

**Yellow Annual**  
*Miriam Juliet Horsley*

When he met the girl she was young, and such was their love—an acceptable age for love to be, especially in the naïveté of her childhood. She was chaste and pure, lively as the early wind that ripped blackthorn blossoms from their sleep, with as strong a profound longing for a kindred spirit as he had. The only rival of her golden hair was the yellow of the wildflowers that opened at her touch and for all the world there was nothing to match the brilliance of her eyes, which captured all of the colors of the sea and the earth and the sky in a single shade of roasted barley.

In those early days of ewes lambing and farmers laying their oats into the new-soft ground she was a mere child, barely reaching the tree branches she so eagerly climbed. Her energy rained on everything around her, making them twist up to meet her eager hands: leaves curled from branches as she touched them, and flowers escaped the stifling earth at the sound of laughter falling from her peach mouth. Even he felt himself drawn up in juvenile rebellion against the dark edges of a weary mind, clearing himself of sadness like mist falling away from old eyes. Those days were too short.

At the end of such days, even as they grew longer with the greenness of the earth, he would cross the furrowed wheat field to his home and she would grab onto him and cry no matter what promises he gave of return. Return he did, time and time again, to the mossy thickets where he found her, and in those hours of play he would himself become a child again, until the sun set on the illusions of youth and he again became worn beyond his four-and-twenty years. It was then that she would beg him to stay in the rising wheat, and it was only in the darkness that he could have the resolve to reject her, looking back to see her clutch herself in her own arms as if to convince herself he was still there.

As the weather warmed and winds banished the early rains she no longer cried, for she had become too old to doubt his return, and he had fallen too much in love with the mysteries of nature to tell himself that he would stay away. The high sun and mild breezes found her showing him the life found in the plants she had herself nurtured; he no longer was lured into a pretense of childish joy but was shown the wonders of the earth with a mature curiosity only found in the inquisitive years of young adulthood. Leaves that unfolded at her touch now showed him which tree was which. Berries that had formed with her voice now were given names and tastes. Branches that once were used as antlers on the head of an imaginative child now could be made into brooms and baskets. Nature that had unfolded from her arms now revealed their uses.

It was in these days that he learned how to make wreaths of flowers, and he

placed them on her head as payment for the lessons she taught him; just enough of her youth remained for her to be happy with such simple gestures. Yellow blooms now stood out against the dark flaxen crown of her hair and brightened the growing wisdom in her eyes. Sunlight slowly stretched wheat towards the sky and with it grew the girl. The trees that she once could not climb for their height bore her weight steadily as she grasped for the freedom of the heavens, but the dust and leaves that patterned the hem of her white shift kept her firmly planted to the earth and, as her adolescence faded into the shrinking shadows of the solstice, so the leaves reached the height of their growth and began to droop on their branches.

She still followed him to the rows of wheat when the sun ducked its head below the horizon, but there were no grasps or pleading, just a following of barley eyes as he left her in the distance. Soon his figure would be swallowed by grain, and she would seek an embrace from the forest instead of his arms.

As the stalks of wheat and the boughs of trees became heavy with fruit and the light of the sun began to wane, she was old enough for him to love her, not this time the want of family that he never had but the captivating, untamed love the wind speaks of as it rattles the golden leaves from their perches. The days were spent discovering how to harvest the fruit of the earth, learning how to better cultivate and nurture the birth of grains from the whispers of dry, swaying grass, absorbing the secrets of herbal cures from the cool murmurs of brooks, gathering knowledge on how to make tools and homes out of wood and stones from the chattering teeth of beavers. The earth laid out its ripe bounty in front of her, and in turn she told the earth to give its gifts to him. He returned her benevolence with twisted crowns of rust-colored leaves and fronds of wheat, and her modesty was content with them.

He could not have loved her more as the trees began to shiver off their leaves and her hair curled into deep hazelnut locks that nearly brushed the leaves beneath her, and though her walk was slower and her voice carried the sigh of twilight instead of the wind of morning, she could not have been more beautiful to him. The flowers still bent to tickle her feet as she walked, but now even running she could not outpace the roe deer; her ripe apple mouth curled into a gentler smile in place of the loud laughter that used to echo through her forest. All of the blooms her childhood had coaxed forth watched in their fading days as she became the mother of the trees rather than the daughter.

Love was amnesia for he who each day blinked at the sinking sun and remembered the weight of his home, and in the dying hours the heavy stalks of wheat watched as he held her. Both were as reluctant to part as she had been at their meeting, but there were no tears. There was tomorrow.

When the wheat cracked between teeth and was scythed from its field, her hair ceased to darken. The ends slowly bleached to the cold silvery white of aspen bark,

collecting dead leaves as they dragged the ground behind her, and her wreath of leaves became one of *Sarcococca* berries and brittle branches. He came less to her forest.

The days he did not greet her at the edges of the frostbitten field she would wander, snow melting beneath her feet as she walked underneath the ceiling of icy boughs that were a barrier between herself and the sky that once felt like freedom. She would watch from a distance as he made his home as the beaver taught him, and a smile would frost her indigo-plum mouth as he safely stored his harvest against the chill. And then alone she would pass her hands over the sleeping trees and feel their dreams, stopping when her hands were needed to rub her arms warmer against the bitter wind, which rasped its regret as it abused what her shift would not cover.

When he would come, she would lead him again into the familiar glade and teach, voice softer than fallen snow and barley eyes filled with intelligence and a faintly swirling color of melancholy. She was no less beautiful, hair becoming more grey-white as the clouds day by day, but all childish fantasy was broken inside him and even with her beside him he barely believed that she was there, the light of a new year and shadow of its end. He never sighted the quiet tears that she shed as his footsteps faded into silence, and she became accustomed to the embrace of her own arms over his.

The sun was at its bleakest when she did not look for him at first light.

Instead she stumbled through the forest, frightening deer with the snaps of branches, snow no longer yielding to the soles of her feet, wind no longer caring whether it blew on her or through her. She thought of him sometimes, and knew that the earth was taking care of him, and her cold blackthorn-berry lips tried to smile as she thought of how he would pass on the knowledge that she gave him.

It was nearly time for the rebirth of the forest, during the most biting chill that the wind could muster, that he came to the wood without meeting her at the field as he once did. He stopped and looked, trying to find the shadow of that wood that he once knew so well, and she came to him, snowdrop hair swirling with each movement and barley eyes frosted over with a vague, sightless mist. For long moments the silence of snow reigned, then she turned and led him into the forest with faltering, measured steps. Without his asking she took his hand and guided it to the prickly leaves of the holly, trying to teach him its secrets. He pushed her hand away.

Instead his hand reached into his heavy cloak and drew out a halo of *Mahonia* flowers, blooming golden yellow even in the harsh cold, and he placed it on the pale crown of her head as she used to. She felt them with faintly blue fingers and understood his thanks; she was at once content with the joy she had given him and filled with regret for the things she would never give him for lack of strength.

Exploring the crown with gentle hands she pushed her fingers towards the sky, stretching out and twisting into woody kinks, dark and brittle, creating the branch antlers with which she would play as a child. Her hair stiffened into bark and pushed

down into the soil as the shift warped into a collection of knotted tree trunks, and in the instant before he could see no more of her, barley eyes were cleared and shone like the sun, and peach lips widened to let out a gentle laugh. The tree whispered and sang as its branches burst into the sky, shattering the ice ceiling, and green leaves exploded from its arms, breaking the fury of the wind against its unyielding trunk.

He stood and marveled, then smiled as fragile yellow primroses broke through the snow and clustered around the base of the tree, heralding the end of the cold.

In time, he returned to the tree and watched as its green leaves burned gold in the time of harvest, and he would come to call her tree a hornbeam for her yellow crowns and her branch antlers. It provided for him strong wood and ample shade and as he came back, year after year, he told his son the stories of she who had given him everything on the earth and in it; even today her spirit blazes in the flower-yellow leaves, laughing in the wind and watching his sons and daughters work the earth as she taught him.