MARY KARLTON

Yellow Opus, 2013
Acrylic on Canvas, 24 x 20 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

CLAIRE CHENEY

Color Notebook

Translating memory through pigment

You had many names for yellow. Aureolin, Winsor yellow, yellow ochre, cadmium lemon, bismuth yellow, quinacridone gold. Your handwriting is difficult to read, but the colors speak for themselves, each with a different tone one might use for a lemon, a field, the sheen of a leaf. These colors, mixed with others, create two pages of yellow squares in the notebook I received when you died. Your brother Jim and his wife, Brenda, gave it to me when I visited their new home in Hilo, Hawaii. They bought an old house by a busy road with a view of the ocean and a garden full of edible delights. Jim let me stand on his shoulders to cut the banana stem with his machete, and in the middle of the night I'd wake to the sound of avocados falling on the roof with a startling metallic *thwang*.

Brenda has taken after you in your love of color—she painted the dining room vermillion and the bathroom metallic gold. She told me I was staying in your room, but I think she only calls it that because of your paintings that cover the walls, the colors still bright and full of breath. Your brother told me how your color notebook, entitled "Paints, Pigments and Color Mixing 1999–2000," was coveted by all of your friends from your painting class—that some had even called looking for it. I hope you don't mind that I have it.

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Scholars disagree about the Ancient Greek name for the color yellow. There's an old script called "Linear B," which is found on ancient pots and tablets from the Bronze Age. The script is mostly symbols representing commodities, such as olive oil and wine, and the script's signs for the colors red, gray, and black have been deciphered, while the sign for yellow has not. I've been studying this period because of the beautiful frescoes preserved in ash on what is now known as the island of Santorini.

Santorini is southeast of the Greek mainland in the Aegean Sea. The dig site there is called "Akrotiri," and the findings date from around the middle of the second millennium BCE. Minoans painted the interiors of their buildings a color we call "yellow ochre," a pigment derived from ferric oxide, a naturally occurring compound found in clay. The pigments used in the frescoes at Akrotiri were mostly made of minerals from the surrounding environment. The paintings were done on lime plaster, applied

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over a mud and straw mixture affixed to stone walls. The colors included ferrous earths, hematite (a type of iron oxide), yellow ochre, and copper oxide. One of the paintings in a house named "Xeste 3" depicts women in a rocky landscape harvesting flowers of the crocus, a plant native to the island. The flowers are used to produce the spice saffron. The rocky ground is painted with a deep yellow-gold that contrasts with red elsewhere. The women's dresses have stripes of blue and yellow and black.

On page five of your notebook there is a square of Winsor yellow mixed with quinacridone gold. It looks like the color made by saffron, which is used for dying materials such as fabric and rice a robust golden yellow. The color from the tiny blood-red eyelash-like stigmas of these purple flowers emits a startling intensity, one that has earned the spice its longstanding use in culinary history.

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Yellow seeps through the cracks of my consciousness, filling it with light. There is a pigment called "Indian yellow," believed to come from the urine of cows fed exclusively on mango leaves. There is one called "gamboge"—its name comes from the word for "Cambodia"—that is extracted from a genus of tree called *Garcinia*, whose red-brown resin is yellow when powdered. Many pigments are toxic: cadmium yellow, now replaced by the less toxic azo pigments; Naples yellow, laden with lead; orpiment, or Chinese yellow, heavy with arsenic; chrome yellow, also heavy with lead. Deadly metals that translate into powders, into pastes, into watery translucence.

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There was the time we created our own printing company, called "Veggi Inc." You took me down to Japantown in San Francisco, where we bought strange vegetables I'd never seen before: lotus root, okra, Buddha's hand. We bought one of each, and brought them back to your house on 20 Newman Street, your steep street where camellias and jade plants grew like weeds.

We used the vegetables like stamps. Covering them in colorful inks you had brought out from your art cart, we'd press and roll the vegetables over the paper. Rolling the corn made a funny-textured pattern on the page, and the onion came out in beautiful concentric circles like the ripples in a pond after you toss in a rock. We made one card that looked like Monet's lily pad painting, using corn and lotus. We made a hot pink abstract design from a lemon that had to be blotted on a paper towel before we could apply the ink. The pithy citrus structure held the ink, and the pulp dispersed it. Your cat, Woody, sat in the window looking out at the fog, and sometimes the scent of eucalyptus wafted into the room from the trees up in the park.

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There's a bench in that park now, in memory of you.

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I remember the yellow rose in your yard. It was a voluptuous blonde-lady rose whose color, in paint pigments, is yellow ochre and aureolin. That summer the rose was covered in aphids. You had mail-ordered a box of ladybugs as treatment, and you let me dump them, hundreds of them, all those hard red shields scattering out to eat what was trying to kill your flower. I watched them as any child would, with a hurried heart, with a fluttering hope.

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Female *Osmia avosetta* bees arrange flower petals to form nests that swathe their larvae in nutrients and warmth for the winter. The nests are delicate, colorful works of art. Like many species of bees, *Osmia avosetta* are solitary—they spend their short lives building nests of flower petals in which to deposit nectar and pollen and finally their single egg that will lie protected until it is born. Iranian bees choose purple flower petals, whereas the same species in Turkey chooses yellow, pink, and blue flower petals.

The female bee builds her nest in a small cavity close to the ground. Entering from the top, she lines each chamber with overlapping petals, starting at the bottom and building up. She works with certainty, with the labor of survival. She ferries claylike mud to the nest, plasters a spit-thin layer on the petals, and finishes the lining with another layer of petals. Purple, yellow, pink tipped with gray, yellow against blue against violet, the petals as thin as wings, as fragile as pigments exposed to the light. In a watercolor notebook I brought with me to Greece I painted a bee that had died in a light blue porcelain dish next to a lemon.

I wonder if the yellow in the travel paint kit I used to paint the bee was cadmium lemon, as you have marked in your color book. Cadmium lemon mixed with cadmium orange would have been appropriate. It's a rich yellow—fragrant if I could make the color bloom a scent on the page—not unlike the square I've chosen, which I think of as saffron yellow. A square that smells like fresh-cut hay, like honeycomb, like home.

The bee was shriveled in the dry heat of Syros, an island where white walls glow hot in the afternoon and then cool with blue shadows as the sun sets. The bee curled on its side, delicate as a dried flower petal, intoxicated from the sun and the scent of rosemary growing thick along the roads.

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You're with me as I carry this paint kit around. The size of a pack of cigarettes, it rattles with its tiny collapsible brush. Before the brain tumor, you went on a trip to Turkey with a group from your watercolor class. You showed me the scrapbook you made from your trip, with photographs of you in your sun hat, your red curly hair peeking out from underneath. I loved the idea of a painting trip, of pausing in the afternoons to sit still and notice the colors of shadows. The chaos reduced to shades and shapes, the way dreams are: disordered imagery in a froth of sleep.

A forced stillness. Sitting at a table, I'd dip my tiny paintbrush that snapped together like a travel toothbrush into a glass of water. I'd stare at the paper, its dimpled surface, then stumble through those first strokes, often wishing you were there to encourage me, to prod me along. How would I paint this lemon, its oily surface that reflects the light, its dimpled zest almost a rainbow of color? It was like trying to translate a difficult piece of text, not knowing the vocabulary of colors, their tones and weights and intensities.

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I have tried to learn the strokes, the geography, the grain of the paper against the water and pigment, to master the unsteadiness of my hand, the water pooling and pushing against the banks of my canvas. I look to your color notebook now as a dictionary, each color combination a new word to work with, to break down what I'm seeing into shades of names. Aureolin, chrome, Winsor, gamboge, cadmium, umber, orpiment, Naples, quinacridone, lemon, bismuth, ochre. Yet one remains that can't be named: the yellow that scholars argue over, the yellow that has no square, has no cursive letters or mineral weight, the yellow that lines the walls where you live, inside a buzzing chamber of light.

Claire Cheney is the author of a self-published book *The Art of the Harvest* (2012) which includes paintings and stories about her time in Greek Macedonia participating in the saffron harvest. She lives in Somerville, Massachusetts. This is her first publication.