The door buzzed before it opened, then snapped closed again behind Jack.

Why is someone always tapping in here? Jack wondered. He could hear the sharp repeated tap of a knuckle on a hard surface. The staccato rhythms fell around his feet and temples. Two patients played cards, slapping the table with each turn. A phone rang. A TV blared from another room. From a room down the hall, someone was moaning, and two other patients were arguing in loud angry voices.

A nurse waved Jack past the front desk. As Jack moved through the psych ward towards his mother’s room, the weight of the noise and the closed, locked door seemed to press against him. He wanted to turn and leave.

When Jack walked into his mother’s room, he found her staring at a painting propped up on her night stand. They must have let her paint during craft time again. Jack glanced at the paper that she stared at and saw dark blues and blacks stacked on each other, filling the page with their weight. “What do you call your new painting?” he asked.

“I call it NoYellow.” She glanced at him then looked out the barred window at the scraps of sky and square-framed hills that could be seen from her fifth floor hospital room window and said, “When I went out this time, it was about a single color. It was about blue.”

Jack cringed. He hated to listen to stories of her craziness.

Speaking softly, she continued, “I kept thinking about blue, darker and darker blue, deeper than the rain or sky. Blue so deep it was almost black, it swallowed me whole, sunk me, trapped me. Blue got bigger and bigger. I could hardly breathe, everywhere I looked I saw nothing but blue, dark blue, even the air was filled with hues of blue, smothering me with a deep sadness, till I thought I’d be crushed under the weight of blue. That’s why I wasn’t talking. Too much blue in everything.” She paused and looked around the room. “Then I woke up, here, in this white room. What’s it been, five days now?”

“Five days.”

Jack shifted and coughed. He was so uncomfortable around this crazy talk about color. The room seemed to get smaller with every moment he stayed there. The main door buzzed and suddenly he wanted to run through it. Looking down at his feet, he noticed an untied shoe. He tied his shoe, then kissed his mom goodbye and said he had to get to work.

The nurse stopped him on his way out. “I know your mom likes you to stop in at her doctor appointments. She has one scheduled at 4:00 today.”

Great, Jack thought. Two trips to Ward C in one day.
Jack stepped out into the hall and pushed open the door to the stairwell, filling his mind with subtraction as he took the steps down: seven hundred and thirty-two minus three-hundred and fifty-eight. Eight from two. Need to borrow from the next column. Eight from twelve. Four.

After one flight of stairs going down, he had his first answer: three hundred and seventy-four. He had two more by the time he left the hospital. Sixty-seven. Thirty-one.

Within minutes, Jack was cruising down the highway. He rolled down his window with quick turns of the handle. As the noisy wind filled the car, he remembered that he had only one client today — the manager of a computer board assembly plant.

A soundproof door separated the main section of the assembly plant from the office area. Jack followed the manager through the door. The noise hit him first. A shrill pitch like a hundred oversized vacuum cleaners engulfed Jack. In one half of the giant windowless warehouse, machines noisily made other machines as mechanical arms attached chips to boards, screaming and clunking with each stamp. In another section of the plant, rows of workers silently stared through microscopes at other circuit boards and worked with long tweezers to place colored-coded computer chips, one by one.

Alfred, the manager, paraded Jack down the center aisle of the plant and stopped at a young woman's workstation. "We hand assemble smaller jobs when it's cheaper than reprogramming the big machines." He pointed at a sheet of paper tacked above her work. "These are the instructions for this board." In a voice loud enough for Jack to hear over the noise, Al read out loud from the paper. "Yellow chip onto N12, blue chip onto R72, and the list goes on from there." Al looked up from the sheet. "The board won't work right if she misses by a single space on the grid. If she glues the chip to N13 instead of N12, it won't work right."

As Jack stared at the bright components of the circuit board, he thought of the circuitry of his brain. He worried that his brain was put together like his bipolar mother's, with a key miswiring, just waiting for a neuron to misfire.

Jack followed Alfred down the line and looked up and down the rows of workers. Two workers in matching white tee's stretched their necks and curled them back over their work, reminding Jack of two mechanized swans dipping towards water for a slow drink.

Al pointed at an empty desk with a computer and said, "You'll work here. You need to get the software that tracks the lines running. Every board is coded. A scanner counts every time a board moves to a new worker. We track each board and entire orders." He raised his voice a notch. "We track each of our workers, too. The guy who wrote the line tracking software got ticked off and screwed up the program before he quit. We want you to get it back on line."
Finally, AI left Jack at a computer. Above him, hundreds of fluorescent bulbs drilled light into the giant windowless warehouse. Fingers, hands, and parts made tiny movements below. Jack felt out of sync. The vacuum cleaner sound kept sucking at him.

Jack forced his hands to open the program documentation file. His fingers felt a long way from him. Staring at his computer screen, he started subtracting 758 from 1,020. Eight from zero, borrow one, eight from ten, two. The rhythm of the numbers calmed him. Subtraction felt good in his brain, numbers falling from each other, leaving a smaller number behind, leaving an answer you could count on.

He turned back to the file. Variable names, modules, and flow charts began sinking in. The other guy had tied the program into angry loops of illogic. One go-to statement ran into another then ran back into the first. Jack untied loops one by one.

Taking a deep breath, Jack worked through code. As the minutes passed he felt the loops of code retying in his stomach. He thought of microprocessors counting each board, each person's work, hour after hour. Jack felt caught in the loop of that plant. His work, his lines of code, transforming microprocessor data into reports detailing repeated movements of the hands of each worker. Working. Working. Working. Dying, dying, dying. Loops tying, untying as new people sitting in different chairs did the same kinds of movements on stamped boards.

The arms on Jack's chair seemed to crowd him. He kept bumping them as he shuffled printed pages of code. Minutes on the job ticked slowly away. In that over-lit warehouse, Jack felt a desire for something besides long rows of desks, straight lamps, and dotted grids. He felt like taking those computer chips and making a wild collage or throwing those bits of color in the air and have them fall down like red, green, and yellow rain. He could imagine computer components on the same canvas as oil paint.

What was he doing thinking about art? He wanted nothing to do with art, it was way too close to his mother's craziness. She earned her living from her art and where did it get her? She got lost in her own paintings every couple years and found herself behind a locked door in Ward C.


When Jack arrived at the hospital, the doctor was already in his mother's room.

"Hello, Jack. I was just about to show your mother something." He wheeled a tray to the side of the bed and adjusted the height.

"Alicia, you remember that we have been collecting MRI's for research. I thought you might like to look at yours."

The doctor slipped a sheet of paper out of a file and placed it on the tray. Tiny squares of color filled a blurred swollen oval on the page. "This is your MRI—the picture we took of your brain, Alicia."
Jack and his mother looked at her brain picture together. Shades of dark blue waved into each other in the swollen oval. Small specks of green scattered infrequent accents on the crest of blue waves.

While his mother continued to stare at the image, the doctor mentioned to Jack, “The way the machines are set up, it turned out that the depressed bipolar patients generated images colored mostly in dark blues while manic patients had MRI’s images filled with bright yellow and orange. Obviously, this is only an aside to our research, the main thing we need to talk about with you today is getting you to take your drugs all the time, on good days and bad days.”

Jack’s mother looked up from her page of dark blues and occasional tiny squares of green and told the doctor, “I see what’s missing. I need more yellow in my life. Deep cadmium yellow. Yellow ochre. Naples yellow.”

Jack pulled keys from his pocket, separated them one by one as she spoke. In his mind, he could see himself one day sitting on a white bed staring with empty eyes out the window.

His mother continued. “Yellow rain slickers. Daffodils spiking my life.” She looked out the barred window. “If I had more yellow, I could mix it with deep blue, perhaps have long green grassy hills in my picture.”

A smile opened across her face and disappeared. The brief smile reminded Jack of a butterfly opening her wings for a moment across a face before flying away.

Back at the plant the next day, Jack stared in front of him and thought of his mother. He kept trying to think of faxes instead of daffodils. Al had called him back to develop a fax management system. Jack watched the faxes fall lightly into baskets like so many petals dropping on a hot summer day.

Jack stared at the blank white sheet in front of him where he was supposed make a flowchart. The paper seemed so empty. The corners around him so rigid, not even a ragged leaf of a plant to ease the sharp angles. The paper on his desk looked to him like the only window in the place. Looking out the window of his page, he saw a daffodil blooming that wanted to come to life on paper. To bring it out, all he had to do was trace the lines that were already there in his mind. He hesitated, but the paper felt too white, his life, too white. He’d had too much subtraction and not enough addition.

He felt mesmerized by the daffodil in his mind. That flower needed to be added to the paper. It would be safe, he thought, to let out just one flower. Then his hand grabbed his pencil almost on its own and he watched the black and white drawing of a daffodil emerge.

Jack never sketched. He half-expected a neuron to misfire that would trigger reactions, ending in the white room of a hospital. He knew that his art ban wasn’t totally rational. Banning art in his life wouldn’t bring on or stop psychosis one way or another, just one factor he had tried to control. Art was one arena he didn’t want to get lost in like his mother got lost. Staring at the flower in the place where his flowchart was supposed to be, he waited. Nothing
happened. He did not become his mother. He did not get lost. No one locked him away. As he looked at his black and white sketch in that noise infested warehouse, he could suddenly breathe a little better.

He folded his paper carefully, took out a new sheet and began his flowchart. After work, he drove to a floral shop and carefully selected ten bright yellow daffodils.

Jack walked into the hospital carrying daffodils in a safe plastic vase. Jack set the vase on the tray in his mom’s room. His mother smiled slowly, then leaned over and pulled out a single flower. She stared into the petals for a long while, then said, “I want to show you the yellows.”

She reached for his hand and looked up at him. Ever since her first psychosis when he was fifteen, Jack had resisted the artistic instructions his mother had once given him. She still tried, but he always pulled away. Even today, he was almost afraid to be touched by her for fear of being pulled into the nightmare of her repeated hospitalizations. But something about the joy in her face as she held that single flower in her hand, drew him toward her.

Very gently, she guided one of his fingers to the bottom of a petal, and then lightly to the tip. Again, she guided his finger up the petal. “Do you see the many, many yellows?”

He watched her trace the flower with his finger. He saw that the richest colors were near the stem, that the yellow lightened towards the tips. When she moved the flower slightly, the yellow changed, splotched lighter in some places darker in others. When his finger approached the tip again, he saw shade blend into shade in the light yellow. Some hues deeper and others light. As he followed the travels of his finger under his mother’s hand, he saw how the yellow changed as his finger moved. A thousand yellows at every turn.

She held out the flower towards him.

“For you,” she said.

Jack took the flower from her hand. As he took the flower he saw the brilliance of the yellows, but he forced himself to notice, too, the dark green stem and the drops of water that gave the flower drink and kept it alive, a part of the natural, real, concrete world. One drop of water slipped from the stem and landed on the tile floor. Subtract one drop from a flower and you still have a flower, he thought.

The drop fell to the floor and he placed his heel over that single drop, trapping that bit of water. Water is a thing of science, of condensation, of cycles, a traveler through flowers and trees and people, a thing without color of its own, he reminded himself.

He felt ungrounded, the yellows in his hand pulled at him like a magnet, unbalancing him. His kept his foot steady on the drop of water underneath the sole of his shoe.

Then suddenly the feeling passed. It was only a daffodil he was holding. The drop had disappeared beneath his foot. But he felt like something had been unleashed. It was as if his eyesight was changed.
Jack felt frightened. He focused on water within his own body and in his mother. Water heals, grounds. He looked at his feet that connected him to earth.

His mother looked at him smiling. He kissed her and left quickly, smacking his feet hard against the ground as he walked, noticing yellows everywhere, slips of paper on the nurses' desk, other shades of brilliant yellow in the plants in the gardens, another shade in the signs on the road outside.