mine and the woman sways once in each direction quickly. I sway back. Now that I really think about it, I have no idea how I'm going to throw a piece of sausage as far as she is. A part of me knows I shouldn't, but that small idiotic terribly excited voice is thrilled that the woman will have to come closer.

I'm still calling it a woman, but I want to see the creature up close.

I rear back and throw a chunk of the sausage towards Angie. The meat winds a pleasing spiral in the air, cresting nicely against the setting sun before it lands about half the distance between us. WAIT THERE, she mouths standing motionless. OH, NO. THAT'S FOR YOU. I GOT IT FOR YOU. I shake my beeswax flag and something clicks in her eyes.

The woman for her part, makes it worth my while. She takes off towards the sausage, knowing exactly what direction to head even though I'd long since lost it in the sea of grass. I can't see her legs beneath the green, but I don't think I'd see anything but a blur anyways. The woman almost flies to the sausage. She doesn't eat it, the blonde woman just pulls a hole open in her chest, depositing the entire meal quickly before pulling the fibers shut like blinds.

She's beautiful, and this is the coolest thing to ever happen to me. I shake my beeswax wrapping like a winning raffle ticket, flashing the biggest smile at the wonder from the grasses. She catches on quickly enough. Her mouth opens, more aptly described a hole in her face over a smile, but she pushes all her features slightly apart to accommodate my face and I can still see her arms swaying slightly. I bend to and 'fro, grinning until I can feel my lips tense.

We stay like that for a second, swaying in the wind and beaming like jack o' lanterns.

It's getting late and I don't know how to tell her that I'll have to play tomorrow. DO YOU KNOW THE SUN? I ask and the woman mouths the whole sentence back. She's close enough now that I can tell it's not the distance causing the silent response. The woman isn't making any noise at all, just moving like me. I point my free hand at the sun, THE SUN. She picks up her nose to mouth THE SUN. The woman doesn't squint into the distance, she seems almost to open for it, palms turning up. SUN, she almost says.

I WILL BE BACK WHEN THE SUN COMES BACK. I'm probably using too many new words. BE BACK, I say. I wait for her mouth to repeat the shapes and I take off. I have to show her what it means, so I run just far enough to duck around the side of the shed and out of sight. I wait only a second before reappearing, BE BACK. She thinks for a second. BE BACK she mouths, and she seems to melt below the grass line before springing up a touch closer, BE BACK! I bare my teeth as wide as possible, swaying my whole body. BE BACK, she sways.

BE BACK WHEN SUN BACK. That's all I can give her. I point to the sun, letting my extended arm rotate all along the circumference of the Earth. I let my hand linger toward the east, BE BACK.

There's no way for me to know if she gets it. She points at herself, BE BACK, she mouths then melts into the grass. She gets it. I practically skip into the house, smuggling the summer sausage to my room.

It's hard to sit through dinner and my dad grumble about some fox scaring the chickens when all I can think about is the creature from next door. I end up telling my dad that I'm tired from not sleeping well just so I can go to my room and watch for the blonde woman. Better enjoy this peace while you can, he says, whole farm's going to hell if our idiot dog won't do his job. Good night dad! I don't hear much of anything he's saying.

I pull the blinds all the way open and my blankets up to my shoulders. I don't see her but I'm giddy anyways. I'm naming her Angie, from Angiosperm. She might have a name already, she probably does, but I don't think I can say it in human. It's probably a wiggle or something. I'm teaching her English, I'm giving her a name for the culture. Angie, the flowering plant: grass. I let my feet kick in the air before a yawn wiggles itself through my body. It's much easier to sleep when I know what's out there. And when I know she's nice.

Surely, the minute sunlight shines on the horizon, I'm out the door, pulling on my shoes by the heel tab. HELLO, I call, BE BACK. I start to wave my beeswax wrapper, but I don't think she needs it because she's flying through the grasses only a moment later. BE BACK, she mouths.

I don't have to hide my delight. Jumping up and waving my flag like one of triumph, BE BACK! From my bag I produce the sausage link from yesterday. Twisting off a new piece, I throw it between us. I really don't know if Angie is safe, but I want her to be. She reappears closer to me, the grass still covering most of her body. The grass at the edge of the plot has grown taller, healthier. There's a starker height difference between our lawn and the tall grass. I think if I stepped over my line, my knee would be below the blades now.

The woman is close enough to get a good look at finally. She's greener than she first appears, like her pores have chlorophyll in them: it's delightful. You can almost see the seams in her skin, like the grain of wood in a table. NINA, I gesture to myself, NINA. I see her mouth back but she also points to herself. NO, I point to her: ANGIE; I point to me: NINA. She does the same thing in the right order this time. NINA BE BACK. I race around the corner of my house and back again. NINA BE BACK, she mouths. ANGIE BE BACK, I wait for her.

My dad tells me that patience is the greatest weapon in training the sheep puppies. ANGIE BE BACK, and I wait. Neither of us move for a millisecond. She repeats Nina be back and Angie be back, almost on loop, searching for the meaning. I'm getting better at reading lips, I can see what she's saying even when it isn't big and loud on her face. ANGIE BE BACK, she says, and she sinks down into the grass. When she surfaces, she surfaces only a foot above the edge at first, her skin broken into a smile. I jump and stamp my foot on the ground, letting my hands sway around. ANGIE, I say. NINA, Angie mouths back to me.

I throw her a whole sausage link, right at the edge of the grasses. She throws her body right behind the line, close but not quite over. I can better see how she moves now. A blocky, stunted stumble now that there wasn't as much grass. The short stuff that could touch her was, bending over to reinforce her calves and hold her back up. I could see the distinct minute that the grass couldn't hold Angie's torso up anymore, when precisely she had to learn to hold her body up fully.

This wasn't the graceful flying motion I saw earlier; this was someone supporting their weight for the first time. I turn my back to her, pulling up my shirt and tapping the vertebrate of my spine, one by one. Angie seems to lean forward in interest, but that could just be her



head sagging towards me. I pop a finger against each vertebrae — over and over — clucking my tongue with each point. All at once, she twists her arms to touch her own back, they're a little too stretchy — noodle-y like she hasn't ever once thought about her elbows.

There's a soft noise like a zipper and that pulling noise of a rope learning the weight it can carry. All at once, like a marionette being picked up from where its holder left it under the bed, Angie sits up. She takes a few more steps and they're better but not good.

I'll have to teach her that too.

The morning is breezily wasted under a warm afternoon of remembering what were probably my first lessons, too. Angie and I are mirror images in lifted legs and falling bodies. I do it all big and exaggerated. Walking is just falling forward, Angie just has to get used to falling without the hands that hold her up.

There's a few times I crow like a proud rooster, Angie's learning new words and she's picking up this whole walking thing quickly. There's a few times where she stops; NINA, she mouths, pointing at me. She feels along the length of her legs, finding the spot that's not holding its weight. I flex my legs and let her observe. The muscle pulls and pushes, rising and flattening. There's a zipping noise, and Angie stands a little bit taller.

She can run now, in the short grass just before the line. I'm like the world's coolest farmer and I wonder distantly if the state fair would make a new category for me. I can't exactly put Angie with the other rose bushes or prize pumpkins or big beef tomatoes. Maybe she would belong best with the Jack Russell terriers, she's got a real knack for picking up walking. I could teach her to run and jump and climb the obstacles. Maybe I could take her to school with me.

I think it's more work to run in the short grass, I'm glad when Angie sits down because I'm tired too. She shows me her chest cavity, it's empty in there. Just liquid and the inner fibers of Angie's skin. She's less human in there. I wonder if she just cares less since no one can see it.

Angie lets me feed her more bits of summer sausage. It sinks leisurely, the viscous liquid slowing its descent. I know if I were to stick my hands in it would feel like syrup. I wanna see it firsthand. NINA, Angie mouths, and I catch the movement. I snap out of my musings from where I've leaned forward, nearly over the line of grass.

It's probably fine, but I like the security of being somewhere Angie can't be. For now, at least. I need to make sure we're best friends first. I think back to the warm darkness the summer sausage is in. I wonder if it feels sticky if you're in it. I wonder if it feels anything at all, or if it's just dark.

NINA. Right, I wave back at Angie, dipping into a whole-body wave. NINA, LOOK. PLEASE, LOOK. It feels like I can hear her. I've taught her new words and I think I almost know what her voice sounds like. It's deeper for a woman, raspy but with a slow airy quality. It's unrushed. Someone who lives in the sun and lives simply. YES, ANGIE? I don't have to yell anymore, but I make my words big just in case. It keeps the shape of my mouth the same.

ANGIE? LOOK?

YES, NINA. Angie mimes throwing something. She pulls her beeswax paper from the bit of hip she's tucked it into, shaking it. Hmm, I haven't taught her anything about food yet. MEAT, ANGIE THIS IS MEAT. She's tracing parabolas in the air again, pulling her outstretched hands from me to her arm. There are small fibers poking up all around her



upper body, now that I look. Like small antennae. NINA, MEAT ANGIE. Nice to meet you Angie, I laugh to myself if only for a moment.

I throw another small piece of summer sausage, letting it arc against the sunlight. It cuts out the sun for a tiny moment, both Angie's and my head tilting up to catch it, a tiny little eclipse just for the two of us. The meat lands right at the part of her arm that probably didn't have a bicep in it. It grazes a few of those little antennae as it starts to slide and for only a moment, Angie's skin opens and slams shut. The pieces of her arm split at a seam before brutally pulling shut around the bite.

My jaw hangs open. I'm surely teaching Angie a host of new emotions. She doesn't tilt up her arm to let it fall to her stomach pit or anything. I'm sure she just moves fibers to get it there. I see her shoulder swallow like a throat.

Angie traces a finger from her arm to her stomach. Like I don't know what she did with it or something. She smiles, big and stretched. Her not teeth are clear this close. She is the coolest thing I've ever seen. I let my body wave excited and quickly side to side and it almost feels natural. Angie does the same thing.

I spend the rest of the day throwing small pieces of meat at Angie. I give her the rest of the bag, until it's empty and I shake it to show that nothing falls out. It's getting dark anyways. I wave to Angie and start to head to my house. BE BACK ANGIE.

BE BACK NINA.

She stays there, in the shallow grass watching me. She's still standing there when I crack open my blinds. She's almost connected to the grass around her, and it twists up her arms and legs. Like she might melt back into it again. I wonder if she's sharing the nutrients with her friends. Her grass friends; I'm her real friend now.

Angie's eyeing the border where the tall grass ends. I wonder if she's sad she's stuck in the grass. Maybe, once she learns more, I'll bring her over for dinner. There will be a time when she's more human than plant. When she's built all the right muscles and learned all the words. I fall asleep thinking about a wheelbarrow filled with grass and dirt. I'm taking Angie with me to the city. I want to wave goodnight to Angie, but she probably isn't watching anymore now that I've laid down.

I wake up, and it's much too dark to be morning. There are some dogs barking in the distance, but it's not Henry. I peek out of my blinds and there are lights moving in the tall grass. I run outside, not bothering to change out of my pajamas or put on shoes. The grass is cold and indifferent beneath my toes.

I can see pieces of everything, but not enough to make out what's going on. It's two men, maybe three, and their flashlights are bobbing through the gaps in the blades. There's light bouncing off all of the stalks and it diffuses everything to a muddled mess. The wind is moving, or at least it looks like it is. I lick my fingers; it's a still night. The grass is just excited.

I see Angie's head distantly, she's moving even faster than she used to. She must not see the men, she's moving deeper into the grasses. Soon, they won't be able to find their way out, flashlights or no. The two dogs bark incessantly, it's hard to place them below the blades. I take off into the grass. Passing the threshold like housecat to a cracked door.

The wandering men move without clear purpose. They're tracing messy circles through the grass and knocking down blades with aplomb, stepping wherever and grinding

heavy boots into the soft soil. I'm slower — watching my step and minding my arms — but they aren't heading any particular direction. Just deeper.

Angie winds around them. Always out of reach, there are times when I catch her green — golden hair in the moonlight or more rarely, under the fuzzy edges of a flashlight. It shoots away a moment later. The men chase the barely caught sightings of Angie with renewed vigor at every morsel. I catch her for only moments myself. I see her eyes, low in the grass, fixed on one of the men. I don't touch any of the grass and she doesn't see me.

We wandered deep enough that the grass is over all of our heads. I only see one of the men and the rare snippet of Angie. There's less light bouncing through the sea, but there's moon light enough. I call for the man, for Angie. No one responds.

I'm watching over my feet intently, that's the only reason I don't trip over the flashlight. It's prone on the ground, between two of the thickets but just as dirty. It looks wet and the area around it is muddy, some of the grass is bent at odd angles and slick. I find it just as a strangled yelp chokes through the air. Only one dog barks now. I don't touch any of it. There's moonlight enough, that's why I don't stop to pick up the flashlight. That, and I'm sure the man will be back for it.

One of them is still wandering. I want to focus on him. Neither of us is supposed to go into the tall grass.

It isn't me that finds him. He finds me. I didn't even hear him coming, that weird silence that permeates the grasses blanketing him. I find myself talking just to fill the air with something familiar. Sir, sir, I say, what are you doing. He doesn't even see me. His sight line is too high for the dog he's lost. He's looking for something and his flashlight swings but he's not illuminating in any way useful to the human eye. It just swings wildly, like he's keeping up the appearance of scanning.

I don't see Angie at all. We need to leave, I whisper, we have to get you out of the grass. It isn't safe, I say. I get as close as I can to talking without leaving my whisper. The man doesn't respond — the shotgun he has is moving limply at his side like an absent thought — he turns to walk, deeper into the grasses. I swear I see a flash of the beeswax paper Angie keeps on her hip. I don't see any of her, just pieces flashing by. Something caught in the edges of roving light. The man is between her and I, between the depth of the grass and my house, between grass he can breathe in and the thick, dark masses he clearly wants to go towards. SIR, I give up whispering, almost giving up talking altogether. My conscious brain gives up talking but really it just abandons thinking before I speak. COME WITH ME, I yell, WE NEED TO LEAVE. STOP TOUCHING THE GRASS, YOU ARE MEAT, IT DOESN'T KNOW. SHE WON'T UNDERSTAND YOU, ANGIE DOESN'T KNOW THE WORDS. I'm pleading with him. The man doesn't respond. My fists are tightly wound within the flannel of the shirt, my heels digging into the dirt. He tries at first to shrug out of the undone shirt. There's one too many buttons and for the first time, I am almost acknowledged.

He twists his torso without his head ever leaving the last spot we saw Angie in. He pushes me off. And I fall out of the path we have carved. I land clean on my butt, my legs and arms woven in the grass and soil. It's like his strength doesn't make any sense to him anymore, he stumbles backwards, breaking stalks beneath his clumsy feet. My nightgown is wet and sticky from where his hands met my shoulders. It smells like syrup.

I feel that same feeling I had that first day I ventured out here. Deep in the grass and I am wrong. An intruder in all the wrong ways. There isn't enough hair on my arms to stand up. I quickly twist out of the grass, curling my arms around my knees tightly. I don't touch anything. There aren't any barking dogs to pierce the silent night. There's nothing but the man's stumble and my beating heart that dare make any noise at all.

The hunter, no longer held back by me, breaks out into his same thickset stumble, pulling his arms through the lines of green and his feet over anything and everything. They don't clear a thing, two degrees from dragged through the field. I can feel the attention pulled away from me, that not — wind tilting the grasses towards the man.

I'm still there, not moving, when I see Angie again. The man had wandered from my view but a few meters down, only halfway inside the space between lines of grass, Angie stands still. Her back's to me, I don't think she's seen me.

Where Angie is, this man follows. She's stopped winding through the fields and in this man's clumsy spiral, he's finally found her. He's further covered in that amber liquid that's wiped on my nightgown, it's all over his hands and his face and his shirt is covered in what looks like gashes. None of them break the fabric, but he's been through the thick of whatever it is.

He heads directly for the unmoving Angie — his eyes never once focus on her. They're far from me, but I feel like I can see all of the details better than I can. My mind replaces features smudged by distance with the exact things I remember seeing yesterday. Her hair is a kind of green — yellow. Her skin has distinct lines in it, the fibers joining in layers of layers. Her arms and chest raise in hundreds of tiny antennae.

The man reaches out to her, his hands all wet and orange. I know what happened to the other men, to their dogs. I know that the flashlight will never get picked up. It will stay on until the battery dies and it will rust teal and corrode and be slowly buried by dirt and grass. The same thing will happen to the flashlight at the man's feet. There's a sickly sense of artistry in the backlighting of the scene, in the way I can almost see the man but Angie is nothing more than silhouette.

The man reaches towards her chest and I know at once that he made a worse decision than the other. This man reaches with his hands, both arms going to grasp Angie's arms while his head moves behind the rest of him. The grass starts to bend toward Angie, building a webbing between her arm and her side. She's becoming a larger target. This man's lumbering hands reach for Angie and I know at once the other man went in headfirst. Maybe he fell, or tripped, or lunged.

But he didn't scream. This man's hands grip at Angie's upper arms and when her skin slices open and shut it is quick. Quick but not painless. The man's eyes begin to focus and whatever was in that nectar isn't good enough and he screams. One of his arms whips wildly, the grasses blowing back with the small dark splatters painting them. He doesn't stop screaming, his left arm feeds further into Angie and the man panics and thrashes. She puts a single fist into his hair and yanks.

There isn't the noise of anything else to drown out the man. No barks, no wind, no buzz. He just screams and screams and screams. It isn't all one flat yell, it's punctuated by sobs and loud gasping inhales. Angie's pulling his head and I can see the man strain his neck



backwards. After everything, the back lighting of the flashlight catches the straining of his muscles and I almost worry Angie will break him before he gets inside.

She doesn't and whether it's the blood loss or the unceasing dwindling of his possibilities, the man lets himself lean forward. Angie's almost gentle and I can hear the way his neck pops as her chest closes around the man's delicate windpipe. I can't see how cleanly the job finishes. There's a final exhale, a great sag of his body like a sigh, and Angie begins to move deeper into the grass. She's abandoned walking, gliding through the forest of grasses. Connecting and disconnecting, she keeps going until I can no longer see her or the man, a million pats on the back ushering her inside. I'm sure she and the grasses will come back bigger tomorrow.

I don't leave for a long while. I know I must but none of my muscles are responding. I simply stay, a small ball of limbs and bone. I keep seeing the man in front of me. I keep hearing Angie behind me but she never comes.

I don't think she can find me unless she sees me, or I trip one of her sensors. I need to leave. It's more important I don't touch any grass than leave quickly I suppose. I want to stay in a little ball, but I can't shake the image of the man's waving arm from my mind. It's what finally lets me untangle my arms from their spots and rub readiness back into my legs.

Picking my way back is arduous and particular work but I don't know how to stop. I need to be back home. I need to see Missy and dad and milk the cows and pet Henry. I'm not supposed to be in the tall grass and I was stupid and wrong and I'm paying for it.

Everything is the same. For miles and miles. I only know I'm not going deeper because the grass ever so slightly starts to shorten. Not enough for me to see. Not enough to be excited about. I can see Angie waiting for me, maybe picking her own way through the grasses to see me emerge from the house. To see Nina be back.

I wonder if she'll still try to make me feed her breakfast. She should be full and I am angry at the thought of it. The grass continues.

I'm getting tired. A few times, I catch myself rationalizing a nap in the dirt. If I lay correctly, I wouldn't touch anything, disturb anyone. A quick nap.

I pinch myself, over and over. I drag nails roughly up and down my arms, leaving angry streaks of red. I keep seeing the man. I resort to pulling individual hairs out of my head. Plucking myself like a chicken as I continue my march. Every time I grab a strand of hair, that image of the man, bounces away for a second. Eventually, the way his neck strains against Angie's hand, the force flushing blood to his cheeks and nose, is more dogged than me pulling my own hair out.

I stop pulling it out.

The grass is still up to my chest, but I'm somewhere new. I can see my house again. I can't wait to be back in bed, to hug my sister, to catch my dad up with the hens. I'm going to burn this whole field down.

I don't let my attention falter.

The grass is still tall, but I was right that it's been growing in the night, the border is more abrupt. I don't have to work my way until the grass fades down to my ankles, I'm so close to safety. I hear the man screaming behind me. The rooster sounds somewhere in

the distance and they blend together like a horrible orchestra. The sun's beginning to peek over the hills. Everything turns indigo under the breaking of its light and I keep winding my way to the house.

It's close, I could run for it now. Maybe. I'm the fastest in my class. It doesn't matter how much grass I trample; I just have to pass the border. Angie is so much faster than fair in the grass though, pushing through with thousands to help. She would catch me, before I got close to the edge. These thoughts are a nice distraction, but I can't afford distractions.

Exhaustion pulls at my limbs; I want nothing more but to let myself fall, build a plush nest in the bent grass, make my bed and lie in it. I am so close.

The sun's fully crested. It's morning. I hear her, flying through the grass.

I'm picking forward, as quickly as carefully allows.

She sees me, tilted forward as she moves through the sea. Her body is better than when I saw it last, like she's had more notes on her anatomy.

Her neck has muscles now.

NINA! BE BACK, she signs, her mouth wide in a contorted smile. I can't view her with anything but horror now. I take off running.

I am close. The grass tickles at my waist and I slam my legs through and down. My arms arc through the air, pushing everything behind me. I hear Angie pulling after me. I am closer than she is. It should be impossible for me to keep moving, but I do. I am so close.

The grass pulls up at me but it shortens. It cuts along my hips, then thighs. I can feel the new sprouts catching on my knees but that is it before I dive for the border. Angie is steps behind me. There isn't enough grass to glide anymore and I taught her everything she knows. But not everything I knew. In the clear air, I am the fastest. She doesn't know anything about this, in the last few steps, I don't touch any grass at all. I throw my entire body forward, it arcs until my hands slam into the sweet flat land of my yard. My wrists are sore and there are grazes from where the grass gripped paper cuts into my legs, but I am too far for her to reach.

I let my head tip back and spill laughter on the ground like pesticide.

Angie stands right at the edge of the grass. The shorter blades lick along her ankles like comfort. She is waving, her body dipping side to side, Angie is saying something. I pause my victory to gape at her. NINA BACK! LOOK ANGIE BACK, she says like my face of disgust is a lack of recognition. I see better now, than ever. NO! NINA IS NOT BACK, NINA WILL NEVER BE BACK. I'm yelling words I haven't taught her. I push backwards until my back hits the shed wall, my legs kicking wildly to put distance between us. GO ANGIE, GO, I'm yelling now, screaming and crying and dripping snot down my nose.

WHY DID YOU DO THAT? I FED YOU, YOU DID THAT FOR NO REASON! YOU KILLED HIM, I am screaming uncontrollably now, I don't think any of my words form separately, they just roll out of my mouth like marbles down a staircase. GO ANGIE, NO MEAT FOR YOU.

She perks up. MEAT? NINA LOOK, she makes a parabola to her chest, like her game means anything to me now. I hate her. I hate her and I hate the tall grass and I will raze the field. Angie stands there, still.



There are some rocks below our drain spout and I think of nothing but that I want her gone. I want her to leave me alone and go in the grass and never come out. I pick up the biggest rock within reach. Angie is right at the edge of the tall grass, I throw it and it hits her square in the chest. She stumbles backwards and I throw another one. I keep picking them up and hitting her and I hate her. I want her to leave, I want to stop hearing that man scream. Not all of the rocks and stones and pebbles I'm using land but enough of them do. I don't feel any better.

Angie is beginning to look more and more angry with me, the grass begins to climb up her legs in support and I can see the fields dance behind her without any wind. I pick up a pointed stone and aim it right at her belly. I don't think she's ever been cut. I hope it hurts like losing an arm and a head and your life. I can see a bit of her stomach fluid drain quickly before the grass fibers can tighten and I hear that awful straining rope noise.

Angie holds the rock like she might throw it back. I see her try and her attempt is pathetic. There's no beginner's luck and it lands pitifully short. I can see where the digestive liquid has done away with some of her skin like a burn, it's an unnatural and sickly green. I stop throwing rocks and let my back slide down the shed until my head's on the cool, cool lawn. Angie can't throw anything and she's stuck in her stupid border.

I can see her, tilted from the way my cheek rests on the lawn. She mouths at me again, NINA MEAT, like it's finally come to something decisive. GO AWAY ANGIE, BE BACK. I won't be back, I hope she won't either. NINA MEAT. I'm not giving her anything else.

I'm looking at her, my eyes squinted, when she takes her first step. Angie steps up to the grasses, right at the edge where her wilds touched my lawn. I don't hear anything, not my dad, not Missy, no birds, or even the wind. Angie peers over the line like she's listening for the same things. Her first step into civilization isn't much of a step at all. One foot securely over the edge like she didn't care that she wasn't supposed to be over here. Toe then heel, like a rooster, proud and tall.

Angie has left the grass. I wonder if this is how that man felt, straining his neck only to feel a fisted hand in his hair and his head dragged inexplicably forward. I wonder what the digestive fluids felt like as the grass aperture closed around his throat. I wonder if it hurt or if it just felt dark and finally over.

My legs have given up on me, I can't have been walking more than a few hours but my muscles rebel at standing. I pull myself up from the ground but it doesn't matter. I start running not like the fastest girl in my class but like a horse with a wagon behind it. I taught Angie everything she knows, and she is quickly gaining on me. I pull together a run with the last of my energy, and Angie's behind figuring it out quickly.

It's over before it begins, I think. Angie is much faster than me. Much faster than I thought she could be. I'm running for the door but I won't make it. Angie is going to catch me and she's going to eat me. Feed me to the grass in tiny, little pieces. I wonder what part of me she'll catch first. I hope it is my head, I hope I all go quickly, no flailing like the man in the grass. I threw those rocks at her, maybe she'll want to make it hurt.

I can feel her behind me. I wonder if she'll put me in her stomach cavity, piece by piece, letting the grass fibers cinch around my muscles in a few inch long increments. It's amazing the way that bone — tired can just vanish. Angie's building her body every day, I helped her form her spine and leg muscles. She took pieces from that man, studied the way

his neck strained and tensed before it gave out. I wonder if she pulled the pieces apart after she dragged him away, learned how to be better at hunting.

After Angie eats me, she will kill Missy and my dad. They won't have any idea what's coming. I think of Missy splayed on the couch, if I don't make it inside, I will have led the grass to the house. Missy's bigger than me, stronger too. Maybe she can beat Angie while it's distracted with me.

The feeling's gone but the ache isn't, my limbs are tight and poorly responsive. A few times, I feel my feet begin to slide on the lawn. A bad step and a lack of friction on the short, wet grass. More than once, I feel myself almost fall, but I'm able to push slanted off the ground and continue running. I've rounded the shed and passed the silo; my heavy, deep breaths are the only thing I can focus on. Angie isn't troubled at all, her pace is relentless and her legs are much longer than mine.

I can feel her behind me, the force of almost, just a second behind. Her arms are swinging wildly, combing through the air for just a sliver of skin. My hairs behind me, loose and raked through from the night before. My gown's dirty and stained and there are messy, smudged orange handprints at my shoulders. I feel Angie's fingers nearly catch both at times but I will not stop. She pushes uselessly at my hair flitting just behind me, but I will not stop.

The door is unlocked and I throw the screen behind me. I'm not far enough ahead to shut Angie out, her dripping hands cut into the door frame before it can close. She leaves orange streaking lines behind her. I race behind the dining room table. MISSY, DAD, I'm yelling, but they have to be outside. Henry isn't on his bed either. Angie follows to the opposite end of the table. I lean left and right, trying to get her to commit to running to a side. I almost start to the right but she reaches over the table, clearing it with a swipe of her arms. The glass cup left from breakfast shatters on the floor. Angie starts a foot on the table, aiming to jump over me. Yanking a chair behind me, I catch her foot heading back for the door. She stumbles to the wall, putting a single messy hand to the floating shelf. Angie takes one step back, her mouth open and gaping. Her form is quivering, the fiber threads between her lips are losing their humanity and they pull between her open maw.

If she could make sound I don't know what would be coming out. She reaches behind her on the shelf she's hanging off. A frame hurdles in my direction but I'm already heading back for the door. The frame cracks distantly and lands somewhere I don't make time to see. I am able to get the screen shut behind me but Angie barrels through it anyway. The corners of the plastic mesh stretch against her grassy skin, drawing that sickly green into the sun light.

MISSY, MISSY COME OUT HERE, I call with as much air as I can spare from my trudging calves. I don't see her outside the house, I have to run for the barn. Angie rips the screen door from the hinges and launches it against me. It lands to my right, hitting the edge of the framework before falling unceremoniously. I can only be thankful teaching her to walk took long enough that we never covered throwing. MISSY PLEASE, my voice is shallow and scratching. The barn is my last stand.

I am covered in grass and dirt and the blood orange nectar of my plant pet that wants me dead. It has not been my morning. I step past the corner of the barn and take a foot to the ribcage. All of me follows the trajectory and no part of my muscles resist gravity. My wrist tries to interrupt my fall and I am certain it is broken. The rest of my bones jostle their way to the floor with the demeanor of a sack of potatoes. I land all at once and my head slams against the short grass.



Angie is only a second behind me but she isn't kicked to the floor. Missy hits her with a shovel, clear to the head. I get to watch her shoulders twist like an all — star pitcher on my way down. Winding the shovel like it's meant to go throw Angie. WHAT THE FUCK DID I TELL YOU ABOUT FUCKING ABOUT IN THE GRASS NINA, Missy yells and I've never heard anything quite so comforting. She doesn't stop with the shovel. Angie hits the ground flat and heavy. Missy doesn't give her even a second to think. Both hands on the shovel and feet planted on either side of Angie, she brings the tool perpendicular to the ground, forcing the tip of the shovel through her chest. Digestive fluid spurts from Angie, soaking her skin and the lawn beneath her.

Missy takes out the shovel, the hole in Angie's torso opens further and I can see the grass almost start to deflate, fluid streaming from the cavity. Rotating the shovel, Missy stabs her again, burying it midway up to the blade. She pushes up on the handle, her arms flex with the sweat sheen of activity and both of Missy's feet leave the ground. Her grip is sure, she pulls her full weight to the step of the shovel, pushing it deeper into Angie.

Fuck's sake Nina, she says, like it's just like me to come home with a grass monster. Angie's fading on the ground beneath her. The fibers of her body strain but none of them form suitable scabs and the digestive fluid is hard at work wearing through what it can touch. She hops off of Angie, pulling the shovel out with a grunt. I think she's done, coming to help me up, but she doesn't so I keep watching from my daze on the ground. She forces her shovel through Angie's arms and neck, neatly separating her into several distinct pieces.

They're distinct until she picks up her weapon again. Missy brings it down — flat side toward her target — and gets about destroying the remainder of the head. I try to talk to her, to thank her, to get up and hug my big sister, but my voice is so scratchy it comes out like nothing and my wrist screams at me when I try and move it and my legs feel like butter. I look at her and I gape like a fish.

No sound comes out when I mouth at her, I bet I look like Angie. Nina, Why the fuck can this shit walk, Missy says, What the hell have you been up to. I can only laugh in response. The sun is high above me, warm and safe. I lay my head back and stare at the cloudless sky. I can't see any green at all.

Missy pushes her head into my sky blue view. Nina, she says, tell me that you went messing in the tall grass so I can tell dad that he was an idiot for not telling you sooner. The shade she casts is cool on my face. I am so happy to see her. To talk to someone that can talk back. Nina, tell me I'm right, she says.

With a smile on my face, I can't do anything but give her what she wants.✽