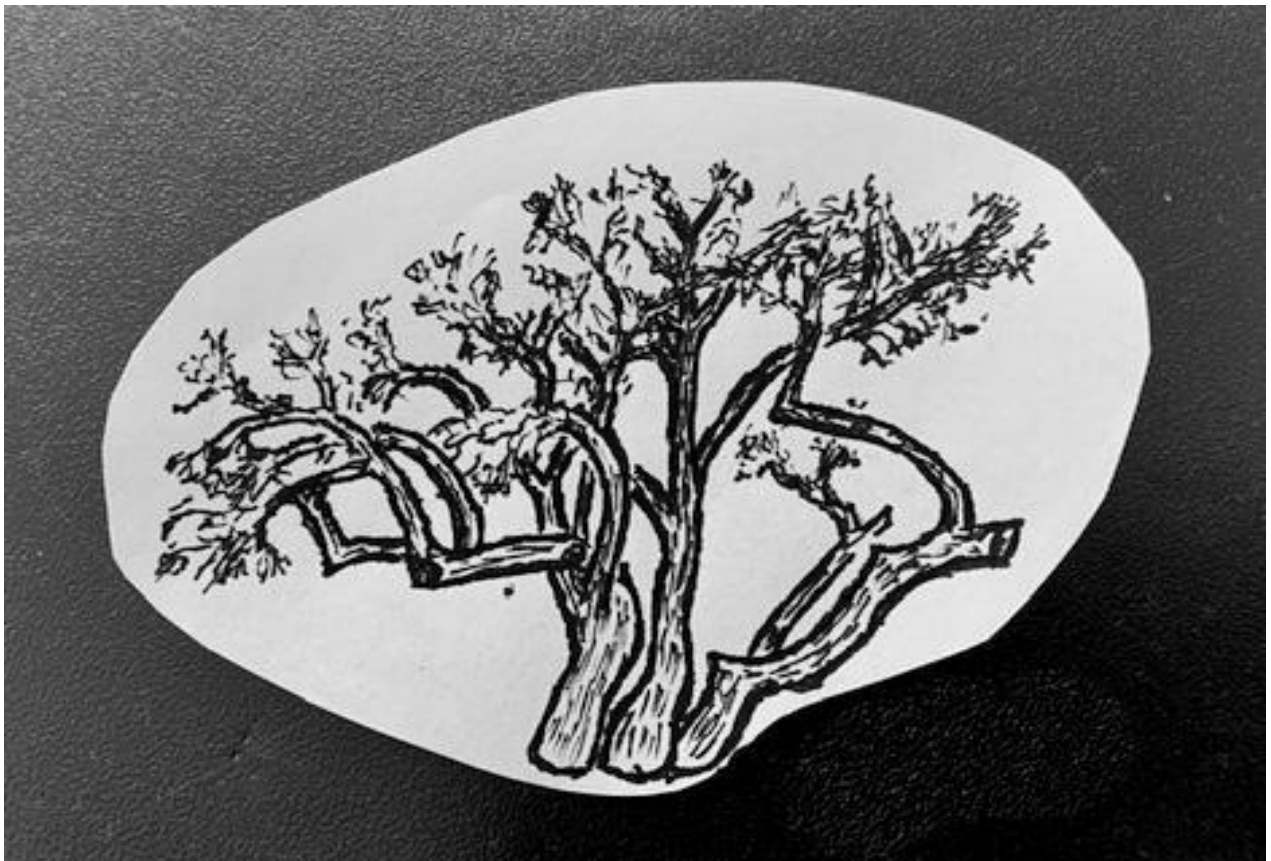


# The Apple in Me

*Davey Ozahowski*



*"Surely the apple is the noblest of fruits" – Henry David Thoreau*

Ah, I can still see it. I can still see our dear, dear old wild apple tree. I close my eyes and there it is, three trunks sprouting up from the soil on the southside of a Vermont hill that welcomes the sun. There it is in the summer, shimmering in the golden glaze of the late day rays that give the green leaves a nimbus, a majestic crown, without a hint of vanity, just an honest, warm shade as if to remind the world that there was kindness to the day. There it is in the winter, bare, cold, lines of limbs leaning their shadowed etchings on the snow before the sun slips beneath the hills that await the stars. It's the coldness that lingers on, that transforms into loneliness, not just because I no longer look out at the wild apple tree from the front yard of your family home, but that the family home was sold last summer, and mom and dad have wandered away from the front yard and wandered away from the earth.

Does the tree know that we have left? Do mom and dad know there is a new family living in our old home and there are new eyes peering out at our wild apple tree? Can it still be our family tree when we no longer own the land?

Answers to these questions are as uneasy as the times, as uneasy as letting go, as walking onward and leaving behind a piece of oneself, like Robert Frost did when he was forty-five, leaving New Hampshire for Vermont "to seek a better place to farm and especially grow apples."<sup>1</sup> But it is that step forward that allows for the blossoming and preservation of memories that, with the help of poetic whispers, bring a sense of solace and meaning to the lingering loneliness.

Our dear old wild apple tree was there when dad would lift me up as a child and give me a gentle toss into the sky, beneath the tree in the evening, summer light. He had a mustache then, but it didn't cover the brightness of his smile. Perhaps the tree watched us in the background and felt a stir in its mind, body, and soul. For such a tree has a mind, a body, and a soul. It's not just one aged barrel of a trunk, no. Three distinct trunks spring from the ground. The left stalk holds dreamy twists and twirls that must make up its soul. The rising, straight to the point, no-nonsense practicality of the middle stalk must be its mind. The right stalk, trimmed down, a skeleton of utility with two arms rising and stretching in joy, and a torso and legs tucked beneath the soil, assumes its body. I figure that beneath the soil, as the roots go on squiggling over buried boulders, the three stalks form into one massive trunk, connecting in the invisible landscape below. I believe there is some unity there, just as I believe there is some place within me, some place within us all, where the mind, the body, and the soul find harmony. It's at this axis that I hold on to mom and dad and hold on to our dear old wild apple tree.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, Robert D. "Robert Frost's Vermont." NewYorkTimes.com. Travel, Sept. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1991. Web. Feb. 8<sup>th</sup> 2020.

Countless hours and days I spent looking out from the sunroom windows of our family home at the wild apple tree's branches. Even from the windows, from a hundred or so feet away, I could see how the branches sported patches of moss here and patches of moss there. They helped mark its distinguished age, but I don't know how old it is; I don't know how many rings it has in each trunk. It always appeared ancient, and for all my thirty-plus years of memory, it was always there and always big, standing about thirty feet off the ground. Its width a near equal dimension, if not greater. It always seemed free--free as a flag waving in the wind of surrender or victory, though in my heart the tree will always be triumphant. And it shall always appear like one of those wild apples Thoreau wrote about: "... as harmless as a dove, as beautiful as a rose, and as valuable as flocks and herds."<sup>2</sup>

Gazing out the windows, steering the vision up on the embankment, to the right of the apple tree but a tier above, I remember that middle-aged oak. The hearty one with a gray, silver trunk that climbed high, well above the wild apple and well above the yard. Over the years the oak had often appeared wounded, as if there was a terminal infestation surmounting behind its bark. But the roots must have found some mineral medicine as those limbs of little vegetation grew healthy and full, swaying on through clashing winds of summer storms.

Beneath the oak tree, on the same tier as the apple, some thirty feet away, was my old sandbox. There I played with the yellow trucks as a child, making engine noises as mom came on smiling and drifting through the yard. She'd ask me questions about my excavations in her soft, gentle voice. I would tell her stories of the trucks as she led me back inside for dinner with my dad and brother. We would sit around the table and look out at that old wild apple tree.

As years marched on, the sandbox became abandoned and a horse or ox-drawn plow took its place. A rusty old beauty, levers here and there, no seat; there was something romantic about looking at it and thinking about how such a machine had been used to till the fields in the summer days of old. It had been abandoned by an old farmer, left down in the woods, beneath the high reaching pines, before my dad, my brother and I moved it up to the yard. The plow would remind our family that winter was good, and that there was a hearty amount of snow out there for skiing adventures when its rusty wheels draped themselves in snow. The wheels, at axle height, could not be seen in the summer because mom would plant lilies there and they would grow sound and strong and green. Between the apple tree and the plow, dug into the embankment, my brother and I built a monument to celebrate mom and the life she gave and the life she lived. The monument

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<sup>2</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. "Wild Apples: The History of the Apple-Tree." Atlantic Nov. 1862. Web. Feb. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

shined beneath the apple tree with its silver, gray granite glow—a bench with a small, protruding gothic arch to rest the back upon. *Judy* was etched into the arch with an imprint of a hummingbird and maple leaf. On the granite of the bench, drawn from my brother's musings, the epigraph stated: "Your Love Would Fill a Sky, You Are Forever in Our Hearts." And when the sun soared low, out in the west, briefly pausing over the hills for that one last gaze into our front yard, a golden light would stream over the landscape and we would watch our monument snooze in the apple tree's shadow. It was a grand place to sit, to think of mom, and look up at the apple tree. It was a place where two worlds seemed to meet; one of departure, one of a lasting imprint. So I'm reminded of Thoreau's words: "How vast and profound is the influence of the subtle powers of Heaven and Earth."<sup>3</sup> Mom lifted her wings five and a half years ago.

"Oh Davey, the deer. Davey, come see the deer," I can still hear her saying. I can still see her smiling, holding a warm cup of tea in her small fingers, looking out from the white chair through the sunroom windows of our old home, at the deer that sniffed in the snow beneath the wild apple tree.

And I can still hear dad's voice, carrying on after his 2020 Martin Luther King Day passing, saying, "Dave, the turkeys. Dave, come see the turkeys." And I can still see him smiling, legs crossed, with reading glasses on the edge of his nose, looking out from the brown couch, through the sunroom windows, at the turkeys sniffing in the snow beneath the wild apple tree.

Mom and dad shared their vows in a small white-clad church in Riverton, Connecticut. Neither of them expected that they would share terminal cancer, and that it would lead to cremations that would take them away from their community, their home and their children. They put their roots into that soil of the Vermont hillside, and our family grew alongside the wild apple tree. Mom was a special education teacher, a community volunteer who lent her heart out willingly. Dad was a cardiac nurse—a man of the heart—a community volunteer whose livelihood depended on running, biking, and skiing through Nature.

I think back to the apple tree and see it there, its leaves a mustard color in the first streaks of an autumn dawn, serving as a living monument to our family. It nursed and enriched us from its beauty and wildness. I can still see my parents' cross country ski tracks beneath it in the winter. I can still see mom walking the dogs beneath the tree as the late autumn breeze sends the leaves sailing. I can still see dad pedaling his mountain bike beneath its soft, summer green leaves as he returns from a long ride on the trails that he hewed out of the surrounding forest. The tree serves as a symbol for our family, our coat of arms, like

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<sup>3</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. New York: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1942. 158.

how Emerson thought of the apple as a symbol, as “our national fruit.”<sup>4</sup> I see our wild apple tree when Emerson writes: “The American sun paints himself in these glowing balls amid the green leaves.”<sup>5</sup> I read such a line and think of home.

I’m confident the wild apple tree is still the great sage who oversees the seasons and that small, two-acre stitch of land on the Vermont hillside. I’m sure there’s still delightful wisdom in each bend of its limbs and in those eager buds. For as life changes, some things remain constant: the apple tree in winter will always be nude and stoic, like a stone statue from the ancient world, with blue jays bouncing from branch to branch and other morning chirps filling the front yard. In the blissful silence after a long snow, it will continue to hold the fluffy mass with gentle, earnest care. There will still be a full-blown smile of wonder, after an early snowfall, for the lucky onlooker who watches a deer push its snout through the snow and swing its head around with a frozen apple between its teeth. In late May, oh sweet May, the tree will be garbed in the most royal and wondrous soft white blossom kisses that will kick around when the breeze blows. I can see our tree when Thoreau writes, “The flowers of the apple are perhaps the most beautiful of any tree, so copious and so delicious to both sight and scent.”<sup>6</sup> After soft rain, after a rainbow that might stretch itself wide in the yonder hills, there will come the buzz from the nectar-bound bees. In the long light of summer, when its leaves are green and rich, there will be slight bulges of pregnancy in the limbs. Beneath the leaves, in a respite from the sun, after a night of hard rain, the brook will be caroling and bellowing down in the hollow, humming with the harmony of a farmer’s harvest whistle.

Then will come the sharp taste of autumn, gleaning through the tongue as the entire rust cuddle, dry, frosty dirt season sweeps into the lungs. That’s apple season. It’s autumn when the apples will ripen into graceful red orbs--hanging decorations of planets in the universe of that three-pronged tree. It’s late autumn when they’ll fall and decay; when the pesky yellow jackets will give a last swarm at the squishy ones for their sweet juices; when the deer will rise on their hind legs to pull one from the tree. But those apples will not be like the shiny globes one finds at the market, no, they’ll always be wild. They’ll have their wounds and worm holes. They’ll not taste like their store-bought cousins. They’ll be bitter and tart. They’ll be chalky and wild. They’ll snap out juices on the lips and crunch through the teeth. But they’ll be excellent for what they are, for they are free and enthusiastic and come from that dear old wild apple tree out in the front yard.

There’s a real kinship that developed from caring for such a tree. It’s these hands that have held the scaly bark and that have been pricked and scraped by its coarseness while

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<sup>4</sup> Reiss, Marcia. *Apple*. London: Reaktion Books, 2015. Print. 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>6</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. “Wild Apples: The History of the Apple-Tree.” *Atlantic Nov.* 1862. Web. Feb. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

holding the limbs and climbing through the canopy. It's the same hands that rubbed my parent's shoulders and interlocked with their hands and fingers in those last moments of life, and even after life had departed and the spirit was off, soaring, flying, like the blue jay from the apple tree's winter branches. And it's these hands that held the chainsaw to gnaw away at some of the apple tree's lifeless limbs. Some of the bucked-up branches stayed stacked beneath it, snuggling the trunk, peering out at the oak and the plow, and into the sunroom windows. It's these hands that cut and pulled back the tree's pesky suckers or water sprouts. They have a pinkish, maroon hue, seeming friendly and innocent, but they're a nuisance as they grow quick and steady. An orchardist sees them the same way a farmer sees a weed: depriving the tree of the richness of the sun, of water, of the root's nutrients that should be given to the apples.<sup>7</sup> So these hands spent a few hours every year climbing up through the limbs with their delicate moss, balancing on the branches, and cutting away the suckers. Once I was fortunate to hear some advice from an old Vermonter who was caring for a tree. I asked him when was the best season to trim. He said he was once told by an old-timer, "when the blade is sharp." We shared a good laugh.

That old wild apple tree, like all of its American brethren, besides the native crab apple, have their origins beyond antiquity. Their story begins in Central Asia, perhaps in the mountains of Kazakhstan, and they have since headed west, against the wind, traveling on the crest of the human tide.<sup>8</sup> And through the long journey, I'm glad that our three-pronged tree grew strong and healthy on that south-facing Vermont hillside. When I think about such a journey, when I think about home, when I think about our wild apple tree, I hear Thoreau saying, "our wild apple is wild only like myself, perchance, who belong not to the aboriginal race here, but have strayed into the woods from the cultivated stock."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps it's been all those long gazes at the tree that has awoken my affinity for apples. When I run an apple under a faucet or pluck it from a low hanging branch, rub it over my ribcage, and let my teeth snap on in, I feel refreshed, like I am doing some good service to my body. Those loud snaps and crunches, the ones that self-consciously make me step outside the library, the ones that go echoing through my head when I'm driving my truck down a dirt road, carry a simple equation: the louder the snap and crunch, the better the apple. I enjoy all varieties—red, green, and golden—but it's the one that's been bathing in the crisp, low light of a Vermont autumn apple that I enjoy the most. They're the ones I see when I think

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<sup>7</sup> Kerrigan, William. *Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard: A Cultural History*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2012. 66.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>9</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. "Wild Apples: The History of the Apple-Tree." *Atlantic* Nov. 1862. Web. Feb. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

about Robert Frost, at eighty-three, writing, “There’s nothing I like to think about more than apples.”<sup>10</sup>

I’ve never been one to hold back on sharing my dreams. Mom and dad know that. They heard plenty over the years, but they’ve also seen a lack of resolve to pluck a dream from the sky, nourish it, and stay committed to its growth. I think I shared with them that one dream, a dream that has faded somewhat with time’s soft trickle and nagging pinches, a dream to have my own orchard. To have fields of apple trees to mow around; to watch the fields blossom and with the help of the wind watch the white petals drift and fly; to trim and collect branches to burn beneath a starry night; to have bushels and baskets of shiny, red orbs; to have wagon rides for good visiting folks and bobbing for apples and cider and apple pie and apple cider donuts that leave a few grains of sugar on the lips. But that dream might have drifted onward, ready to be plucked by another.

It’s early April 2021, but it feels more like mid-May, as if the apple blossoms are about to burst from those enthusiastic buds. It marks the first spring where no one from our family will be looking out from the sunroom windows at that dear old wild apple tree. The house was sold last summer to a lovely mother, with her three daughters. It’s their turn to look out the sunroom windows at that wondrous apple tree with its twisting branches that reach to the blushing sky of dusk. It’s our turn to pass on our family tree and let it be theirs, to love and to hold, if they wish. May it bring inspiration and even perhaps transform our old house into a modern-day *Orchard House*, where a new Louisa May Alcott will write a new *Little Women*.<sup>11</sup> But the tree will stay with me; I’ll still picture it, like how I’ll picture my mom and dad’s smiling faces, looking out upon the wild apple tree, and out at the deer and the turkeys.

Last Mother’s Day, May 10<sup>th</sup>--when snow was still skirting through the morning sky--my brother and I moved my mom’s memorial bench up to our family’s land in the high hills of the county. We welcomed her to her new home: that silvery gray Vermont granite bench with a gothic arch now rests upon the hilltop ledge, peering out to the bubbly chain of the Green Mountains where the sun sneaks off to sleep. Five months later, in October, my brother and I reunited our parents. Now on the hilltop, there are matching granite benches, with gothic arched backrests, stone taken out of the same Vermont quarry. On dad’s gothic arch it says his name, *Tom*, and has an etching of a cross-country skier. Carved into the stone bench it reads, “A Man of the Heart, Always Adventuring in Wonder.” My parents are together again, memorialized in stone--two gothic arches looking out at the mountains and the setting sun. Granite marks their imprint on reality and the ever-changing sky offers their invisible trail to the afterlife.

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<sup>10</sup> Reiss, Marcia. *Apple*. London: Reaktion Books, 2015. Print. 96.

<sup>11</sup> Reiss, Marcia. *Apple*. London: Reaktion Books, 2015. Print. 91.

Now my parents' granite rests a hundred or so feet away from another wild apple tree up there on the hilltop. It's a much younger tree, just one trunk and a third of the size. There's no aged moss growing on the twisting branches, but the bark is scaly and coarse. In the late-day summer sun, it rests in the shade of a large, cone-shaped spruce tree, and a dominant old maple, wizard-like, seemingly pronouncing itself as the king of the hill. I still have a lot to learn about this apple tree. Perhaps, as it grows, as I sit with the stone memories of mom and dad, watching the seasons change and the sun fall, the tree will come to replace our old wild apple tree. But I am not thinking about that now, because I am still stuck on the hidden meaning, the veiled metaphor, the cloaked irony, of how last year's branches were bare and how neither the tree on the hilltop nor our dear old wild apple tree grew any apples--no blossoms or red hanging hearts. Your musings or poetic waxing are as good as mine.

But I am sure those hilltop apples will grow again. And I am sure they'll be just as good, just as bitter, just as tart, just as chalky, just as untamed and unmanufactured, just, as Thoreau offered, the "wild flavors of the Muse,"<sup>12</sup> as the ones hanging above the front yard, back at our once upon a time family home. And when my parents' granite sparkles, playing in the moonbeams, near that younger apple tree, I can think of mom and her humble ways, think of dad and his adventurous spirit, and think of Thoreau playing a lyre in honor of that younger, hilltop wild apple and in honor of the stars and singing: "They belong to children as wild as themselves,—to certain active boys that I know—to the wild-eyed woman of the fields, to whom nothing comes amiss, who gleans after all the world,—and, moreover, to us walkers."<sup>13</sup>

I walk on, but I don't think I'll ever start my own orchard. I am okay with the departure of such a dream, just as I've found a certain solace with the departure of my parents. A certain peace blooms from Thoreau's words when he writes, "For nectar and ambrosia are only those fine flavors of every earthly fruit which our coarse palates fail to perceive,—just as we occupy the heaven of the gods without knowing it."<sup>14</sup> I aim to come to such understanding to the enriching abundance and plenty of this world, and while trying, slipping, falling, and climbing again, I'll keep taking care of that hilltop apple tree near my parents' granite, knowing there is something intimate about watching it blossom, watching it grow, and seeing those red hearts hang in the late day autumn sun. And I'll keep a seat on the granite bench empty for anyone who would like to join me and sit with mom and dad and hear more

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<sup>12</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. "Wild Apples: The History of the Apple-Tree." *Atlantic Nov.* 1862. Web. Feb. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. "Wild Apples: The History of the Apple-Tree." *Atlantic Nov.* 1862. Web. Feb. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020.



of their stories as the birds sing in the background. For their stories are essential to my story, and like the apples, they help connect my mind, body, and soul, pushing me beyond time, offering frosty, transcendental transportation to memories of home, loss, and all the history, all the mystery, all the beauty that makes the day and the apple just oh so lovely.