

The Sky In So Many Words

An Immigration

I never had my own bones. They were always my mother's, because everyone's bones start as their mother's and I never outgrew mine. This is what I told Cass when he tried to paint me that spring, passing ink over my collarbone and claiming it as his.

It was my first spring in Colorado. Cass had brought us up to the cabin in Dillon and on the way out of town I counted seventeen patches of wildflowers; I learned quickly that Cass wasn't impressed by this, but how could he be? He had never left his state, had never been to Nebraska--even now, when I close my eyes and step into the shade I can picture the flat gray skies, the chunks of ice in the river, the snow on my mother's eyelashes outside the train station in Omaha, the winter that took half the year to melt into summer.

My mother sent me away during the first snow, when it should have still been autumn, two weeks after her wedding. She had agreed to marry a man (an American) with a farm and four young sons, her motherhood in exchange for some comfort. She always meant to continue going, to get further across this country than just its middle--in the bed we shared at the boarding house, she said she dreamt of the ocean that brought her here every night. She promised that the other ocean closing us in would have a different current that circled back to Turkey, that we could go there together someday.

She didn't realize how far Nebraska was from anything else when, at nearly full-term, she had to stop and have me there. She thought the edge of the land had to be close with how wide the Omaha sky was, with how hard she'd prayed to make it to the end of the earth before I was born. She used to believe the Pacific was around every corner, that America was shepherding her on and through, that this country she had come to was simply the long way back home and

she would make it there before sunset with her daughter in her arms. She refused to make the same mistake twice: when her new husband purchased my ticket, he agreed to pay for California.

She wrapped me in her scarf as the train pulled up. I begged again to stay. In her rasping voice, against the prairie wind, the last thing she said was to be her good girl and go.

This is no secret: I got off the train in Denver. I was sixteen and had spent the ride crying into that scarf while strangers looked away. Where was my mother now? Where was her god who meant to protect me? Where were her stories of a land she meant to give me a home in? I refused it all. I wrote to her from the Post Office to say: I will never see California. I will never see your other ocean.

I spent so long thinking I had been too wicked, that my mother had never written me back from her new home surrounded by her new sons because of those words. I wrote her again at Christmas, pleading for forgiveness, promising to do anything she asked if she would only tell me what to do. I stole paint from Cass and outlined an ocean at the bottom of the page, including him as a footnote in only her language: there is a man here who is helping me, I live in his house (I know I shouldn't, but I do) and if I marry him he says he'll take me west. I wrote that I wouldn't marry him until she sent her blessings. I wrote her this promise three more times.

She never replied. On my seventeenth birthday Cass said he had waited long enough and gave me his sister's dress to wear for a ceremony his grandfather oversaw at a church below the Foothills. I was still wearing that dress when we made it to the cabin, unsure how I could be married now with no mother to teach me how.

Cass set up his canvas and easel while I started the fireplace; he set a lamp beside the window to catch any color left in the sky and I brought the water and food inside. When he was ready, like I had seen several times before, his face lost its expression and he called me over. He folded me into a chair in front of him and said he would teach me how to be still.

He said it was like pouring cement over the ridges and rocks of my spine, that I could likely hold my breath for 90 minutes at a time if I wanted to keep my chest even for him; he had me turn toward the window and the reservoir past it and the Gore Range past that and to think about nothing. His instructions were simply to betray nothing: not in my face, not in my ribs, not at the edges of my nails, and not in my brain where any letters lived. He told me to focus on being barely alive, to freeze the blood in my veins like so many rivers. He told me to freeze like Omaha. I learned to do it well.

I will never say I loved the way he loved; it was wicked, more than my childish words to my mother. He demanded totality. He needed the deed to the land and its water rights and the folklore in it and the ghosts that haunted it and the houses built and broken on it and the footsteps left in its dirt. I had never been loved and looted that way; I had only been loved by a mother who fled west from Anatolia and sent me further west when it seemed she no longer loved me at all. This is what I was thinking of when I was supposed to think of nothing: my mother, the aging hills she grew up beneath, her face as she sent me on without her.

Cass had clipped my hair tight against my scalp to catch the lamplight in places that light had never seen. There I invoked her more than ever: our mornings and nights, her fingers plaiting and unweaving my hair--her hair--over our two shoulders, my skin blending into hers and shrinking away from him; if there is a way to exist in more than one moment across time, I did it. When he finally told me to look at him I could only look through: to one hundred springs rushing across the hills of Anatolia and barreling forward into the Rockies, one hundred years to come without her and another hundred I would have waited for her, the end of the war and the start of so many more as she explained, in her accented English, why I had to leave.

Cass painted with stainless steel palette knives. I still wake up sweating some mornings, certain they are on my skin again, nauseated by the smells of pine and spruce that have followed

me. I press a hand to my chest to prove I am awake and far away now; I count the hundred times my heart beats over the course of each minute until it softens into quiet again. Only then do I reach up and feel for the scar across my collarbone, a wedding gift given with a coat of black acrylic, Cass' claim that this bone and I were both his now.

"It's not mine," I said. "Not mine to make yours." None of it was.

"Try," he said.

I stayed with him a long time after we married. It was longer than I intended, and it became longer still once we had children and a house and he told me to stop asking if we would ever leave Colorado. I stayed until the town became a city and the roads became trafficked and the trains fell out of favor, and after that until our children moved away and sent their own children home to us for the summers. Fifty-six years after I last saw my mother, my oldest granddaughter--she had Cass' eyes, but the rest of her was her own--went to Omaha to write for the paper there.

She called me from her office to check the facts: was Ayda her great-grandmother, was I certain? Could it have been spelled Ada? Had she married a man called Olson? I told her I was certain of my own mother's name, that in her language it was beautiful, that it meant the coming back of good things.

Ada Olson's obituary was published two weeks after I left, credited to the flu. She was supposedly survived by her husband and four sons. There was no mention of a daughter.

I cried for her one last time then, into the phone that hung on the wall of a home I had haunted for so long, into the ears of a granddaughter she never could have known, for the life she should have had and the way it should have ended instead. When Cass came out to see what my noise was for I passed him the phone and went to the hall, slipping a sheepskin coat on over my scars and her bones and making my way to the door.

“Alya,” he said. “Where are you going?” He had turned the corner, watching me, the phone still at his ear.

“To California.”

“Right. How are you getting there? Were you planning to walk?” I nodded. “Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t walk to California.” I ignored him then, bending slowly to tie my shoes on. “You’d die if you tried.”

When I stood again I pointed at the phone. “Tell her she’s a good girl, and I love her.” Cass was expressionless again, his face somehow as it was when I first knew him. “Tell her how to spell my name right. Tell her my mother gave me this name, and I want her to write it in her newspaper. Tell her what it means.”