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# Seed

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## SEED

by

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The days and nights were so hot and so humid our second summer together. I loved you, even then. There was a big town thermometer in the front lawn of a cinderblock home, ten blocks from our rented house. It spindled like a skinny soldier, just taller than the tin roof of the humble house. The thermometer preceded what little technology the country enjoyed; it stuck there, its metal stand pushed into the hard, black soil, the weeds growing up around it. Rambunctious boys vandalized sides of buildings, abandoned cars, and park benches, but they never touched the thermometer. They must have recognized that the crudely painted, tin device was a sacred reminder to us all that what we were living was difficult, and therefore significant.

The red line of the thermometer rose and fell each day. The older, knobby gentleman who lived in the home moved the metal strip up and down through the afternoon as he took note of the temperature. He was the most important man in the city between the months of

November and April. The higher the temperature, the more the neighborhood reveled. “Worst summer in twenty years, do you know that this part of the country gets hottest of all?” “I once was hospitalized in heat like this—stayed three hours on an I.V. I’m likely to end up back there if this keeps up, you know?”

No matter that the man in charge of keeping the thermometer had no accurate way of anything exact; Uruguayans lean toward the dramatic. So you and I wrote letters home telling of record temperatures.

Our misery grew simultaneously with our joy. Or perhaps they both simply made us feel alive, and thus have always been the same thing. It took me a while to catch on, but I learned it was easy to engage conversation about the crippling heat and humidity, the best way to make life-long friends in a new place. So I did talk. I spoke fluent Spanish with an American accent, but was always well received when I exclaimed, “¡Qué horrible! ¡Qué calor más brave!” Everywhere I went I made a sport of lively complaining.

You and I even began to complain to one another in our kitchen, not because we needed to say it, but because even married people will do anything to feel a little closer, to share one more experience. We walked each morning before school to the fruit stand and each day I noticed that my stomach touched the inside of my dress less and less. I wasn’t wasting away, but I was losing weight. Maybe it was adjusting to a foreign country, maybe it was

standing day after day at the front of a classroom full of illiterate adults who were not convinced that this would get them a job, maybe it was learning to be in love that made me skinnier. One year later, my stomach would grow the other direction.

Salto, our town, was known for its variety of oranges: navel oranges, red oranges, oval oranges, ruby oranges. They were all I wanted to eat. Oranges and the popsicles frozen in little baggies, homemade and sold from the front door of every other house for a peso.

We ate oranges for breakfast while sitting on our beds, the sun low, just above the line of the tall grass in the backyard. There was one spindly lemon tree standing in the corner near the dilapidated fence. The tree was shorter than it should have been, more brittle, too few leaves, perhaps a symbol of the country in which it was born.

Near the top, in a place where one could reach up above one's head and stand on tiptoes, a small lemon was slowly ballooning outward into the world, taking up a little more space every day, aware of its taking and needing a place in a world where not everyone had even a plate of rice to eat for dinner.

We were also aware of the lemon, though we didn't begrudge it for its selfish need for material, air, and space for growing. Rather, we pointed to it, from its very conception bud, to its flowering childhood, and now, into the thick-skinned green oval hanging shyly from a firm stem from the top branches of a small brown tree. In the

coming month, in spite of, or perhaps thanks to the heat, the skin would yellow, pull tighter, thinner and more porous.

One evening, before dusk, we walked to the edge of the yard, and because you were just a bit taller than me, you reached up and plucked the lemon down, turning it in your hands, letting the roundness fill in the deep C of your palm. We looked close and rubbed the smooth skin against our cheeks; you rubbed it against mine and said, “the only lemon of the year, la primera limón del año, quizás la única.” We could look deep into the shadow moons of the lemon’s skin and perhaps it would speak to us of its history.

We might see a scene two hundred years ago: ships full of sailors and explorers and men longing for far-away wives, ships rolling across the sea from the eastern shores of this country. Did the men on those ships ache for home? The lemon—not this lemon, but its ancestors—were on that ship then. The fruit, a rich source of vitamin C, was known to ward off the dreaded paleness, open sores, and depression that came with scurvy, and from being thousands of miles from home. Perhaps their wives sent them with lemons, in hopes that they might return to them, safe and in love.

Later that week, you made me tea from the lemon when I was sick and throwing up. Looking at the lemon, we pondered what it means to be home, what it means to be so close to one another and still ever treading into the

unfamiliar.

One round window on the lemon's yellowed skin might show us its particular origin, might tell the two of us how a scraggly, dying lemon tree came to live in the backyard corner of our house in this poor neighborhood. It might show us the stray cats fighting and forcing love all night under its branches, the noises so awful. I woke up and threw a cup of water through the metal bars and out the open window once, in hopes of ending any injustice. Then I lay back down and turned over to you, your skin rounded like baked clay in the white moonlight. Were you thinking of names for our children then?