

HOW DO YOU LIKE THEM

Julie Marie Wade

In the Storybook, there is always a great red apple with a little patch of shine.

Sometimes several apples nestle in a fruit bowl, suggestive of affection. Another sits upright on a teacher's desk, balanced on its awkward apple-buttocks. This one is all business.

Sometimes the apple has a stem, like a cowlick on a little boy's head. Sometimes the stem bears two green leaves, which dangle midair, perfectly symmetrical, an allusion to Dali's mustache.

Sometimes the apple is anthropomorphized, red as a lady's lips with long eyelashes and beguiling smile. She seems to want to be bitten or kissed. It is hard to tell which. Perhaps it is always hard to tell which.

Instead of *Goodnight Moon*, I liked to say *Goodnight Apple*. If the sun was an orange in the sky, how was the moon not an apple?

In the Storybook, there is always a great red apple, and sometimes a friendly green worm chews its way out from the inside. This is another kind of metamorphosis, different from caterpillars and cocoons.

Call it an apple, the poem begins. *Call it a test or a joke*.

The apple and the worm are friends. Sometimes, the worm wears spectacles and a bow tie. Always, the worm is there to teach the apple something.

My mother called it the *apple of my cheek*, that high place under the eye with its little patch of shine.

A black eye is sometimes called a *shiner*, or an *apple*, according to my father. *Just look at the apple he gave him!* my father exclaims. This is an exciting occasion, though not an especially happy one.

At the Cinema, the music swells, the lights grow dim, and the curtains part, red as apples. When the evil queen appears on screen, I cannot stop screaming. It is a reflex, primal as anything. My father carries me up the long aisle, slung over his shoulder like a sack of fruit.

In old movies we watch on television, a jaunty man may rub an apple on his shirtfront before taking a bite. In black-and-white movies, the bite even sounds red.

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In the Storybook, God calls David the *apple of His eye*. I would rather God had called him the *apple in His sky*.

Among things frequently juggled, apples are prominent, along with tennis balls, responsibilities, and bowling pins aflame.

In the Storybook, God makes a small orchard in the middle of a garden. This scene is familiar to me. I have spent hours climbing my friend Joy's apple tree, dangling perfectly in midair, plucking bright fruit from the boughs. Every spring, for the few weeks it flowers, the apple tree turns white as snow.

I ask my mother if Eden is in Washington.

Once I had a Granny Smith, but we always called her *Grandma*. Perhaps this was to distinguish her from the apple, which was also known to be tart.

My other grandma was named for summer. When I bruised my knees, she called the piebald places *apples*, then kissed them with her cool, thin lips.

At the Cinema, I puff with pride when Orphan Annie recites her long list of dinner wishes. *Did you hear? Did you hear? She asked for Washington apples!*

I ask my mother if I can have a whole apple in my lunchbox please.

The sliced ones turn brown as wilted leaves.

In the Storybook, Eve meets a snake in the garden, which might have been a friendly green worm. He encourages her to eat the apple. He encourages her to learn.

Later, though, Mother puts the apple into Snow White's hand, and then it's poison!

Grandma June cautions that Halloween candy must always be wrapped. *If someone gives you an apple, you take it, you say thank you, and then you run right home. Don't bite it. Give it to your mother.*

In the Storybook, the friendly green worm who is sometimes called the Serpent reminds Eve it is important to share. She gives Adam a bite of her apple. They are having a picnic the way I always imagined brothers and sisters do.

But what happens if I bite it?

My father tells me one notable difference between men and women is the Adam's apple. Men have an apple lodged in their throats. I have seen it in the game called Operation. Women do not. My father cannot explain this absence, even though the First Man and the First Woman both ate from the same apple tree.

There could be a razor blade inside.

Later, I learn that women have apples in their throats, too. Though typically smaller and less visible, this protrusion from the larynx protects the vocal chords of men and women alike. Pleased with myself, I boast to my father that I have an *Eve's* apple. For some reason, he does not look pleased.

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In the Storybook, William Tell and his son have been sentenced to death. One chance for redemption is offered. If, with a single arrow, Tell can shoot an apple from his young son's head, the two of them are free to go.

Here the Storybooks begin to contradict each other. Sometimes what you do with an apple helps you get by. Sometimes what you do with an apple brings about your demise.

Remember: Adam and Eve have been banished from the garden, which is like being grounded forever — your privileges not just suspended but revoked. Now they must make clothes out of leaves and toil in the harsh sun. *Why is knowing ever a bad thing?* I want to know.

My mother is an elementary teacher and a master gardener. Her students rarely bring her apples, though. And when we plant seeds in our backyard, despite our most diligent attention, an apple tree in the rocky soil never grows.

Later, I dream my father shoots me with a single arrow. It is an accident, though he is a poor marksman and should not be shooting at all. The arrow does not pierce my heart but lodges deep in my throat instead. I am not dead, I marvel, but I will not speak again.

In the dream, my blood is the color of apples, which is also the color of my mother's dream car. She, like Prince, wants a little red Corvette. This is precisely where the similarities between Prince and my mother end.

I must have been eight years old before I knew apples came in colors other than red.

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Have you noticed how the early story problems are all about apples? For instance: *If I pick twelve red apples and you pick nine green apples, how many total apples do we have?*

But I thought we weren't supposed to be picking apples at all!

That's a different story, my father says. Come to think of it, this is one of his favorite things to say.

Eve has five more apples than Adam. Adam has nine apples. How many apples does Eve have? It is hard to think of *fourteen* at a time like this, knowing they are naked and sunburned and eventually going to die.

When I feel poorly as a child, my mother gives me applesauce. In winter, she warms it up and adds cinnamon. In summer, she serves it cold.

Sometimes I have a strong desire to be sick in the middle of winter so I can eat warm applesauce dusted with cinnamon.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away, my Grandma June is fond of saying. My Grandma Smith, who is not fond of apples or of anything else, goes into the hospital and never comes out.

At one time, we discussed a family vacation to New York City, sometimes known as the Big Apple. In the end, my parents decided it was too dangerous and expensive. We traveled to Portland, Oregon, instead, which is known as the City of Roses.

If gas costs \$.89 per gallon, and the destination city is 2,404 miles away, how much will it cost to make the trip? What if the destination city is only 173 miles away?

My father chuckles. *That's like comparing apples and oranges* — as if he invented the phrase.

Despite years of pleading, my mother never puts a whole apple in my lunchbox. She says it is *unladylike* for a girl to eat an apple that way.

In the Storybook, Trixie Belden lives on Crabapple Farm. I don't know what a crabapple is, but I know I want to live with Trixie Belden in a houseboat on Puget Sound.

Speculative questions prove infinitely more appealing than those with fixed answers: *When Julie and Trixie make their first apple-based dessert, should it be a crumble or a cobbler or a pie? And how many apples will these two enterprising sleuths and inseparable friends require? And*

will they be too shy to kiss in a windstorm and pluck apple petals from each other's hair?

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In one Storybook, Adam is a bad man who loves the land and being outside in nature. In another Storybook, Johnny is a good man who loves the land and being outside in nature. *But Adam isn't bad*, my father explains, perhaps protesting too much. *It's just that he's weak and gives into temptation. Adam is a bit too easily led.*

It turns out there is a *Red Delicious* apple and a *Golden Delicious* apple, but there is no such thing as a *Green Delicious* apple, which strikes me as a glaring oversight.

In one Storybook, Adam is a weak man who knows a lot about gardening. In another Storybook, Johnny is a strong man who knows a lot about gardening. Strangely enough, though my father often works side by side in the garden with my mother, it is hard for me to picture men as gardeners at all.

I like to jump rope to names of apples. Two syllables are best: *Fu-ji*. *Brae-burn*. *Ga-la*. *Pink Crisp*.

In one Storybook, the man-gardener called Adam apprentices himself to a master orchardist called God, who bellows at him from the inside of a cloud. In another Storybook, the man-gardener called Johnny apprentices himself to a master orchardist called Mr. Crawford, who speaks to him face-to-face. The first orchard is in Eden. The second orchard is in Ohio.

My mother teaches me how to make an apple cake from her secret recipe. The cake is ugly to look at but tastes better than all the pretty desserts I've had. Apple cake also puts carrot cake to shame.

In one Storybook, Johnny Chapman is such a good gardener and grower of apples that his name is changed to Johnny Appleseed. I ask my father if Adam from the other Storybook has a last name. He says *no*, then *I don't know*, then *maybe Child-of-God*.

It is harder to jump rope to *Jon-a-gold*, *Pa-ci-fic Rose*, and *Pau-la Red*, though I do decide to write a story about a woman named Paula Red who always carries a lucky apple in her purse and solves mysteries that stump the police. She bears a certain resemblance to Carmen Sandiego.

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Before piano lessons, I sit at Mr. Van Lierop's brand-new computer and answer questions about B flat and grace notes and four-four time. He has taught me how to turn the computer on and insert the floppy disk that contains the questions. There are many levels, so mastery seems unlikely. Sometimes the question times out because I spend too long gazing at the rainbow-colored apple perched seductively above the keyboard. Someone has already taken a bite.

Whenever I see a word and the thing it signifies placed side by side, I feel a surge of satisfaction. My pulse quickens in my wrist. My toes wiggle in my shoes. My breath catches in my throat like a scarf in a screen door. In this case, the image of an apple paired with the word *apple* is more thrilling than I can ever hope to explain.

Meanwhile, my class is the only class in the whole building with a computer, so all day long little children traipse in and out, placing a finger over their lips like the teacher taught them, waiting in line for their turn to identify words or numbers on the screen. Their presence makes us feel older, more important. They are dwarves, and we are Snow White, every last one of us.

Despite pervasive connotations of sin, temptation, and forbidden truth, the Apple remains a mandatory site of learning all my youth.

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Once upon a time, after Adam but before the Present Day, there was a very smart man named Isaac Newton who liked to sit in his garden and think. He was not the same Newton of the fig empire, for if he were, the little cakes would have been stuffed with jellied

apples, no doubt. Mr. Newton thought about a lot of things, but he was especially interested in notions of motion. He was, after all, a scientist. One day, while sitting in the shade of an apple tree, Mr. Newton had an epiphany. The epiphany coincided with an apple dropping from the tree, and in some versions, conking Mr. Newton on his highly sensitive head. At this moment, Mr. Newton realized that the apple fell to the earth, gaining speed as it fell, because an invisible force acted upon it. He did not call this force *God*. He called it *gravity*, and he saw that it was good. Mr. Newton imagined the apple tree growing taller and taller, and still, apples would plummet to earth every time they were roused by wind. If gravity could act upon even the tallest tree, even the Tree of Life, say, or the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, could gravity not also reach the moon, the sky's greatest known apple? Might gravity even explain the moon's faithful orbit of the earth? Mr. Newton wrote down his theory and shared it with other scientists, who agreed that the apple and its gravity were good.

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In one Storybook, Johnny Appleseed never marries or has any children of his own. He spends his life scattering apple seeds, which grow into magnificent orchards and secure his legacy.

One day, when I am grown, I live in Ohio for a while, where I run through apple orchards in autumn with the woman I love. We drink cider made fresh from those trees and sold in jugs from the back of pickup trucks piebald as any *Pink Lady*. In that life, I think of Johnny Appleseed, wondering if he was gay like me, happy like me, and if he too dreamed of leaving Ohio.

In another Storybook, Adam Child-of-God marries Eve Child-of-God, who shares his last name and is made from his own rib. I find this fact instinctively distasteful, though no one else in Vacation Bible School seems to mind. The two Children-of-God are evicted from their botanical home, after which they run a failed landscaping business on the outskirts of Eden. Eve is cursed with terrible menstrual cramps, long before Pamprin is invented. Eventually, she and her husband have two sons, one of whom grows up and kills

the other. It is probably good they are the first people because they would have trouble finding a bright spot to highlight in their family Christmas card.

One day, when I am grown, I pack up that Storybook with the gold-gilt pages, the red velvet bookmark, and the smooth vellum cover. I finally put it away. Then, I marry the woman I love in my home state of Washington, a small ceremony without ceremony by the sea. Sometimes, I still think of those stories, of the ways they are sewn into my skin like names into camp clothes, but I never reopen that volume.

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My father is fond of saying, *A rotten apple spoils the whole barrel* — as if he invented the phrase. In my future life, I will wonder if I am the rotten fruit to which my father refers.

At least half the time, my mother says *sour apples* instead of *sour grapes*. She becomes more irate when I attempt to correct her. In my future life, I will wonder if I am the sour fruit to which my mother refers.

Both parents scold me for bruising bananas when unloading the grocery bags. When a banana is bruised, the damage is obvious, each brown patch set in sharp contrast to the yellow peel. But apples are sometimes bruised in ways that are not obvious until you bite them, and even then, there is often an unexpected sweetness to the bruise.

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Once upon a time, after Adam but before the Present Day, there was a very smart man named Robert Frost who liked to pick apples from the trees in his garden. After he had picked *ten thousand thousand* of them, which may have been hyperbole to convey his inundation, Mr. Frost became weary and fell asleep, though he continued to dream of apples. He was, after all, a writer. In his dream: *Magnified*

apples appear and disappear, / Stem end and blossom end, / And every fleck of russet showing clear. Mr. Frost could not escape the apples, which became a metaphor for other responsibilities he had grown weary of juggling. He illustrated the paradox best this way: *For I have had too much / Of apple-picking: I am overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired.* Frost's was a recognizable feeling, like eating too much ice cream and getting a bellyache, or wanting to stay home alone and then feeling afraid and longing for your parents' return. My teachers said Frost was contemplating his own death, the loss of his will to live, but I never believed them. Wasn't every day shiny and new, bright as a *Red Delicious*? Weren't some days even covered in caramel?

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My friend April's father can eat a whole apple, including the stem, seeds, and core. In this way, he resembles a horse I met once on a field trip. Nothing is wasted on him.

I discover two people eating apples together in the same room at the same time can be very pleasant. If only one person is eating an apple, the feelings that arise in the other may range from mild annoyance to homicidal rage.

My friend April and I take a quiz in *Seventeen* magazine to determine our body types. Options include *Apple*, *Pear*, *Ruler*, and *Hourglass*. "Two are food, and two are devices of measurement," I muse. According to the article, neither one of us is an apple. April, however, is easily recognizable as a pear. "I like pears," she says, accepting her fruit-fate. But even when I use the tape measure *for best results*, my body shape remains *inconclusive*.

My mother is fond of saying, *The apple doesn't fall far from the tree*. This phrase has many meanings, but in context, it suggests that I, like my mother-tree, am not a natural beauty. Examples of natural beauties, according to my mother, include movie stars like Audrey Hepburn and Gwyneth Paltrow. It is hard to ascertain which shape each actress embodies, but I notice the adjective most frequently used to describe them is *willowy*, which leads us back to trees. This

seems like a linguistic dead-end to me. When I say *I'm stumped*, it becomes a pun.

My friend April decides that Hepburn and Paltrow are rulers. *How can you tell?* April suggests *ruler* has a second meaning beyond its shape, like *ruler of male attention* or *ruler of the social scene*.

Later, I learn that Audrey Hepburn ate a dish of tart green apples every night for dessert. I wonder if this was pure coincidence or part of a carefully controlled health and beauty regimen.

Grandma June is still fond of saying, *An apple a day keeps the doctor away*. But what kind of doctor does she actually mean — a specialist in bariatrics?

Later, I learn that Gwyneth Paltrow named her firstborn Apple. Much later, I learn that mother and preteen daughter undergo expensive facials performed by a beauty therapist in Hollywood. I consider their picture in a magazine: Apple resembles her mother, just as I resemble mine.

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In high school, I write a poem about punctuation. In it, I declare: "The asterisk is the apple of the lexical world." Sister Mary Annette slashes through words until the paper resembles my own pale arms after a day in the thicket picking blackberries. At the bottom of the page, a note: *I have no idea what you're talking about! Poems must at least make sense*.

Later, I read Pablo Neruda in a library book: *Carnal apple, Woman filled, burning moon, / dark smell of seaweed, crush of mud and light, / what secret knowledge is clasped between your pillars?*

Still later, I read Jennifer Oakes in a literary journal: *It would take fire or breaking glass to tell them. / the poppy, the apple, and the vein*.

And still later, I hear Katerina Stoykova-Klemer read her poem, "The Apple Who Wanted to Become a Pinecone" at a festival in

Owensboro, Kentucky: *I can see why a pinecone would want to be an apple, / but it is less obvious why an apple would want to be a pinecone.*

It is obvious enough to me. My own desires move back and forth across furrows, hedgerows, little flags in the soil. Pinecones sometimes fall close to the tree, while apples sometimes fall far, and vice versa. No matter what I do, or what I refrain from doing, there is always a *vice* and a *versa*. There is always Fiona Apple singing a sad, sexy song on the scratched CD.

I decide I am both the apple and the pinecone in the poem, soft flesh and bristled body, deciduous and coniferous at once. I decide Sister Mary Annette is wrong.

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Once upon a time, which is our time, the time we call Present Day, there is a very smart man named Jacob Appel who surely must have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and may have planted a few. Appel's hunger for learning can only be described as *insatiable*, rendering the word unfit to describe most other people at most other times, including the mythical Adam and his sister-wife, Eve. Appel earned two bachelor's degrees, seven master's degrees, a JD from Harvard Law School, and an MD from Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, all before his fortieth birthday. In the process, he became a physician, psychiatrist, lawyer, playwright, professor, bioethicist, novelist, and social critic. The only field he has left untouched to date is poetry. The unwritten poems of Jacob Appel dangle in midair, golden and delicious. They are ghost-apples, resistant to gravity, their green leaves perfectly symmetrical, their stems like the cowlick on a little boy's head.

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At one time, I used a Blackberry as my electronic device, enamored of its tablet shape and tiny keypad. But there was another reason. I loved that the product name also called to mind a treasured poem: *Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings, / saying blackberry, black-*

berry, blackberry. If apple was the fabled fruit of the fall, perhaps blackberry was the fruit of a sweeter time, a different story — something about redemption or the promise of it. Like most treasures, my Blackberry did not last.

In the hotel lobby, I spy a platter of impossibly ripe apples, more pleasing than any bouquet of roses or bottle of Beaujolais. When the concierge sees me eyeing them, he insists, *Take one. They're complimentary.* I blush. *Would you mind if I took all of them?* His brow sags until I show him my camera. It is also an Apple. We both laugh.

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Now I'm thinking of a game from childhood. *Hi-ho-something? Do you remember?* I ask my beloved.

Cherry-o, she says.

No, I think it's cheerio, like the British say in greeting or parting or making a toast.

But they're cherries, she insists. *The whole game was about picking cherries from a tree.*

I'm certain they were apples. We look it up. They were cherries.

All those years I remembered it wrong. I thought I was picking apples! Maybe you were, my beloved laughs.

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Somewhere I am always four years old, dreaming of my first candy apple at the circus. My mother walks in to find me squatting on the counter, all the apples from the crisper laid out in a row. I am covering them with peanut butter and colored sprinkles, which is how I assume you turn an apple into candy.

Somewhere I am pleading in the checkout line for Grandma June to buy me Aplets & Cotlets. She always does. We pile the sugary delicacies on a saucer between us, then gorge until our lips are powdered white, our fingers sticky with the hybrid treat — apples, apricots, and walnuts.

Somewhere Elliott the Dragon is roasting apples on the flame of his own breath, then tossing one — still too hot to eat — to the boy named Pete, whose hair is the same color as that flame. Pete always blows on the apple, takes a bite, and then begins to sing. Here is an only child who is never lonely, a boy with an apple-roasting dragon for a friend. I rewind and watch them, over and over again.

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Though I never learn to make applesauce, I learn to make apple-centos instead:

*How do you like them apples I keep hearing from the cellar bin,
The rumbling sound; let a loose apple teach me how to spin.*

Welcome the ripe, the sweet, the sour, even wasps at work
in the soft flesh. The apple apologizes
for those whose hearts bear too much zest.

We could grow apples here... Apples?

Red apples hearty in the trees, golden apples
in sheer skin. Their weight breaks branches,
the ground rolls with them: white apples
and the taste of stone.

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Once, I played the evil queen in a school play, brandishing a plastic poison apple. Although I cried when the teacher first assigned me the part, I soon learned that villains have better lines.

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Once, a student who worked the lunch rush at Whole Foods brought me an apple, placed it lovingly on my desk. *This is a Macintosh*, she told me. *They're the very best.*

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Once, in an interview, Gwyneth Paltrow explained that she loved the idea of calling her baby *my little pomme*, which is French for *apple*. Depending how you say it, the French for apple also sounds like poem.