

Philip Heldrich

Notes from the Field Finalist

Gleanings from the Hesperides' Garden: Notes on an Heirloom Apple Tree

My earliest entries are just fragments, part observation, perhaps part homage to Issa or Buson: *White blossoms in spring / brushed pink by an evening sky / soon there will be snow. Or, Lilacs dress the fence / where the farmhouse used to be / April's always cruel.* Besides the poetic, there are the more informative entries—*Tree Circumference: 12 hands, or, Wood plank nailed high in a fork of branches.* A couple of months later, I have: *8:20 pm. 64°. We begin tonight our tilt away from the sun. Apples the size of a first-grader's fist.*

I often discuss what I'm doing with my daughter, who joins me on my walks to what I've come to call our tree. On several occasions the topic of the tree's age has come up. I suspect the tree to be as old as the derelict, Depression-era farmhouse that the firefighters burned down in a training exercise a few years ago to make overflow parking for the high school. However, my daughter, who has begun taking her own notes, speculates (and I didn't alter any of this): *In my upinyin the tree is 12 years old. The big hol in it probley yoost tou be a branch. It is big.*

By autumn, about the same time the salmon have returned to our rivers and the children back in school, we glean what we can before the rain settles over the Puget Sound for the dark months ahead. *Large apples of unknown variety, hard and waxy, red and yellow with hints of green, imperfect with worm holes and bruises. Scent something similar to honeysuckle and rain-wet stone. Tart with a sweet cider aftertaste.* We will make pies and apple sauce throughout autumn and early winter. Some of the apples, which we store in our cool garage, will even keep until February.

Somewhere near the beginning of what would become a record-breaking streak for continuous days of rain, I begin to spend my autumn Thursdays in the basement of the University of Washington's Allen Library. I drive two hours in heavy morning traffic from my home 45 miles south to read about the history of Washington apples from musty files kept in the library's non-circulating Pacific Northwest Special Collection. I have no idea whether I will find anything of importance in my reading and have yet to define what "important" might actually be. Mostly, I have only my growing obsession with a forgotten tree for which I have only simple notes.

When asked by friends, family, and colleagues what I've been doing at the library every Thursday throughout the fall, I can only say that I've been reading about apples, though I want to say something about serendipity, a writer's curiosity, and how an essay begins. It's something I should probably tell my Environmental Science and Writing students as well. So far, despite my diligence, I have yet to find any coherence in what I've discovered. Sometimes in my research, often about place, local history, and the cultural ideologies shaping our response to the environment, all I have at the end of the day are mere fragments without a story to bring them together.

One of my notes recalls the eleventh labor of Heracles to obtain golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides guarded by Ladon, a multi-headed dragon. I want to believe that these golden apples located at the northern edges of the world are a metaphor of sorts—for what I'm not exactly sure, but such notes may become important later and the metaphor may clarify itself. I also have notes on how botanists have traced the origin of apples to the Tien Shan range in Middle Asia, a place also known more poetically as "the mountains of the spirits." And, I shouldn't forget on the margin of my notes, *remember Sir Isaac Newton's theory of gravity.*

In the silence only interrupted by the frequent patter of rain on the windows, I settle myself at a table and wait for the librarian to bring out the materials I've requested. The "Apple Files,"

which I've read over several visits, contain newspaper clippings and promotional brochures about the Washington apple industry at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century when Washington towns tried to establish themselves as apple centers. I'm drawn largely to the way towns, particularly those on the eastside of the Cascades, marketed themselves with promising slogans of apple boosterism, fictions about seeing the land in terms of its use above all other qualities: "An apple orchard provides as sure an income as government bonds," notes one brochure. "The pick of American citizenship compose the population that has built up a thrifty and prosperous country, and we want more of the same kind," describes another. "Get a fruit farm and become independent," suggests a familiar American myth. And, a personal favorite, "A box of apples should be in every household. The fruit ought to be placed within easy reach of children, who will benefit greatly in health and who never can suffer any ill-effects from this natural food. Ripe apples, like well-baked bread, cannot be eaten in any quantity that will be injurious."