

Lamplighter
Tracy Daugherty

Wallpaper the color of lemonade. Sarah liked it especially now in winter, when you wouldn't drink real lemonade because of the cold. The walls reminded you of summer, of firefly-nights and frog leg barbecues, big glass pitchers of lemonade filled with sugar as thick as the Milky Way.

Here in Oklahoma, in her grandma's house, she slept in the front bedroom. The bed was soft and high, the comforter the dark green of strawberry leaves. Moonlight through slats in the window blinds striped the scuffed oak floor like flashlight beams. Just outside the bedroom door was an old Crosley radio, big as a bear, that didn't work anymore. It had scared her when she was littler. Her grandma had told her voices used to rise from it, the voices of singers, of funnymen, heroes, and presidents warning of war. In summer, when Sarah couldn't sleep after the thrill of a cookout in the park across the street, she'd creep out of bed and sit in front of the Crosley. She put her ear to the speaker. It felt like a sponge. What if it soaked up her voice? She'd go through life croaking for food, for love, and no one would understand her. She thought she heard, inside the speaker, a lonely whisper, air inside a beach shell, a president's ghost sighing, "Fear . . . fear itself . . ." She'd run back to bed and shiver till she fell asleep.

Last summer, just after her ninth birthday, the dial fell off the radio, a round plastic knob. The Crosley was dead, once and for all. No more lonesome whispers. Yesterday, when she and her mom drove up from West Texas, unloaded the car, and carried their bags to their rooms, she was surprised to see that the radio looked smaller than she remembered. She gave it a thump with the corner of her bag as she sashayed past into the front room.