THE MOVE TO CALIFORNIA

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THE MOVE TO CALIFORNIA

DEDICATED TO JOHN STEINBECK

My father crouches
on a wooden fruit
box, crying.
His tears moisten
the dirt
of his rippled
skin.

I remember when we traded
our house for a beat-up
black car, blacker than
my mother’s eyes--
as black as death.

We left Oklahoma
and squandered
our lives in the backseat
of this jalopy.
As we inched
along the highway,
I squirmed
between Mom and Dad
on a quilt put
over the tears
in the seats.
At night, we curled
up in our piles of ragged
clothes, like hamsters
in their nests;
sleeping among
cans of Pet milk,
cheese, Sanborn,
bruised apples,
soft potatoes,
and a couple books.
The cramped car forbid
us to bring even one
of our most treasured
possessions.

Daddy said tomorrow we would
be in California; picking fruit
and earning money. On the way,
I saw oranges and oranges
and oranges and oranges.
But at the state line,
only police officers stood,
like a brick barrier, asking
where we planned on going.
No smiles, no sun,
no oranges.
Now, when Daddy sobs
at night, he is not
alone.