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Rachel Miller

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The Soldier and the Yellow Woman

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The Soldier and the Yellow Woman

By Rachel Miller

*And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.*

From “Good Morrow” by John Donne

“What lies between your land and the country of men?” the river asked.

“We do,” said the swans dabbling their beaks.

“You know that we fly to and from the land of Faerie” said the crows that hopped beneath the trees.

“And where I trickle into a stream, there on the border of your land,” said the river, “an old creature waits beside a golden bush for someone each day. He is the last one who lies between your home and the country of men, but what he is I do not know.”

“He is a good soul; he loves without fear or artifice,” said the crows.

“He receives our gifts each day,” replied the swans.

“A strange creature indeed it is that welcomes you all as guests,” said the river, “for you birds are full of life only for a short time.”

“Old river you only know what the earth has taught you, but we are children of not only the earth but heaven as well,” the swans and the crows laughed.

The river muttered, and the birds hearing two voices arguing in the field beside the river, took flight to discover the cause.

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“Give me that, or I’ll break your fingers—see I’m yours and you must now ask politely,” the yellow woman shouted, tearing the young man’s hands away from her. She pushed him to the ground, and darted giggling behind an ash.

The young man, his pale blue shirt now flecked with dust, stared in mock seriousness at the white-washed sky, a grin tickling his face. He sighed. “Tell me, oh heaven, what must I, her soldier, do to make her love me? Fah! She has my ring, she has my word.” He paused and glanced at the yellow woman, her trailing skirt betraying her whereabouts.

“Listen you silly man, give me a roof, and I’ll give you more than you ever paid for. The priest should have mentioned that in his blessing. A house makes a happy wife, and affection will come in time.”

Leaping toward the tree, he seized her arm and quickly wrapped her in his scarlet cloak. “There now,” he shouted, “is this roof enough?”

She tossed her head allowing him to kiss her cheek once. “Remember, I married you for security, and when Father Joseph introduced you to me last week, he said you were a soldier and a yeoman who worked a decent estate in Lancashire.”

The young soldier released her regretfully. Soon he and the yellow woman, with his horse walking pleasantly beside them, left the road they were on, to stroll through a wheat field that lay adjacent to the shallow river, which tumbled gently through the valley. The setting sun flushed their faces, while the woman pointed out how twenty crows seemed to be following twenty swans that soared in determined lines along the watchful horizon. When they reached the end of the field, the soldier’s thoughts began to wander; he shuddered as he thought about the crushed bones he saw during England’s last war with France. The curse of his captain appeared mingled with the yellow woman in his anxious thoughts, and down a well-worn path in

his mind, he saw his mother sitting by a well with him as a young boy, washing clothes and telling old tales of a green knight.

They stopped by the river as the soldier's horse took a drink, but it wasn't long, though, before the mischievous animal, noticing that the soldier had dropped the reins, dashed a few yards ahead. Bidding the woman to stay, the young man approached the dappled beast, cautiously marking well its pulsing nostrils. The woman watched, pressed her lips and ignored the hair that blew in her face, but before he could grasp the horse's bridle, squeals erupted from the trees that marched down the broken hills towards the water. The horse bolted, but to the soldier's surprise galloped directly toward the foul cries.

"Well, come along, we can't just let him go," shouted the yellow woman.

The soldier shrugged. "So you desire me to face wild beasts now?"

"Of course," she said, her cheeks round with courage.

"Very well, then, but remember, there will be a debt to pay. If I slay these beasts with only my short sword, you must allow me to love you," he replied with a wink.

As he bade the yellow woman to wait patiently, the sun suddenly fell on a large golden bush that grew close to where they stood. Glancing carelessly toward it, the woman's face wrinkled then glowed with awe, and before long, the man observed what lay prone beneath the bush, and what sat laughing above it. There under the bush was old Agape's body, his face turned away from the yammering of the beasts, his eyes fixed on the sky as his soul sported with his lady in the evening light. His soul had seen the twenty crows and swans that had recently passed his way, and he was glad, though it did remind him that his time with Queen Eirene was short, and that like a drop of water he would once again return to that naked clay, which walks about under the worn stars. He loved Eirene and she loved him, and their love was a love that grew beyond the veil of sleep, a golden chain that stretched from earth to heaven. They had traveled the expanses together, delighting in hidden things. The souls of Agape and Eirene sat above the river's voice upon the gentle wind, as the green and golden land marched out before them, and they rested in each other's faces.

Agape's body moved, and the cries of the beasts grew faint. The soldier trembled and was forced to mind his thoughts; he could not look at Agape or Eirene for long, though they smiled kindly upon him. The yellow woman grew pensive. Neither one remembered how long they watched old Agape and his lady, while the moon rose and the questioning voice of the night whispered to the shallow stream. When the soldier finally turned to the yellow woman, she looked at him timidly, yet not without hope.

"My love," said the soldier taking the yellow woman's hand, "Look, our horse has returned. Isn't this a stroke of luck?"

"Yes," replied the yellow woman, "he knows that we will have to camp here tonight."

"Camp? We aren't that far from my house?" said the soldier.

"No, but this is a blessed place. Come, let us throw away our fears," said the yellow woman softly.

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"So," said the river as the swans nestled once again among the rushes, and the crows sat silently in the trees. "Who were those arguing voices that called you away?"

"A woman who needed us," said the swans.

"A soldier who found his rest," said the crows.

"They must be the ones who have camped beside the forest's edge," said the river sleepily.

"Your observation is correct," said the birds as they closed their eyes.

"I was here before the forest, and I was here before the fields were planted with wheat. I remembered when your kind arrived, as well as those strange creatures who visit the golden bush. I do hope that the soldier and his wife don't get the idle notions that you all have, ignoring that I and the earth are your true parents. Love is an illusion, and cold death is the real."

The swans chuckled to themselves and the crows opened their yellow eyes sharply, and down at the forest's edge the soldier and the yellow woman slept together beside a small fire.