December Yellow
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A few years ago at a thrift store in Wisconsin I came across a dusty lamp with a yellow-orange stretched linen drum shade and a candlestick body the surface of old coins. I bought it of course, and proudly situated it on the desk in my dorm room, dust and all. I shut off the overhead lights, pulled the shades down to hide the bleak street lamps outside, and excitedly sat to do my homework underneath the honey-seasoned glow of that $6 lamp.

Cool-toned lighting has always given me headaches. My high school was a nightmare: deafening blue-white fluorescence reflecting off pale eggshell walls in every direction. After school I'd retreat to warmer colors, to a bedroom with a covered incandescent ceiling light and sheer pink curtains draped over the windows.

Researchers have spent some time looking into the ways colors impact mood, mostly in the context of advertising strategies and classroom design. In any sense, the color yellow is stimulating, warm, happy. This led to the old wives’ tale claiming Vincent van Gogh ate his yellow paint in a desperate attempt to make himself happier. I thought it was true for years. It seemed romantic to me. An artist secure in nothing but the impact of art, so enchanted by the emotions provoked by the colors on his canvas that the fear of poison was far outweighed by the eleventh-hour conviction that art could change people for the better, that it was the colors and not his employment of them that made him happy. The reality is far less comforting than the wives’ tale. Old physicians’ notes revealed that Van Gogh did express a concerning urge to drink turpentine or eat lead-based paints, not to absorb joy from any particular color but because he knew they were poisons and he lived a painful life. Whatever geniality the color yellow held, Van Gogh never believed it could save him from the lead.

The bedroom I live in now allured me with the geniality of garnet walls and chestnut-stained wood and topaz sunlight shining in through tall windows. It’s an Earthship, so named because the structure seems to grow out of the dirt, as if it’s no more than the earth itself. A little capsule with the intention of sustainability. My Earthship was built by college students a few years ago on the ashy foundation of a cabin lost to a fire. They duly named it Phoenix and fashioned the one-room cabin with curving asymmetrical walls, a single electrical outlet, and a wood-burning stove for heating in the winter months. Phoenix sits with three other cabins a mile off campus, down a winding dirt road and into the woods. For 45 years it’s been offered as an alternative to traditional dorms. For 45 years students have felt compelled to maintain the cabins, tend to the gardens, rely on fires for cooking and heating: to live a life that challenges a growing culture of environmental nihilism.
Given Phoenix’s namesake, the school’s insurance identified fires in residential rooms as a hazard, so use of the stove in Phoenix was strictly prohibited. In the spirit of sustainability, students opted for a manually-fueled boiler system over central heating infrastructure. The Central Boiler E-Classic 2400 outdoor hydronic heater is a black and gray metal box the size of a phone booth with a tall skinny chimney on top. Our soot-covered phone booth, nicknamed Earl sometime before I got here, stands proudly in a round patch of dirt and ashes some 150 feet from the front door of Phoenix. Earl is a fire chamber connected to a system of water lines that snake underneath and around the cabins to give off heat. During the winter we keep a fire lit in Earl almost nonstop. Five roommates and I take turns feeding the fire, 15 or so logs every 6 hours.

The ancient Greeks believed that fire, the spark that ignited civilization and led to the arts and sciences, was a gift from the titan Prometheus against direct orders from Zeus. As his punishment, Prometheus was chained to a cliff where every day an eagle would peck and claw away at his liver, and every night his liver would repair itself only for the eagle to peck and claw away again in the morning. The stories say Zeus chose such a gruesome punishment because he wanted humanity to be mindless worshippers of the gods. Prometheus was convinced humans had the power to change the world; he just didn’t think they could do it blind and cold on a fire-less Earth. He gave the gift with hope we’d change things for the better.

When Earl’s fire goes out, the temperature in Phoenix can drop to 45 degrees. The greenhouse windows can frost over, and no saturation of warm colors inside can combat the numbing shroud of pale air. It doesn’t always wake me up. When it does, like tonight, I pull my blankets around my shoulders and pull myself out of bed, slip on a pair of boots underneath the frozen glow of that $6 lamp and march over to Earl with the blankets still around me. Lift the handle to open the chimney bypass door, and count 15 beeps, 15 seconds. When time’s up, it takes both my arms to open the main hatch and let the smoke out. The beeping doesn’t stop until the fire’s going and the bypass door can be closed again. There’s something about that beeping when you’re still half asleep; it follows you into your dreams and then inevitably learns to find you when you’re awake, even when the bypass handle is down and you’re a thousand miles away sitting at the kitchen table in your mother’s house unable to hear a word she says over the incessant beeping. I once held up a tuner to the speaker on Earl’s side: it beeps a B. With a blackened shovel I poke around at the logs, to make sure there’s enough space for the flames to breathe. Some day our world will be nothing but fire.

Van Gogh never painted fire, but he painted a lot of wheat fields: gold and bronze soft-erea stalks realized by individual hog hairs on the tip of his brush. Vivid and irregular, they almost looked like the forked flames of a fire. Almost. His blue skies were a little too pale, a little too green to belong
to a fire. At least they were up until his last wheat field, his last painting before his ambiguous death, Wheat Field with Crows. In that one, the sky takes up close to half the canvas with ominous shades of sapphire, ranging from electric almost white to black, laid on thick with fierce strokes. A hot blue, not a cold blue.

My birthstone is turquoise, a cold blue. I was born on the fourth of December, which makes me a Sagittarius. It’s a fire sign, and the constellation looks nothing like the half man-half horse shape drawn over the stars in diagrams. The Greek stories say that the shape is based on the disfigured centaur Chiron, who Herakles accidentally shot with a poisoned arrow. Chiron was immortal but grew miserable by the poison and eventually offered himself as a sacrifice to the gods in place of Prometheus’s sentence. Chiron was killed, Prometheus was freed, and to honor Chiron’s generosity his likeness was cast in the sky to live immortal in the stars. That was before people knew stars weren’t timeless, but it’s a nice thought.

It’s unclear what came of Prometheus after Chiron’s sacrifice. Some stories say that he remains chained to the cliff. When Chiron died, Herakles shot and killed Zeus’s eagle with the same poisoned arrow used on Chiron, effectively ending Prometheus’s torture but not necessarily his incarceration. Other stories say Prometheus, freed, returned to the upperworld to challenge Zeus for the sovereignty. Prometheus was always told with wisdom and compassion and confidence in the power of humanity; it was he who formed the first humans out of mud and introduced them to the fire from which they thrived. Through those stories it feels just that he be the one to rule. I wonder how his story would go if the hopeful storytellers knew his mud creations would, out of both necessity and ignorant insouciance, exploit Prometheus’s gifts and set the world on fire.

When Van Gogh died they thought he killed himself. On July 27, 1890, he was found with a gunshot wound in his stomach. He died two days later giving no explanation for how he sustained the injury, and people assumed it was self-inflicted because of his history with mental illness. Historians and art fanatics still debate the topic, many claiming it wouldn’t have been possible for Van Gogh to inflict the injury on himself. They think he was murdered. I suppose it’s all the same in the end. On July 29, 1890, Van Gogh died. Maybe the world is already on fire.

Van Gogh’s last blue starts to hover over the coals at the fire’s base as the flames take over Earl’s firebox, spilling over the open hatch and reaching out at me. In the fire’s chaos I see Van Gogh himself, fervidly scooping dallop after dallop of yellow lead-based paint into his mouth, licking it off the hog hairs of his brush, eyes open wide searching the black sky behind me for a miracle. I swing the heavy door back into place, trapping the artist inside with the flames. Count 15 beeps, 15 seconds, and as my
eyes adjust to the darkness I turn to the north sky, to where Van Gogh was searching for his miracle. I see the teapot-shaped collection of stars that make up Chiron’s upper body, his arms holding a bow with the arrow drawn, aiming right at me. Or maybe aiming at Earl, at absurd mini-scale efforts to delay the already imminent destruction of our planet, at the stubborn determination to live up to Prometheus’s high hopes despite the overwhelming evidence that too many have already failed at this. Maybe Chiron isn’t aiming as much as he is pointing, signaling: attempting to identify the closest thing to a miracle that a world destined for flames will ever see.

I push the handle down to close the bypass door and end the beeping at least externally, then wrap my blankets around my shoulders a little tighter before making my way back to Phoenix, back to cold air frozen in place over deceitfully warm colors. Someday this world and you and I will be nothing but fire, and still, I’ll make the midnight trek to the soot-covered phone booth the next time I wake up cold because I’d rather listen to that cathartic beeping than face the despondent silence of Prometheus’s misplaced confidence.