4-25-2018

Yellow

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Class of 2018

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**Author Bio**
Katie Bolger is a senior (AHH!!!) English major with a Writing Concentration and minors in Spanish and WGS from West Caldwell, New Jersey. She hopes to go into publishing after college, but for now she’s enjoying her remaining time on campus as a Residence Coordinator, PLA for the English Department, and Managing Editor of The Mercury. Having completed her capstone in creative nonfiction, she’s now finishing her Honors Thesis on Dominican-American immigration narratives. In her spare time, she listens to Pitbull songs and engages in heated debates about movies. She frequently passes off quotes from The Office as her own.

This nonfiction is available in The Mercury: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2018/iss1/15
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Vincent Van Gogh believed that by creating art, he could give happiness. He infused his paintings with colors to convey emotions, making everything symbolic, intense, and bold. The Yellow House where he lived in Arles, France infected his color palette, brightening his works with a joy he himself did not feel. He applied yellow in bold brushstrokes, bestowing his canvases with the moon and its celestial companions, reflections of riverside French cities, pinprick flames from lanterns, sunflowers confident or wilting, hay bales basking in sunlight, bed frames waiting to welcome the weary. Yellow was warmth, cheer, comfort—things Vincent desperately wanted to offer to others if he could not have them himself. But nobody was buying his art. He kept painting, kept trying to disguise the anguish in his heart. His brother, Théo, wrote, saying he couldn’t loan Vincent more money. The artist stopped paying for food but kept paying for paint supplies. He nourished himself with coffee, cigarettes, and hours and hours of painting. His neighbors began to whisper when he took up residence with his doctor; they said he sipped on turpentine and ate the color yellow. They said he thought it would make his insides bright and help him be happy.

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As a child, I drew pictures of myself with yellow hair, and the taller stick figure of Mommy next to me. We both had green dots for eyes, but I color her shoulder-length bob brown.

“Why don’t I get yellow hair, too?” she would ask, examining herself in the mirror and rearranging her hairline to better hide her dark roots. She’d ask about having to call Grace at the salon, and I’d go back to coloring, confident in my choice of the brown crayon for her and yellow for me. After all, Cinderella had yellow hair, and so did Tinker Bell, costumes of the characters scattered on my bedroom floor beside the Barbie dolls everyone favored over her boring brunette friend, Stacy. It wasn’t until later, when a classmate told me to add brown to my drawing’s yellow hair because I was dirty blonde, that I understood how Mom felt: as if the way I’d chosen to depict myself needed a modifier signaling imperfection, impurity, blemish. I’d been proud of the way my self-portraits stood out on the classroom walls, a burst of yellow in a sea of brunettes, but now I was told I blended in with the rest more than I wished to admit. The word “blonde” was reserved for fairytale heroines and the dolls who got picked first, and real people should describe themselves accordingly, streaking their yellow crayon drawings with dirt.

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I went to Ikea to buy a new comforter, the old one having lost a battle with my residence hall’s washing machine. The store was designed to remind you that you are indoors, and interior design should be your sole focus. There were no windows, and the floors consisted of gray cement flecked with whatever people trekked in on their shoes. The lights overhead, fluorescent white bulbs, bore no resemblance to sunlight. The entire space was made all the more confining by the crowds of shoppers struggling to follow the directional arrows that seemed to lead them in circles, and I was desperate to escape as
soon as I'd arrived. In the bedding section were plain duvets, and I chose one weighted to keep the dreamer cool at night before moving on to the duvet covers, hung like tapestries in an old castle. I easily selected bedding the color of melted butter run through with vines of ivory; I wanted to always wake up to the sunrise.

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Two weeks into the new semester, a girl in one of my classes arrived with the same dandelion-colored backpack as the one between my feet. “I kept noticing yours all over campus,” she said by way of explanation. “I had to have one. I didn’t want you to think I was copying, but I loved yours so much.”

I shrugged and couldn’t help but notice her dandelion was far cleaner than my own, which told the story of my college years through its various stains, frayed edges, and the hole in the bottom that threatened to lighten my load at any moment. Despite its imperfections, the conspicuous hue stood out amid the crowd of more subtle blues and blacks, a single star against the night sky. Whenever I saved seats for my friends in the busy dining hall, they knew exactly which table was ours.

While I didn’t mind the sunshine on my back as I made my way from one end of campus to the other, I was more aware of its brightness when I spent a weekend in Barcelona during my semester abroad. With all my worldly possessions in the mochila amarilla peeking out from beneath my noticeably blond hair (where was that brown crayon now?), I did my best not to draw any unnecessary attention to myself in the pickpocket capital of Europe. At the time, my biggest fear was having my wallet stolen. I wasn’t in Barcelona a few months later, when a vibrant dandelion would have made a perfect target for a terrorist’s rampant van. During my time there, I didn’t have anything taken from me.

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Without the color yellow, there would be no daffodils signaling spring, no baby chicks emerging from eggs. We couldn’t ask for butter on our popcorn at the movie theater. We wouldn’t have green or orange but would instead be stuck with blue and red. The sunset would not be half as impressive, and there would be no amber waves of grain to sing about in a show of patriotism. The canary wouldn’t warn the coal miners, and I couldn’t drizzle honey into my tea. Nobody could blow out the candles on their birthday cake, and my mom’s gold ring wouldn’t wink at me in the sunshine. Angels wouldn’t have halos, and Mary and Joseph would never have found Bethlehem without their guiding light. We couldn’t warn children about which patches of snow they shouldn’t eat. No tall stalks of wheat would call to be harvested. Coldplay wouldn’t tell us to look at the stars, “look how they shine for you.” The teeth of smokers and caffeine addicts wouldn’t publicly betray bad habits every time they offered a smile. There’d be no corn on the cob at barbecues, no school bus to pick up the children at the corner. No pencils would sit on desks to signal an eagerness to learn. Lighthouses would have no means by which to warn ships away from the jagged coast, leaving splintered shipwrecks on the dark shore. Nobody could stand on the corner of a city street and hail a taxi cab to take them home. I would only see half of the bumblebee resting on my foot threatening to sting me. My dad wouldn’t cut into his fried egg and let
the gooey yolk ooze across his plate, only to be sopped up by his toast. There would be no transition between “stop” and “go” on the traffic light. Bruises would fade from black and blue to invisible, with no hues in between to remind us what healing looks like. People with the condition synesthesia would be handicapped when it came to certain words, smells, sounds, feelings; no lightning bolts erupting from the slam of a door or a sunburst accompanying every kiss or fizzling gold fireworks with the smell of firewood.

My mom’s hair dye would permanently fade, giving way to the brown crayon of my drawings.

My comforter wouldn’t keep me warm all through the night or remind me of the newness of dawn each morning.

My backpack would blend in with the rest of the crowd, just another student hauling books to class.

Van Gogh’s morning star wouldn’t illuminate the canvas, his dying sunflowers would never have lived, and Arles wouldn’t shine off the surface of the Rhone. His insides would stay as dark as his works. The brightness of the paint would do nothing to counteract its toxicity as it coursed through his veins. He wouldn’t feel happy, not even for a moment.