

## A Yellow Hayfield

by Jónas Reynir Gunnarsson

They walk across a yellow hayfield. With each step they sink all the way down to their ankles, and legions of swarming mites appear in their tracks before vanishing beneath a blanket of grass. He is wearing hiking shoes, she is in street flats. She swats the mites from her calf.

– Ugh.

– I told you wear my boots.

– They were way too big. Give me a piggyback ride instead.

She's kidding, but he crouches down and tells her to hop on.

– You think you're strong enough? she asks, jumping up and locking her arms around him. He grabs on to her thighs and hoists her up.

The sky is gray but it's warm out.

A light breeze blows against them and caresses the hayfield. The grass barely moves; it is dry and breaks when he steps on it. He walks several paces with her on his back, sinking even deeper into the grass. The mites find their way past his hiking shoes and crawl searchingly up his pant legs.

She feels uneasy not being able to get her bearings. She is used to being surrounded by mountains or being within sight of the ocean, but the land here is low and undulating, and it is impossible to see what's up ahead aside from the next hill.

Grassy tussocks stick out of the water in the irrigation ditch, and a thick line of white chervil grows along its bank. They get a running start and jump across, grab hold of the grass on the other side and pull themselves up.

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She talks about her dad as they cross the moor:

– He's so funny when we're expecting company. Gets so stressed out.

– How so?

– He just is, gets on everyone’s nerves, won’t stop nagging my mom. There’s so much that needs taken care of: iron the tablecloth, find the right color napkins, make sure there are enough glasses and silverware for all the guests. Of course we need several sets for each person because there are so many courses. Then you need to light outdoor candles and this and that and I don’t know what all.

– Light outdoor candles?

– I kid you not. When guests arrive he can’t even hold a conversation because he’s so preoccupied imagining everything that might go wrong. Why are you laughing?

– I’m laughing at your dad, what do you think?

– It seemed like you were laughing at me.

– I’m laughing at you too, you’re a funny storyteller.

They approach the cliffs. Giant boulders lie strewn about the slope.

– Look at this, he says, putting his hand on one of the rocks. He runs his fingers across orange stains on the stone. – Look at the moss. It’s like the rock has a skin condition. This is like a rash.

– Yeah, like troll eczema, she says.

– What does your dad do again?

– Insurance, at TM. He’s been sick of it for a long time. And there’s also this whole other vibe at home since I moved out. It’s like they’re having an existential crisis or something. Mom too.

– Has she quit work?

– No, but she’s cutting back on it.

Thin shards of rock cover the ground at the base of the cliff. A soft crunching can be heard as they walk over them, and the shards spill out of their footprints and down the slope. He can’t stand this sound. He leads her upward along the notch in the cliffs, up to the crest. They are met by the sight of dirt mounds, ragged turf, and low-growing birch trees scattered about the hilltop.

She kneels down by one of the birch trees. It is brown and sleek, the bark begun to peel away. She tears a thin strip off the tree and rolls it up between her fingers. The outline of the sun is visible behind the clouds.

– We should have brought water, she says, stepping into the clearing. – And snacks. I never remember anything ahead of time. Like when I go grocery shopping, even though I make a list...

– Stop a sec, he says.

She stops and turns around.

He puts his hands on her hips. She puts her arms around him.

They kiss and then continue their hike.

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– Here, she says.

She sits down on a patch of grass, smiles at him and pats the ground beside her as if to offer him a seat. He takes off his shirt and pulls the damp t-shirt from his chest to cool off.

– Aren't you even sweating?

– I didn't dress as well as you.

– Jesus.

He lies down.

The grass is tall and tangled. From a distance the spot appears purple or even gray, but when she plucks a blade of grass and wraps it around her finger it seems a faded green in color. He lies looking up at the grass; from his perspective the light makes it look yellow. It seems unusually bright to him considering how cloudy it is. She grabs on to his pant legs, pulls them off, and tosses them aside. They laugh and she climbs on top of him.

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Afterwards he puts his t-shirt back on.

She's squatting between some birch trees nearby, peeing in the grass.

– Where are you? he yells.

– Don't come over here!

– Over where? he says, and walks towards the sound.

She nearly loses her balance.

- Don't watch me pee.
- Watch you what?
- Stop it!

She laughs until she begins to jiggle. She watches how the stream stops and then starts again as her abdomen contracts. This makes her laugh even more.

Her laughter infects him.

– Why are you crouched down behind that tree? Are you playing hide-and-seek? he says, and pretends to be looking for her.

She can barely talk through her laughter. She shakes and watches the stream drip down the grass, darken the soil, and disappear into the red moss.

- Stop!
- Really, where are you?

– Falling into my own piss if you don't stop, she says. She's holding her sweater up with one hand while leaning forward on the other. Tears stream down her cheeks.

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They walk in silence further inland. The heather crunches beneath their feet. They feel the heaviness of each step and tightness in their thighs as they make their way down the hillside.

She is wearing his shirt. Her head is down but every so often she looks up and shifts from one sheep path to another. The trails are scattered across the moor along the rock. He looks at her, about to say something, but stops.

A faint pattern appears in the sky and then melts away, fading back into the gray overcast.

- He peels off and goes up to a large boulder that has fallen from the cliffs.
- I found a fox den here last year.

He walks between the rocks, searching. She is standing nearby. The sparse grass sticking up from the heather flutters in the breeze coming in waves over the hillside.

- She scratches her ankle and picks off the straw that has gotten stuck to her socks.
- What time is it? she asks, once they've set off again.
- Don't you have your phone?

– Yeah, I just don't feel like digging it out of my pocket.

She shudders and pulls her hands up into her sleeves. He looks at her and waits, thinking she is about to say something, but gives up and makes his way crosswise down the hill in the direction of the marsh.

– I'll show you the place I told you about.

– The hot spring?

– The fumarole. It's not a spring exactly, you can't go swimming there. Not yet anyway.

She looks downcast.

He puts his arms around her.

– Are you up for it?

– Yeah, I'm just a little tired.

She leans up against him. He squeezes her tight.

– Look, he says, and goes on ahead.

The tussocks are soft and give way easily; their footprints fill with water and an oily film floats on the surface.

She looks up and sees a glint from a metal pipe in the middle of the marsh.

– What's that?

– An old gate that used to be by the road. We use it as a grate now, so people don't fall into the pit.

They hop from tussock to tussock, carefully but also quickly to avoid getting wet, until they reach the fumarole. They step up onto the grate covering the pool. It sits askew. The support structure is a pile of rocks that have begun to sink into the ground.

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A year earlier he took part in a stag party for a friend of his from high school. His friend's fiancée had a bachelorette party the same day and that evening the two groups met up and camped on a yellow hayfield. They had a barbecue party and spent the night there.

She and the bride had worked together one summer and become friends but didn't belong to the same circle of friends. She felt like an interloper at the party and to get over this feeling she made an effort to open up and get to know some of her friend's friends.

After dinner he asked her whether she had a lighter and they broke off from the group and walked over to the ditch to have a smoke. While they smoked he told her about his girlfriend. They had recently started dating. She told him congratulations and asked him how the relationship was going. He said well.

When the glow from their cigarettes died they were invisible in the darkness. She finished her beer and dropped her cigarette butt into the empty bottle. She asked him if he thought it looked bad for them to go off by themselves, whether his friends might not think they were doing something indecent.

– Oh definitely, he said, and took her hand. They kissed. She tossed the bottle in the ditch and caressed the back of his neck.

They avoided each other at the wedding two months later, and didn't talk again until spring. He had sent her a message saying he just moved into her neighborhood. He had broken up with his girlfriend. He asked whether she wanted to get together for coffee, she said yes. They had met several times since then but she let him know that she wasn't looking for a relationship.

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Her shoes are filthy. She looks down at them. She can see black water through the grating.

A feeling of vertigo suddenly hits her. Steam rises from the water.

– How deep is it? she asks.

She treads slowly out to the middle of the grating and looks down.

– I don't know. We still have to measure.

She bends down and stares into the water.

– This is wild, she says. – I'm hot just standing here.

She finds it hypnotic trying to get a sense of the depth. The hole is shaped like a funnel. There is vegetation growing out of the water along its edges. The colors there are sharper than anywhere else in the marsh, the moss an acid green and yellow, the grass dark brown.

They stand looking at the water. They manage a smile when their eyes happen to meet.

Again he searches for something to say, but then doesn't feel like trying anymore and gives up.

She thinks about how long it will take them to walk back, and how late it has gotten.

They come to an untended hayfield and head towards some large aspen trees. Plants have sprouted from the ditches, which are filling up again and transforming the field into a swamp. Rust-brown sand fleas crawl up onto their shoes. They shake them off. Tall trees standing in straight rows along the field remind him of an abandoned manor somewhere in England. Everything is dark green; tall stalks of grass bob up and down beneath their heavy spikes. The leaves on the aspens look like wet clumps from a distance. The sky visible through their branches is gray and blends into the leaves.

They turn away from the aspens.

She feels like she is abroad, in a thousand-hectare swamp, where catfish swim in a muddy lake between tall grasses, and yellow crocodiles lie in wait. They get a running start and jump over the ditch.

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He dries off his crotch with his t-shirt, tosses it aside and put his shirt and pants back on. She is walking in circles close by, talking on the phone. She waves when he looks at her.

The dirt swirls each time her foot hits the ground. He lays down again and yawns. A spider crawls across his chest, beneath his shirt.

He stretches out and passes the time pulling up grass. Something scratches him; he reaches for his jacket and shoves it underneath him. The sun sits low in the sky, it has set behind the hill and he watches the last rays of light shine through the branches of the bushes fluttering in the breeze.

She laughs. The sounds carries to him.

He closes his eyes and has a hard time clearing his head.

He feels like he needs to find some sort of balance, to solve a problem he can't quite wrap his head around, but instead he begins to think about what they might have for dinner. He doesn't come up with anything. He is too exhausted to think and falls asleep.

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It is cold when he wakes up. The greenery is disappearing into the blue nightfall. The leaves are no longer discernable, but their rustling is louder than when he fell asleep.

He shivers, puts on his jacket and fetches his t-shirt, which has blown onto a nearby bush. He looks around and listens. Yawns and wipes the tears from his cheeks. The wind is blowing in his face. He stands there a moment.

He calls out to her. He goes back to where she was walking in a circle talking on the phone. He's careless around the uneven ground and nearly falls.

He walks between the trees, thinking she might be lying asleep somewhere. He calls to her again and walks further from the hollow where he fell asleep, lowering his head to shield himself from the wind. He climbs higher to get a better view of the area.

The fear that something has happened slowly creeps up on him. The cliffs surrounding the hollow are low and slope gently, so it is unlikely she could have fallen off somewhere. She could have potentially tripped and sprained something, even broken her foot. Maybe she passed out. She could have decided to go for a hike while he slept. It would be hard to get lost, but she isn't familiar with the area. Maybe she's trapped. Maybe she ran off.

He goes over in his head the path they took to the hollow. Then he remembers the fumarole and suddenly becomes terrified. He imagines her in the boiling water: she is trapped beneath the grate, holding on to the bars and screaming. Her skin is burning.

He knows she couldn't have gotten under there, it's impossible that she's there, but nonetheless he runs as fast as he can down the hill, back in the direction of the marsh.

Tussocks of ryegrass grow out of the black sand. He darts between them and sinks in deep with every step – the sand is moist. He knows she isn't in the water but he's sure that she has vanished and can feel her sinking into the darkness beneath the grate. He is breathing fast and deep. He is certain she has disappeared into the marsh, and a different image begins to haunt him, not of her, but of himself, walking along the side of a road slicing through a black plain.

That was several years ago when he had hitched rides from one part of the country to another.



Off in the distance are silhouettes of jagged mountains, while up ahead the sea is a sheer line of dark blue. A truck is driving toward him, and a brown dust cloud swirls up from the road. The cloud and the truck get closer and he knows the cloud will soon envelop him. He looks at himself from behind walking along the road, sees as he averts his head, turns away, and braces himself for the brown cloud heading in his direction. He watches as the truck approaches himself. The brown cloud follows behind it, engulfing everything – the road, the posts, the tussocks, and finally himself. Everything is in motion, brown and gray veils of dust wrap themselves around him, cling to him and blind him, the wind deafens, and he runs into the cloud after himself.

Translation: Mark Ioli

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