

honorable mention, non-fiction

Levi

by Emily Bentley

In western culture yellow is the color of a thousand wonderful and simple things.

Yellow is daisies and sour lemon skittles, a brand new pack of smiley face stickers and the color of paint you pick to create a sunset.

In Chinese culture the color yellow is no simple thing.

In China yellow is the color of nourishment.

Yellow is the color a mother wraps her brand new baby in, yellow is the color of the insides of an egg she must eat for thirty days after giving birth.

Yellow is the golden color that the Chinese use to describe themselves.

"What color are you?"

I remember my Chinese school teacher asking me, rapping on my desk with her ruler.

"White" I remember timidly responding.

"What color is he?" She asked pointing to a picture of Martin Luther King in my faded textbook.

"Black." I answered

"What color am I?" she asked.

"Brown?"

"No."

"Orange".

"Of course not."

"Light pink."

"Yellow, she said, I am yellow".

In Chinese culture everything has meaning.

The way the moon hangs in the sky has meaning, which hand you use to write with has meaning, even the characters you write with generally are made up of two or more characters each with their own meaning, so naturally a lot of weight would be put on colors.

White is for burial, red is for luck, yellow is a lot of things.

In China during the reign of emperor Huang Ti (better known as the yellow emperor) people actually worshiped the color yellow. His army tribe greatly honored "yellow earth", which is the soil that is best for farming and would wear the color yellow in battle. It was also said that during the end of his life a yellow dragon appeared from the sky and carried him off to heaven by invitation of the Gods. Emperor Huang Ti is also credited for starting the Han Chinese, who now make up ninety-two percent of the Chinese population. It is often misconstrued that red is the most important Chinese color, but if you research it at all you will find that it was the color yellow that was the foundation of China.

My parents moved to China when I was eight years old.

They felt like they had achieved the American dream and it was bathed in the lilac lime light of someone else's dream. It was stale and crumbly like unsalted crackers left out too long.

My dad was a successful lawyer; we lived in a nice house, in a nice neighborhood, and had a yellow rose bush in our front yard. My dad had just purchased a new sports car, and my mom was homeschooling us four kids. Life was schedules, life was pleasant, life was scripted.

My dad's good friend Tim had started a non-profit special needs orphanage in China about eight years before and he asked my dad to join.

My dad looked out his window and saw a whole life of pleasantries spread out before him, he saw raises, and politics, soccer games, and a thousand other small things that would ultimately make our lives the same as a hundred before. So he took the chance. He hopped on a silver boat of opportunity that would eventually bring us to China's silky and ancient shores.

I loved China the moment we landed. It was big, bustling and obnoxious. I remember the day we landed we went to an outside park, hundreds of children were flying paper kites, and the sky was a mess of all the most brilliant colors. I remember skipping that day, my converse tennis shoes drumming across the surface of this new and magical place that had come like a mother and tucked happiness in between the folds of my sandwich.

The next six months was a happy blur. I learned how to fold dumplings, fly a paper dragon kite, and cuss like a sailor in a language that my mother could not understand.. China was my first crush and I flirted blissfully with her I wrote crooked simple characters on the crook of my arm.

"You're like an egg", my ayi told me.

"White on the outside, yellow on the inside",

And I laughed because that was a glorious and splendid thing.

China for me was like the scene in the original Willie Wonka, when he leads all the children into the candy room. It was as if all the colorful things and places that were stored in my imagination came to life in one room. It was sparkly, brash, loud, full of new discoveries and endless possibilities. I remember

falling asleep one night thinking to myself that the only way it would have been even remotely possible to be happier would be if I could make my mom smile more.

My mom recognized that the work they were doing was good. It had meaning; they were not panning for fool's gold. They were building families, and saving babies. She could see the rip tide affect of the work they were doing, and yet she was not happy. We had all jumped on a rumbling jolly wagon of infatuation and she'd been left behind in the dust.

And then she got the phone call. It came in from a local orphanage director saying they just got in a burned abandoned baby. They didn't have the funds, or the space to be able to do anything for him, and unless my parents did something this baby would die.

When my parents got to the hospital they were greeted with a horrible stench and a blood curdling cry. There on the table was a tiny baby, fists flailing as tears coursed down his scorched body, ash and flesh falling as he swung his tiny arms around.

The baby jumper he was wearing literally had to be cut off his body because they had become stuck to his wounds. After they cut them off they looked at him. A small little boy made up mostly of leaking yellow pus and burnt ash, and just like that my mother fell in love.

When my parents returned in the morning they were tired, black circles like black berry stains around their eyes. I watched my mother talk about the baby, and I sensed, and I saw a change.

"He's so tiny and so hurt", My mom said, her eyes kissing sadness into the sharp February air.

"The doctors told us last night that they will call us in the morning when he dies. There is no hope for him", she said punching words that I could see made her bleed onto the soft flesh of her heart.

"Don't worry he'll live mom" I said patting her head. I was young and morose, I did not know what love was, and my mind had yet to grasp the finality, the long spanning black ocean, of death.

When a week passed and the baby still lived my mom took me to meet him.

He was small and the left side of his body was burnt black and ashy.

I looked at him from outside the incubator and a hummingbird fluttered in my stomach.

"I love you", I whispered through the glass to the baby whose almond eyes carried a world of pain.

"Wo ai ni".

Surprisingly enough I wasn't the only one to fall in love with this baby boy. My mom started spending nights at the hospital. When he continued to live despite the doctors dire predictions she got permission to move him to the best hospital in Beijing, an hour away. "He won't make the drive over there", the doctors told us.

But he did. "He won't live past his first surgery", the new doctors told us, but he did.

Levi, as my mother named him, became a small but surly rebel. "He won't", "he can't", "he'll never" were constant words, that took no meaning in his small life.

He had his left arm amputated, all the toes on his left leg, and the tips of all of his fingers on his right hand.

One of the doctors, noticing my mother's constant vigilance over Levi quipped "If you adopt this boy what type of life will he have?" He'll never be able to walk, or run, or do anything that little boys do".

But my mother, inspired by Levi's rebellion, only smiled because she saw, what we saw. A titan's strength contained in a baby not even six months old. So she fought for him, and she got others to join in her fight. Airlines gave us free tickets to fly him to America, the Holiday Inn let us stay for free during Boston Marathon weekend, and Shriners took care of all his surgeries free of charge. These are just some of the things that were done. The whole next six months of Levi's life were a rainbow of miracles as people gave, and came to watch the little boy who'd beaten death.

The name Levi is Hebrew and it literally means to bind and unite. Levi walked, before he could crawl, over the silver linings of death and life, and chose life. He fought a fierce battle, and ultimately won, giving us someone to look up too. When I see Levi, my brother, I do not see scars, or missing limbs, I see the bravest person I know eating strawberry pancakes and cannon balling in the pool.

Levi is now eight years old. He will have to get surgery at least every year until he is eighteen. The skin on his left leg will not ever grow. So every year he has to have skin graft surgeries where they take skin from the parts of his body that do grow, and patch it on to the parts that don't. Every year more scars are added to his small frame, and it hasn't stopped him yet.

He runs and wrestles and swims better than all of my other brothers. He is hilariously funny and if you piss him off his pinches hurt like heck. His favorite blanket is blue and yellow and he loves Spiderman so much it borders on obsession. His favorite song is "Rock Your Body" by the Black Eyed Peas and when it comes on he "shakes his booty", as he likes to call it.

He often gets stares when we go out because of his "disabilities" he always accredits these odd looks to the fact that he is Chinese, since we now live in the United States.

Levi was given odds from the moment he arrived in the dingy farm hospital. Levi was supposed to die, but he didn't.

For the rest of his life people will most likely have pity on him, and they will thank God that they are not like him.

Levi is disabled; when he learns how to drive he will get special parking, and special treatment. They will treat him like he's fragile, and tiptoe around him.

People often think that disabilities warrant pity.

Disabled people need special parking spaces and sloped ramps.

They need help out of walkers, and hands to guide them when their Seeing Eye dogs fail.

They “need” our looks of pity, our side ways glances, and our special prayers.

Because they are weak, because their missing something. Because we are whole and they are not.

That’s what society tells us at least.

But then I see Levi, streaking across our yard after a soccer ball. He does not care that his left foot turns in when he runs, or that one of his limbs doesn't fill his jersey. He's in it to win, and by God he has, he will, and will continue to do so.

Disabilities are not a cruel accident dealt out by an unforgiving God. They are complicated circumstances that tend to make being a human so much harder. They make us angry, make us wonder why.

One of the most beautiful things Levi has taught me though, is a disabled person is not a broken person. They are a brave person. They meet their dragons on a day to day basis and fight proudly.

While others may see my brother’s scars and the limp he carries when he walks, I see my brother the dragon slayer. Bathed in a golden yellow light as he races off to face the world,

or at least for now just another dragon.