

Wake of the Flood

“Golden hills, now veiled in gray
Summer leaves have blown away
Now what remains? The Wind and Rain,”
- *Weather Report Suite*, Grateful Dead.

The summers of my childhood were spent outside, in the park that bordered my small, suburban neighborhood. The “barn park,” as the neighborhood children colloquially termed it, was the beacon of all neighborhood activities, equipped with a full playset, basketball courts, a street hockey rink, and a big, crimson barn meant for community events but mostly just there for decoration. Eventually, when we all outgrew the slides and baby swings, we moved on to the park’s primary attraction: the creek—a skinny, shallow, meandering waterway fed year-round by snow runoff from the Rocky Mountains. The creek gave us very little as children but a chance to act as adventurers, unbound by the set rules of the playground. In the creek, we were free; free to jump from rope swings crudely hung upon low-hanging branches and build dams amidst the creek’s slowly flowing waters. Most of all, we were free to sit all day on the creek’s banks, fishing for crawfish using slimy, chopped up hot dogs.

I don’t know where the crawfish came from—they’re hardly native to Colorado—but they lived within the walls of the muddy creek beds of my childhood park. At every possible chance we got, my brother, our friends, and myself would head down to a nook in the creek that we claimed as our own and spend hours using makeshift fishing gear to reel in as many crawfish as we could before our parents called us home for the night. It wasn’t much, and we hardly ever caught enough to cover the bottom of our bright

orange Home Depot bucket, but it got us out of the house for a few hours a day. At the end of the day, we would return our bounty to the muddy creek and go home to join our families for dinner.

September 11th, 2013, was a Wednesday, meant to be like any other. I was a month into 7th grade and on that Wednesday, I woke up in a panic, terrified of missing school. I saw the clock and ran out of my room, yelling to my parents that I was late to school. My father laughed, informing me that school had been canceled due to torrential rains that turned the roads to rivers and turned an otherwise dry state into a wetland. Growing up in Colorado, weather usually never posed a barrier to our education. I remember once in 1st grade, when school had been canceled due to a blizzard that nearly trapped my mother and I in a Costco parking lot, but due to our Alaskan superintendent, our snow day prayers weren't met again until my senior year of high school. And so, when school was canceled for rain on a random September Wednesday, I suppose I could have thought more about the potential significance of this missed school day. But I was 12 years old, and, in that moment, the pros of the impromptu rain day far outweighed its cons.

But then our solo rain day turned to four and suddenly the weight of the situation was firmly pushed to the front of my preoccupied 12-year-old mind. Suddenly, there were calls for evacuation, roads were buckling under the enormous weight of the waters, and homes and people were lost as our creeks swelled past their banks and flooded any earth they could get a hold of. Homes, lives, and memories were all lost in the torrential rainfall that ravaged Northern Colorado.

At some point during the four-day endeavor, one of my best childhood friends—a girl named Remy who lived down the street—and I went to assess the damage in our

beloved barn park. Our once narrow creek now covered nearly half the park. No longer could we jump from bank to bank with ease; now, the dainty creek of our childhood was a behemoth, eating away at our park inch by inch. While I wouldn't fully come to terms with the impact of this once in a lifetime storm until I was in my late teens, my childhood was forever altered by these four days of rain. Shortly after the flood had receded and left millions of dollars in damage in its wake, Remy moved to her dad's house full time and was no longer right across the street from me. All my childhood afternoons spent with her suddenly drifted away with the receding flood waters as we grew from best friends to acquaintances.

I don't know where the crawfish came from, and I don't know where they went. But after the flood, they were no longer burrowed into the mud walls of Dry Creek. Summers from then on were no longer spent squatting in the mud with a hot dog jammed on a paper clip at the end of a twine rope, hoping that we would catch as many crawfish as we could find. The nook that we had spent countless days at was no longer level with the creek. Rather, the perfect creek bed was replaced with a six-foot drop as the flood had sledged away any traces of our childhood exploration.

When the crawfish left, they took our childhood naivete with them. We could no longer separate the water from the destruction that its floods caused and so we separated ourselves from the creek all together. One day, we went fishing down at the creek, packed up our gear to leave, and never went back. I returned to the barn park many times in the years following but I never went fishing again. What was once a quintessential part of my life shrunk to a distant memory and what strikes me most about this whole experience was how little the missing crawfish seemed to mean after they disappeared in the flood's wake. I believe that sometimes when you're enveloped in

these situations, especially when you're not quite old enough to understand them, they begin to seem almost trivial. Nothing about the flood was trivial, but my 12-year-old understanding of the world had yet to grasp the gravity of it all, and so, like the crawfish in their muddy dwellings, I began to retreat inside myself.

It has been almost ten years since the flood and my hometown is still reeling from our 100-year flood. In the last nine years, I hadn't taken the opportunity to reflect upon the flood until December 30th of this past year, when half my county was on fire and I desperately wished for the flood waters to return and quench the thirst of our dry, burning grasslands. In the fire and the floods, I watched as pieces of my childhood were slowly stripped away by an angry Mother Earth, but only in the fire did I fully feel the weight of my childhood slipping away. I suppose you could say that the nine-year gap between the two natural disasters changed me into a more reflective, if not nostalgic, person, but I don't know if my processing of the Marshall fire was as reflective as it was cathartic. I've realized that I don't want to have to reflect upon growing older or becoming more of myself, or whatever. I don't want to think about the greater implications of these events. I don't want to think about where the crawfish went or if kids still fish for them on hot, slow summer afternoons. I just want to *be* that kid on the creek again. I want to be the one throwing grimy hot dogs into the muddy water hoping to catch crustaceans who weren't even supposed to be there in the first place. I want to walk the streets of Louisville without seeing the charred remains of businesses my friends and I used to frequent in high school. I want to be able to look back at my childhood without seeing the broken pieces of what once was. I suppose that, ultimately, my 12-year-old and 20-year-old selves just want nothing more than to let out one big, cathartic shriek, finally allowing me to release the last nine years of pent-up stress that

come with watching your hometown burn or simply wash away with the rain and Rocky Mountain runoff.

I don't know where the crawfish came from, but I know that when their rusty, dirt-splattered shells were swept away from their muddy dwellings, they took a part of me with them and I'm not sure I'll ever be able to fully grasp what was lost in those floods. I don't know where the crawfish went but I hope that they live on elsewhere, encouraging a new generation to explore and find their own nook in the world, at a creek or otherwise.