

Crack the Sky Yellow

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Goose bumps covered my skin, acting like dried glue, preventing me from moving fluidly, but instead with jerky, trembling motions. The ground was a mass of snow and ice. Each step in it produced a satisfying crunch. The wind cut like a hot knife, singing my exposed skin. I never knew cold could burn. Grandmother's jacket served as my armor, the hood of it encased my head, leaving nothing but my eyes, nose and lips exposed. The only thing I desired was to feel the sun again. I hobbled down the wooden stairs and across the property to reach the trailer my family used to camp in, the only item that would bring me closest to the sun. Stomping around the corner of the trailer, I found the steel ladder that would bring me to the top of the trailer. My hands clutched onto the metal rods, sending a burning sensation down my arms. I hoisted myself up, despite my burning hands, only to find the roof's cheap, plastic material corroded and stained with dirt. It resembled the snow on the ground below me.

I laid on my back. The sun slowly crept around my exposed face, as the warmth of it seeped into my chest. A conversation between my mother and father ensued in the distance, asking of my whereabouts. I decided to remain there undetected, if only for a few minutes more. It had been seven months since my family had moved from California to Colorado, a difficult endeavor for all of us. As soon as I had begun to feel warm, the wind picked up once again. Tears rolled down my cheeks, sliding down to my temples, only to be frozen by the wind that would slip into the folds my hood had created. Numbness became a ubiquitous way of life. It was much more than a side effect of the cold. I could never fully escape it. I did not want to be here any longer, but there was no other place to call home. I felt as though a war had ensued

between me and the unrelenting climate. Although I was defeated, and worn, and tired, much like the house we had moved into, we would stay.

I was 15 when my parents decided we would move out of the state. We moved four times before this decision, but always throughout California, so I only half-heartedly believed them when they stated it would be in Colorado. They had played this kind of game about five times every year. Their weekend past times involved driving to a town they'd never been to and look at open houses. My parents would talk to the real-estate agents, ask about the foundational structure of the property and its listed value. Then they would pack us into the car, give an opinion on the house, and never bring it up again. I think these ventures let them escape their lives for a moment; they could become someone new. However, the move to Colorado was different. My dad spent about a week alone in Colorado before the move, looking at different towns where he could buy property. He said this was the kind of thing he needed to "feel out".

When they stood by their decision, I looked forward to the move. For months prior to moving day I would spend time searching for properties online in Colorado, mostly ranches and farms. I'd print out the property details and present them to my dad. I pretended we would live on the mountainside in a small town where everybody knew everyone's name. I would make a new name for myself. I could be anybody. I had created an entire fantasy future of what my new life would be like. It's not that I was afraid of leaving everything behind. I wasn't fleeing the crutches of an old life I held in California. I relished the idea of the future, of the unknown. Curiosity is woven into the fibers of my being. This was simply an opportunity to feed the urge to escape every day monotony. Perhaps this was even a genetic trait, as I had grown accustomed to the wayward lifestyle my parents had raised me in. If anything, I was fearful that this move

was just another one of their attempts to temporarily flee their reality. My imagination of a life in Colorado could be trampled down to a mere dream in the wake of their decision.

I think even my parents were surprised by their own actions when we embarked on the move. They had made their decision final, signed in black ink at the Colorado State Bank and Trust, guaranteeing the title of the house. My father had decided on a dilapidated farm house with four acres in Parker. When we arrived to the house, sight unseen, my mother began wailing and screeching, "I can't do this anymore!" After two full days of driving, with three cats in a makeshift carrier in the backseat, with no air conditioning, she had had it. She got in the car and drove off in a panic, leaving me, my brother, and my dad behind momentarily.

My brother called it a shit hole. It was. All the windows in the house were inside out. There was an old, unattached pot belly stove sitting in the middle of the living room. The basement was nothing but concrete pavement holding up two pillars. The kitchen floor modeled peeling yellow linoleum, only to reveal splintered wood underneath. I picked up a rusted broom stationed next to a window and started to sweep the inch of dust that had accumulated in the living room. It was as if the previous owner had left the broom there as a condolence for the sorry house he had left behind. My dad stared off at the road my mother had sped off down. I told him that it would be okay. We would stay.

We tried to sell our house in California before we left, but the market was so bad we were left to rent it to a group of rowdy college boys for a year. The house tied us back to the state. After experiencing the harsh winter season, part of me hoped we would never be able to sell it. I hoped the market would keep our stake there, so we would have a home to run back to if Colorado proved to be too much for our family. But the following year after the move, my dad decided he would go back and fix the house up one last time and sell it. My brother, Christopher,

and I tagged along in the hopes of seeing old friends and everything we had left behind. To travel cheap, we towed our trailer that we used for dirt-biking trips as a mobile motel, sleeping at rest stops and camp sites while my dad fixed on the house. The longer we stayed in the trailer, the more California felt like the past. We were vagrants stationing ourselves in the depths of our memories.

My father had finally finished all the repairs on the house. A final “sold” sign was staked into the ground we once gardened in. The day that it came to pack up and leave I stole a white dump bucket splattered with dried paint from the back of my father’s truck and began filling it up with lemons from a tree in our old front yard. I did so stealthily and rapidly so nobody would know I was plundering a tree that was no longer mine. I twisted and ripped each lemon off its branch, tossing it in the bucket with a satisfying thud. When the bucket was overflowing, I still kept picking these lemons, piling them into a makeshift bag I had made by lifting up part of my dress. When my father came to the front yard, he saw me fumbling around, attempting to carry all these lemons. He smiled and went into the garage, only to come out with another bucket. We stuffed each crevice of the buckets with as many as we could, threw them into the bed of the truck and slowly drove away.

About eight hours into the trip returning back to Colorado, we had reached the town of Barstow, California. It was 117 degrees. The only buildings in town were a gas station and a restaurant claiming they offered the “world’s best gyros.” As we pulled up to the gas station, we soon discovered the sheer heat had shut down the power. There would be no gasoline. The blue and white restaurant seemed to draw travelers inside. We followed suit, and entered the building in the hopes of seeking refuge in an unforgiving desert. Everyone just sat there, waiting for the circumstances to change as they fanned themselves with paper plates. Nobody could purchase

anything, but nobody wanted to remain outside either. I kept looking at the menu, wishing the machine would work to make an ice-cold strawberry milkshake. Dad claimed they were the best he's had in his entire life. The next stop was just outside of Las Vegas, but we knew the truck would run out of gas before we ever reached it.

There was nothing left to do but move forward. As the truck kept moving, I kept waiting for the tires on the truck to melt into the pavement and peg us to the desert forever. We were carrying with us the remnants of furniture packed in our trailer, which dragged along behind us. We had left our house in California for the last time, it was no longer ours. Along with the lemons, I insisted we bring back an old rusting metal cabinet that used to hold my dad's construction tools. The white paint was peeling off to reveal a burnt, corrosive rust. "I'll fix it I swear," I whined, which was enough to convince my dad to throw the metal junk into the bed of the truck. I stared at it now, with a placid smile spread across my face knowing that I succeeded in keeping it, keeping the memories. Next to it sat the two buckets of lemons, so yellow they seemed unnatural against the desert landscape. As waves of heat swirled around my face, I thought of all the things I would make with these lemons: Ice cold lemonade, lemon custard, lemon bars, lemon sorbet, lemon poppy seed muffins, lemon marmalade. My hands would carefully roll the lemon out before slicing it and grate the soft, fine zest into tiny little piles of yellow. I would squeeze the juice out to add a zing to almost anything. I would use every last bit of these lemons.

I was sitting in the back of the truck with my head crouching out of the tiny window in the middle. I had my back to the road, instead of looking forward. I saw everything in a kind of vacuum. The road behind us was swallowed by the wrath of the heat and the surroundings blurred into a strange mesh of colors, streaking my peripherals with shades of brown. The wind

was in a bind, disrupted by the gap between the truck and the trailer. It was stuck, but kept hitting me in the face from time to time, whipping my hair into my eyes. I felt an undeniable sense of peace as if the heat had filled every cell in my body, warming me into a state of comfort despite the fact that my white dress was permanently plastered to my skin. My mind was fixed on the lemons when the truck began to crawl along the asphalt.

With one last cough, it rolled to a stop. The truck crooned and lurched as it was put in park and then, suddenly, everything stood still. Nobody said a word. The truck filled with silence. Heat continued to blister the inside of the truck. Even though we were no longer moving, my eyes were fixed on the trailer and the road behind us. I refused to turn my body around and face forward. A minute crept by as we sat there in silence. The heat was suffocating us. My eyes remained glued to the buckets of lemons until the sound of the door opening ripped my train of thought back into reality as the truck beeped, warning us that the keys were still in the ignition, *ding, ding, ding, ding, slam.*

My dad circled around the truck before reaching into his front left pocket to pull a Sherman cigarette up to his lips and strike a match. The flame engulfed the tip of the cigarette and, as it caught on fire, it slowly smoldered into a red, hot ember. With one long inhale, he sucked the tobacco into his lungs and exhaled with a sigh as smoke lingered around his face, trapped by the heat.

My brother then hopped out of the truck and began to kick the dirt beneath him. He picked up rocks on the side of the road and chucked them as hard as he could, mumbling curse words under his breath. He complained about the heat and the stupidity of being stuck in the middle of the desert and the fact that my dad could only go a few hours without lighting up another cigarette. But I knew with every rock he threw that the anger within him was not about

the heat, but instead about the fact that California was no longer our home, no longer our life. Time was moving on without us and people were changing. It was time to move forward, even when we felt like we were stuck.

I looked back down at the bucket of lemons. Maybe there were 40 lemons. Think of all the things I could do with 40 lemons. I didn't want to leave the truck but the heat continued to slap me in the face. I peeled myself from the seat and slid out of the truck. The dirt was like a fine powder beneath my feet. It puffed up and swirled around my toes, sticking to the sweat that had accumulated between them and my sandal. I knew the truck would stop eventually, it was inevitable. We were without gas, the fuel that would keep our truck moving along mile by mile. And I also knew that waiting in Barstow would do nothing for us. It was 117 degrees. There would be no strawberry milkshakes and I would not eat the best gyro in the world. There was nothing left for us there. In this moment, I didn't want anything. I didn't feel anything. I would sit there with my bucket of lemons for the next four hours, waiting for whatever was to come next.